The Veil of Years

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Dedication

For Sue E. Folkringa, my wife, my friend and companion on all the trails and byways of Provence, and wherever else the endless quest may lead us.

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Alain et Nathalie, Hotel Cardinal, 24 Rue Cardinale, Aix-en-Provence, France*, pour une chambre jolie et confortable, et un gai "bonjour" chaque matin.*

The French people for the preservation of so many antiquities among which we may, on certain magical occasions, part the Veil of Years.

Sue, as always, for everything. Celeste Anne and Emma Sue, of course, just for being warm and furry.

Baen Books by L. Warren Douglas

Simply Human
The Sacred Pool
The Veil of Years
The Isle Beyond Time(upcoming)

Prologue - Roman Year 630 (124 B.C.)

The Roman consul Caius Sextius Calvinus wrapped a woolen blanket around his legs and feet. The fabric of his tent drummed with the beat of half-frozen rain, and beads of moisture formed where a careless aide had brushed the fabric. He should have brought a good leather tent, like the ordinary legionnaires used.

The mad*Mistral* wind drove ice-rimmed puddles into the tent where fabric met rocky ground. So this was fair, sunny Gaul? Calvinus felt like a fool, an old fool, wrapped in a blanket. But it was beneath the dignity of a Roman general to wear bulky*bracae* —ridiculous baggy trousers, bound at the ankles.

"The*veleda* is outside, Consul," a centurion rumbled.

"Bid her enter." In this weather, even a crazy Gaulish hag shouldn't have to stand outside for the sake of his Roman dignity.

The centurion pushed the tent flap aside. His words—and the seeress's reply—were whipped away on the battering wind. Calvinus made as if busy with a dispatch he had been trying to write—until the ink had clotted with the cold. To complete his disgruntlement, the oil lamp on his table blew out when the flap was thrust aside. Thus his visitor was no more than a bulky shadow in the dim light that penetrated the wet fabric of the tent.

"Here," she said, stretching forth an arm. From her fingertips, a tiny bright flame leaped to the smoking wick. Again, the warm glow of burning oil illuminated Calvinus's hands, and the crone's veiled face.

"How did you do that?" Startled by the trick, he failed to remark that the single word the woman had uttered had not been in a voice cracked with age—nor had those briefly illuminated fingers been an ancient harridan's claws.

"How? Do you have a Great Year to learn my trade?" A Great Year was the druids' nineteen-year cycle, that reconciled the lunar and solar periods. "You have no time at all."

Now those young, strong fingers reached to loosen her woolen scarf, to toss back the close-knit fabric

of her fine, waterproof*sagus* . She tossed the heavy mantle across a brass-bound chest.

Calvinus stared, at a loss for words. The*veleda* —the druid seeress—was a girl. Her glossy black hair was piled atop her head in curls that a rich senator's wife would have envied. Her pale blue garment was draped Greek fashion, but was belted with pale leather encrusted in gold.

Despite his goose bumps and the indignity of his blanketed legs, Calvinus was all too aware of his maleness. This was no big, gruff Celtic camp follower, and no starved old woman. Blue eyes the color of summer skies appraised him dispassionately. Small, well-formed breasts pushed against soft blue fabric, their nipples as proud as if just fondled—but that was chill, not arousal.

Aware that he had lost not only his dignity, but all of the initiative in this unfortunate meeting, the Roman gestured at the cloak-draped chest. "Will you sit?"

A smile dimpled her pretty—no, lovely—face. She slid gracefully to the impromptu seat, her legs turned slightly to the side, accenting the smooth curvature of thighs and hips.

"Centurion Varro said you have a message from the Gauls' chief. What is it?" No degree of gruffness, he discovered, could regain him his lost poise.

"Your centurion misunderstood. King Teutomalos has nothing to say to you. He intends to outwait you, then send your headless body to Roma. Your head he'll hold for ransom—its weight in gold. Or he'll drive a bronze spike through it, from ear to ear, to hold it in a niche by his door."

Had anyone else said that—under any other circumstances—Calvinus would have had him flogged, or he would have leaped up, groping for his short sword. As it was, he merely crumpled his goose-quill. The woman's tone had been matter-of-fact, even regretful, not challenging or insulting. He was clear on that, because her command of Latin was as good as his own, despite the sweet lilt of her unfamiliar accent.

"Then whom do you speak for?" he grated.

"For myself—and for a hundred Roman generations to come, whose fate hinges upon the outcome of this siege. You must not wait. Attack now, before it's too late."

"Another legion is on its way. And the Massalian Greeks are levying more troops. By summer Teutomalos will be starving, and I'll overwhelm his pitiful fort."

"By springtime his power will be so great that all the legions that ever were, led by the Scipios themselves, could not prevail. Your reinforcements are not coming, and Massilia is a city of merchants, not soldiers. You are alone. Attack now, and prevail. Wait . . . and Roma itself will crumble, and be forgotten in a hundred years."

The woman—the girl—had gone too far. "Who are you? What filthy druid magic is this? What mad Gaulish god whispers in your ear?"

"If I tell you, will you really listen? It's a long story, and a strange one. You may think me mad—and continue to wait, until it's too late."

"I'll listen," he said. "But not here. My soldiers have been repairing the roof of a snug farmhouse with a hearth and a dry floor. Varro! Are my new quarters ready yet?"

They were ready—or near enough. Seeress and general soon retired there and, in considerably more comfortable circumstances, she began a tale that was long indeed. . . .

Part One - Veni

Provence: a land of harsh contrasts and lovelinesses. Its clear sunlight is tangible, with taste and scent. The master wind that blows down great Rhodanus' valley has a soul, a personality, and a name:*Mistral* . It blows the miasmas and fevers of the low land away out to sea.

Wind and River are the heart and spirit of the land, and the people are its blood, ebbing and flowing to the beat of Celtic drums, swords against Roman shields, and hoofbeats of Franks and Moors. The pulse of the land is never still. Tribes long forgotten blend their blood with such fresh infusions, each in turn diluted, but never lost.

This is a story of the land, of a woman descended on her mother's side from folk who neither plowed nor sowed, but took what the Goddess gave, and drank from her breasts, the sacred pools of the land. They called Goddess and land alike*Ma* . Though inscribed in no Pantheon, her name is remembered in*mater* , mother, in*mare* , which is sea, in*mammae* , women's breasts, and above all, in Man, born of*Ma* .

This is not a Christian tale, though there are Christians in it. It is not about God who created us, but the scapegoat we created to blame for what God allows us to do, that we should not. Such a demon can be created in the minds of men, but once loosed it cannot be driven back.

Now Darkness looms at the end of time. All that is good will be locked in an ebon box. Evil will lie like gray ash across the land, like leaden clouds across a sunless sky. Yet the Black Time will not come as long as there is magic in the world, nor until the last rules have been written down.

Otho, Bishop of Nemausus

The Sorceress's Tale

Chapter 1 - The Goddess of the Pool

Centuries later, long after the fall of Rome

* * *

Shadows and sunbeams mingled, a quilt of colors stirred by a breeze from the stony heights. Ferns nodded over moist emerald moss. Pretty red and white mushrooms were rings of tiny dancing girls wearing their feast-day best. In high branches of maple and beech, songbirds twittered and magpies

laughed. In a sun-bleached land such a grove, nestled within a deep valley a hundred steps wide, was a magical place.

Stones rattled on the trail, and for a moment the songbirds were silent. The breeze abated as if to hear what had disturbed the afternoon. Was it a deer, come to drink from the pool?

She was not a deer, though she moved with deerlike grace—a girl of fifteen summers, hair black as moonless night, without Roman curls or Celtic color. She held the hem of her skirt in one hand. Entering the cool, moist shade, she wiped sweat from her brow. Her eyes, beneath dark, arching brows, were as blue as the sky at zenith. Her elfin face was modeled on the small folk who built no houses and grew no crops.

She settled by the clear pool. From the folds of her skirt she took a dried yellow-and-blue flower, rubbed it into powder, and formed it into a pill. Cupping water, she washed it down.

She plucked a red mushroom from a troupe of tiny dancers. Grimacing at its bitterness, she took another sip from the pool, then settled back amid rustling beech and maple leaves, and closed her eyes. The dappling, shifting sunlight smoothed all expression from her features, and she drowsed. . . .

* * *

Hearing the agitated rustle of dry leaves, Pierrette opened her eyes. A familiar face stared down at her—her own face, as it might be in twenty or fifty years.

"You've been avoiding me!" the older woman snapped.

"I've been busy," Pierrette protested, rubbing sleep from her eyes. "In a month, I'll have what I seek."

"Pfah! You'll remain with your nose in a book until you have answered every question." The woman spun away. The sound of her motion was the crackling of dry twigs, the rustling of leaves. "Anselm's magic is deceitful. Just because the sun never sets within his fortress's walls, time itself has not stopped. The Black Time advances from the Beginning, and falls back from the End. Will you ask what I require, or must I force it on you like medicine?"

Pierrette sighed. The goddess*Ma* swirled the waters of the pool. Eddies danced, and the depths grew dark. The glittering ripples were silvery stars in a moonless sky. But no, they were not stars. . . .

Cold, hard lights festooned towers of rusty iron, twinkling as greasy smoke swirled about them. Half-obscured by dark engines of unknowable function, great orange flames guttered and flickered atop a black iron sconce taller than the tallest tree.

In the foreground, as if Pierrette were standing ankle-deep in dead and stinking water, the bloated corpse of a small creature bobbed. No flies swarmed. Nothing lived there, not even maggots. The land itself was dead, without leaf or blade to cover its nakedness.

"Is that the Christians' Hell?" Pierrette shuddered.

"It's*this* world—not now, but soon—where River Arcus empties into the lagoon."

"No!" Pierrette gasped. She remembered a crisp breeze filling a sail, a boat's prow cutting the azure water of that lagoon. The Arcus's channels were overhung with willows and elders. "That can't be!"

" `Can't?' " snapped*Ma* . "It*will* be."

"Why are you showing me?"

"Once before, you stayed the advance," said*Ma* . "You must do it again."

"The demon is gone," the girl protested.

"But the Black Time still comes," replied*Ma* . "Will you bestir yourself?"

"What must I do?"

"I have foreseen you in a temple with druids in white robes. Beyond the city's walls were the towers you just saw."

Pierrette shifted uneasily. It sounded unpleasantly familiar. "Is the town on a hill surrounded by salt pans red as blood? Are its walls thick and smooth, in the Greek fashion?"

"You know it, then."

"It's Ugium." She had pushed her visions of Ugium into a dark room, and had closed the door. "The temple doorway is festooned with warriors' heads. I'm not ready. I wouldn't know what to do."

"You're as ready as you can be,"*Ma* replied. "And you'll know."

"When I'm a true sorceress, I'll go."

"Don't wait for perfection,"*Ma* grated, turning her back. "This is an imperfect world." Then she was gone, and Pierrette saw only a drift of dry leaves—yellow, russet, and brown, like the patches on the goddess's dress.

* * *

Cletus scrambled over broken limestone, his sweat evaporating in the dry air, cooling him so he could maintain his fierce pace. Eight-year-old legs pumped steadily uphill. He had to find the sorceress!

Gilles the fisherman had come into harbor under full sail. Seeing Cletus fishing, he shouted "Boy! A Saracen ship beyond the fog! Fetch my daughter Pierrette. Hurry!"

Gilles set off up the red, crumbling rocks of the Eagle's Beak, to alert the mage Anselm. It was anyone's guess who would reach his objective first—the old man on the steep, short trail, the able boy with the longer route ahead . . . or the Saracen vessel edging through the fog.

Cletus shouted to those he passed in the streets. "Warn the knight Reikhard! A Saracen is offshore!" He did not stop running. He prayed he would find Pierrette in time—and that all his friends would see him with her.

"There are the Mussulmen!" he would say. The sorceress would cast fire. Muslim sailors would scream and burn. He imagined Pierrette saying, "Cletus, my champion; wade forth and slay them." He, tall as a tree, would pick up the ship, emptying men, swords, and ill-gotten treasures.

He had to find Pierrette before Gilles reached Anselm's door, or his chance to be a hero would be stolen

by the old magician.

A mile beyond the town he saw her descending the trail. "Pierrette, come!" he gasped. "Saracens!"

She looked over the coast, far below. "How far out are they?"

"Still in the fog."

"Will you help me, Cletus?"

He puffed his heaving chest out. "Whatever you wish." He envisioned himself carrying her down the valley in great strides.

"Run to my father's house. Get the big book with the red leather cover, and meet me at the wharf. Are you tired?"

"Me? I'm not even out of breath—but I'll run faster still if you make me tall."

She chuckled despite her black mood, and waved a hand. "There. I've made you agile as a goat." She gave him a push. The boy indeed ran with the gangly grace of a sure-footed goat—but the only magic was his desire to impress Pierrette, the prettiest girl in the town. Yet he would rather have been a giant than a goat.

* * *

Cletus arrived at the wharf shortly after Pierrette, clutching a heavy volume against his bony chest. "Will you find a spell to turn the Mussulmen into toads?"

"Be quiet, Cletus. I'm looking for something. Ah! Here it is." She spread the pages wide.

"A spell?"

"Not a spell. Be silent."

Shifting from foot to foot as if he had to pee, Cletus obeyed.

It was an observation from ibn Saul's treatise on Moorish navigation. The Saracen captain would depend on a knotted line and a sandglass to measure sailing distance, and upon the line's straightness in the water for confidence that he had not deviated from his course. Above all, he would depend upon his memory of the coastline.

"Give me your fishing line," she commanded Cletus.

She began tying knots in it, one every foot or so.

"You'll ruin it!"

"If the Saracens sell you as a slave, you'll have no time for fishing."

Pierrette tied a splinter to the end of the line. "I need the red box from my father's boat." Cletus scrambled for it, then Pierrette withdrew a sandglass. Working its cork free, she poured a third of the sand into the box. Replacing the cork, she turned the glass, and watched sand trickle through its

constricted waist.

"Fog bemuses," she murmured, too softly for gathering townsmen to hear. None came close; she was useful to them, but sorceresses had no friends.

"Sun confuses," she said. "Log and knotted cord confound."

She tossed the cord-and-splinter "log" into the water.

"Daydreams range, and coastlines change, and trickling sand forgotten falls."

Pierrette turned to the boy. "I need you to look for the ship, and tell me what it does, Cletus. Can you climb that tall pine?"

"If you make me as tall as the tree, instead . . ."

"If I turn you into a squirrel . . ."

"I need no magic to climb trees!" he hissed, backing away. "You'll see how well I climb."

She chuckled softly—but none of the stone-faced*gentes* found humor in her words or Cletus's consternation. Sorceresses were not ever funny.

"I see it!" Cletus shouted, from high within the pine's gracefully spreading parasol.

* * *

The captain of the rakish vessel tugged at his beard. He eyed the ribbon pennant atop the single mast. "You're sure you've maintained course?"

The sailor swore upon his hope of Paradise, the beard of Muhammad, and a list of saintly ancestors. He had paid out the cord and counted the passage of knots with every turn of the twenty-eight-minute glass. The line had streamed straight astern.

The captain read the sun's height from the butt of his fist resting on the horizon, to the endmost knuckle of his thumb. They should be east of Massalia—but where were the red rock scarps of the Eagle's Beak? The Saracen knew the coasts from Jebel Tarik to Massalia to Constantinople, from Smyrna to Alexandria to Ceuta. Had buffeting winds addled his brain, or the sun cooked it? For the first time since his beard had sprouted . . . he was lost.

"Wear about and follow the coast eastward," he said softly. "Call me when you sight familiar land.

"It's over," he told himself as he descended to his cabin. Never again would men sail with him; they would know his failure.

Wearing—changing tacks by turning downwind and hauling the huge sail around before the mast to the new lee side—was not left to subordinates. Though the mate was pleased to do it himself, it did not take long to register that the change was more than a promotion.

The captain remained below for seven turns of his large sandglass, until he heard the lookout's cry. He recognized the islands ringing Olmia bay, just where they should be if he were indeed exactly seven turns east of the Eagle's Beak. "I am going mad," he muttered to himself, a broken man.

* * *

In Citharista, celebration began as soon as the ship was hull down

"Tell me," the priest Otho asked the elderly magus. "What turned the Saracen away?"

"I have no idea," Anselm replied, his white beard stained with red wine from a jug making the rounds. "I cast no spell. Ask my apprentice."

Otho turned to the dark-haired girl. Such a slim shape could have belonged to a boy, but he was not deceived. How old was she? Fifteen? As old as he, when he had taken his vows. She was as lovely as her mother Elen had been—the same hair, blacker than black, and the same eyes, blue as the waters of the*calanques,* where the white sand beneath them shined in sunlight. Ah, to be fifteen again, he mused, suffused with sweet regret.

"What did the Saracen see when he turned eastward?" he asked her.

"I don't know, P'er Otho," Pierrette said. "I only uttered the tiniest of glamours, making him uncertain what his eyes showed him."

"Ah," Otho sighed. "Good."

"Good?" The corners of her shapely mouth dimpled. "Does a small spell condemn me less than had I called up a great storm with black clouds, and . . ." Even as she spoke, tiny glitters at her fingertips danced and crackled like miniature lightning.

"Stop that!" Otho snapped nervously.

Pierrette giggled, and the display faded. "I'm sorry, Father," she said with false penitence. "It slips my mind how even innocuous magic reminds you of Hell's fires, and tormented souls, and . . ."

"Stop that," he repeated. "*I*am not the one who should be frightened by your magic."

"You're right," she said, now truly penitent, thinking of her confrontation at the sacred pool. "The one who should be most afraid . . . is me."

* * *

"Why didn't you kill them all?" demanded Cletus. "They'll come back."

"I'll send them away again," said Pierrette. "I don't like fighting."

"That," Cletus said, "is why you weren't much fun, when you were a boy."

"I was*not* a boy! My father had me pretend I was, because he had no male heir. The castellan would have forced him to sell his olive grove to some man with strong sons. Everyone knew I was a girl—they just kept quiet so the castellan would remain fooled."

"People say you used magic to fool them."

"Little girls don't know magic. Anyway, there isn't much difference between little boys and girls."

"There is too! Little girls don't have . . ."

"I mean if I put you in a dress, with a ribbon in your hair . . ."

"No! The other boys would laugh, and I would be . . . I would be . . ."

"Humiliated? Of course you would. It isn't pleasant to have to pretend you're something you are not. You wouldn't make a satisfactory girl—you're far too bloodthirsty."

"Good!" Cletus grunted. He turned his head, hearing iron-shod hooves. "Diodoré!" he exclaimed.

Pierrette watched the knight approach. Diodoré was the youngest of Reikhard's soldiers, and the best looking. Her heart beat faster. Diodoré carried his casque under a mail-clad arm. His coiffed hair was a red-gold crown in the last sunlight of evening.

"You're my nemesis," he said. "The Moors were my chance to dent my shield in*real* combat—and you chased them away."

"Did you ride all this way to chastise me?" Pierrette feigned indignation. "Are there no brigands to slay?"

"Come. Ride with me." He stretched out a hand. "It's almost dark, and evil stalks."

Pierrette envisioned her cheek against Diodoré's broad back and her arms around his waist. She shook her head.

"Take me!" Cletus exclaimed.

"You'd wet your pants," said the knight.

"I'm not a baby!"

"I think that's a good idea!" Pierrette said, eying the gathering dusk. "Cletus lives outside the town wall, and should not go home alone."

The young knight put the best face on it. "He need fear nothing," he said, "neither beasts nor malign spirits. . . . But I'll see*you* safely home first."

He pulled the boy up behind himself. As they threaded the crumbling, narrow streets, Cletus's constant chatter—"What is this strap for?" and "Why is your sword on this side, not that?"—kept the young man from saying courtly things, and saved Pierrette having to think up responses that would neither encourage nor insult. She wanted Diodoré to say such things, but if he did . . . she would discourage him.

Life was unfair. She had to spurn him. The goddess had made that clear: Pierrette's mother Elen had died because she had kept one foot in each world. Sorceress or housewife, but not both. Her virginity gone, Elen could not command the great magics—and that had destroyed her.

Now the goddess had put yet another burden upon Pierrette—to abandon her studies before she was ready. To fare out on a fool's errand . . . to Ugium.

At the stone staircase to her father's house, she bid horseman and boy good-bye. Gilles's snores greeted her, so she tiptoed to her pallet. Even tired as she was, sleep was long in coming. She promised herself

that she would go fishing with her father in the morning. She would doze in the clear Mediterranean sun, and would not think a single unpleasant thought.

Chapter 2 - Ancient Ghosts

Had all Provence enjoyed the wondrous spell that lit the keep of Anselm the sorcerer—where the sun shone night and day—its mood might have been equally cheery. But night came, and not all the torches, candles, and wicks burning in oil could push darkness away, and with darkness came footsteps in the night, and the cries of souls in torment. Had Provence been a cold northern land of dank forests and gray skies, its people might have been enured to the terrors that stalked their countryside. But it was not.

Outside Tolonia, at the foot of the mountain called Sainte Victoire, Holy Victory, the shepherd Sinatos found an ewe staked on her back, her entrails spread in patterns like characters from some ancient alphabet.

A monk tending Saint Giles's shrine saw a deer walk on its hind legs around the saint's sarcophagus. The stag's footprints, graven in the stone flags as if pressed into soft mud, gave credence to his unlikely tale.

Near Saint-Mitre, an olive tree uprooted itself and marched across the road. It settled amid grapevines, which bore olives that year, while the tree bore grapes.

The rattle of chain mail and scabbards, the cries and clashes of battle, were heard in the reedy forests along the Druentia, but no reeds were trampled nor bodies left behind. Downstream, an eroding bank released the bones of an ancient Celt, clad in the rust of chain mail. He had no head for the priest to murmur over, only an empty helm of pitted iron.

Bridges shook with marching feet, but no soldiers were seen. Groans of dying men issued from beneath them, yet no corpses remained when the priests came, unsure if unction or exorcism were required.

Masses were well attended, not because people were pious, but because they were afraid, and were unaccustomed to such fears. Some might say little separated fear and piety.

* * *

Guihen the Orphan suffered greatly because of those fears. He was an odd little fellow. He might have been considered deformed, the twisted product of inbreeding among the reclusive folk of the oldest blood. He might, equally, have been a wood sprite, not human at all. His ears were large. His eyes shone violet in the darkness.

Claudia, who made the chewiest*boules* of honey-colored bread, left a loaf for him every night, but tonight there was no bread; instead, garlic, teasel, and nightshade hung from the peg on her door, and Guihen sickened even before he saw it. He had only enough strength left to crawl away.

Banes also hung from other doors. Herbs deadly to his kind were strewn on windowsills and thresholds. He found no wine or sausage, no sweet olives, not even a cup of milk. He did no good deeds that night, and had no heart for pranks. The once-friendly town had become a trap.

He made one last desperate stop, at a house with no bane. It was a friend's house, a friend who would never turn against him, but no one was home. He could not write, but he left a sign. He would wait in the hills for a day.

There were guards at the town gate—shadowy men in creaking leather and ancient armor. But they had no heads, and they did not watch the roads leading into Citharista, but looked inward as if to keep the townsmen—or vagrants like himself—within. Could anyone but he see them?

The town's walls were crumbled. It was not hard to scramble over them, but even then he was not safe. A stag blocked his path. Its antlers gleamed in the rising moon's yellow light as if covered with gold foil. Its eyes glowed red, and its steamy breath was thick as smoke. Guihen edged off the trail into the tangles. Brush and bushes remained his friends, and though he heard crackling pursuit, he outdistanced it, slipping through dense undergrowth as if it were mist.

He sank into the shadows of a limestone cleft. Slowly his breathing returned to normal. "That is it, then. I can't return to the town." His only listener was the small white hen he carried under one arm, his pet and his friend—his familiar, folk of a later age might say. People said the hen was the source of his magic. Indeed, when he stroked its feathers right then, he seemed to disappear, leaving not even a shadow.

* * *

Pierrette surveyed her books. Cato was too serious, Ovid too frivolous, but there was a history—Diodorus Siculus, from whose name the knight Diodoré's was derived. Its ancient, familiar words would soon lull her to sleep.

She thumbed through the first half until she came to a single word: Heraclea. She shuddered. Heraclea was the Greek name of the town known today as . . . Ugium. A Celtic settlement, Greeks had made it a center of the salt trade. Romans had sacked it. Now Ugium was of no importance except to local farmers, but the taint of unknown and ancient evil lay strongly about it. She had not dared set foot ashore, when Caius's boat docked there. She did not know what that evil was, or why it lingered. That made it all the more frightening. She turned the page quickly, reading on:

* * *

In the year 650 (104 years before Christ), the Teutons, now allied with the Vocontii, and with help from the league of the Salluvii, defeated Marius east of Aquae Sextiae Salluviorum, and put an end to Roman designs upon Gaul.

* * *

What had she just read? She looked back up the page. What tricks eyes and minds could play. Marius had*defeated* the Teutons in 104 B.C., securing Rome's hold on Provence. He had ordered a canal dug through the marshes of Camargue. She had travelled on that canal only the year before. She read the passage again:

* * *

In the year 650 (104 years before Christ), the Teutons, now allied with the Vocontii, and with help from the league of the Salluvii, defeated Marius east of Aquae Sextiae Salluviorum, and put an end to Roman designs upon Gaul.

She pulled the lamp closer. Was it a prank? No words had been erased or changed. The faulty paragraph was identical to the rest. Had the scribe written them wrong, in monkish rebellion against an overbearing taskmaster?

It was almost dawn. Picking up the lamp, she shuffled to the windowless back room for her clothing. A flash of whiteness caught her eye—a white feather. A hen's feather.

"Guihen," she breathed, scrutinizing the stone wall's regular courses for the slightest waver that might give the sprite away "Guihen! If you're here, appear now," she commanded. "I'm too tired for pranks." There was no flicker of motion, no cheery high-pitched chuckle. She spun the feather between finger and thumb.

How strange. That was how he had signalled her when she was little, before anyone was concerned that she had inherited her mother's gift, before anyone thought much about wood sprites.

She would have to delay her return to the relaxed cheeriness of Anselm's high fortress, and go instead to the old campsite in the hills, as she had done when she was a child.

* * *

The slope to the high forest was rough and steep, and she had not slept. If it was not one thing, it was another. If not the goddess, then Saracens, and now Guihen. What else would keep her from her studies? What else would thrust between her and her goal?

"Pierrette!" cried Diodoré, spurring his horse forward. There was her answer. She should not ask such questions. "You shouldn't go out alone. There are demons."

Pierrette wanted to flutter her eyelashes to say that, with a protector like him, she feared neither brigands nor supernatural manifestations. She sighed. "You're kind to be concerned, but I'm going to meet a shy old friend, to trade for herbs. If he sees you, he'll flee, and I'll return emptyhanded."

"Ah," said the young soldier knowingly—though indeed he knew little at all. "I'll take you as far as the edge of the high woods."

He would come crashing after her at the first shriek of an owl, waving his sword and terrifying poor Guihen. Despite her resolve to use spells only in dire circumstances, she would have to. A very small spell.

From a small leather pouch she withdrew a tiny bell, keeping it out of sight. Guihen had given it to her when she was little. It was shaped like a*muguet* , a white, sweet flower of the moist woods by the sacred pool. Under her breath, she murmured in an almost-forgotten tongue.

"What did you say?" asked Diodoré.

"I said I hear the church bell," she replied. "I wonder what's amiss?"

"I hear nothing."

"Listen." She moved the tiny flower-bell, and heard not a silvery tinkle close by, but a deep brazen peal at some distance.

"You're right," said Diodoré, frowning. "Perhaps the Moor has returned."

Pierrette jiggled the tiny bell vigorously, and the church bell's peal echoed from the hills surrounding Citharista, and richocheted outward over the ocean, multiplied tenfold. With an apologetic shrug, the

knight rode off. Pierrette hurried to a faint trail that led steeply uphill. She hoped Diodoré would miss it entirely, when he found that no one had rung the church's bell, and no one but he had heard the ringing.

* * *

How old had she been when last she had sat by a campfire here? The scrub oaks pressed no more closely than when she had been five, the night her mother died. She laid dry sticks on the fire, and tried to distinguish the sounds of dry wood burning from the rustlings of small creatures. She would not hear Guihen. She would not see him until he wished it.

When she heard crackling and crashing, the thumping of footsteps, she leaped to her feet, her heart hammering.

The man who emerged was taller than a Frank, though his hair was brown. In the shadowy brush, two pairs of eyes gleamed greenly. "Yan Oors!" she gasped, which meant "John of the Bears."

"It is I, little witch," he boomed. "Our leafy friend will be here soon. He's too frightened to walk openly, but skulks from rock to tree." His shaggy companions remained outside the firelight's circle.

Though Pierrette knew Yan Oors meant her no harm, he was terrifying. He wore blackened chain mail and a leather vest darkened with oil and sweat. His muscular legs were a froth of black, curly hair. His black kilt and flapping leather*pteruges* were like those once worn by Roman soldiers. From a wide belt depended a sword like a Roman spatha, but half again as long. Its iron scabbard was slung from chains in the Celtic fashion out of style for more centuries than even Anselm the mage had lived.

Yan Oors leaned his wrist-thick staff against a sapling oak. It was brown as old wood, but Pierrette had once tried to pick it up: it was iron—a fallen star forged in Earth's fire and quenched in the Mother's blood.

"Have you ensorcelled yon poor knight?" he asked, using the Latin*equite* instead of the Frankish*knicht* , unpronounceable to a southern tongue. His grin revealed gapped, yellowed teeth, and crevasses spread across his weathered visage. "He's beaten up and down the trail until his poor horse is frothy."

"Poor Diodoré," Pierrette murmured. "He thinks he's in love with me."

"As are we all, girl," said a new voice, high and boyish. Leaves and branches coalesced into a figure whose hair was moonlight on bleached stone, a face at once old and young. His eyes picked cool blue hues from the fire. Moonlight colored his puffy white shirt, and his silky pantaloons were embroidered with willow and olive leaves that shifted from russet to emerald as he moved. "Perhaps you've ensorcelled all of us."

"Guihen!" Pierrette exclaimed.

The two odd men settled by the fire—Guihen far from Yan's staff; the smell of iron made him ill. Pierrette glimpsed something white cradled under his arm. "How is Penelope?"

The sprightly fellow snorted in mock disgust. He released his small, white hen to scratch in the stony soil. "Her name's not Penelope. She has never told me her name . . . unless it's `cluck.' "

"She is Penelope," Pierrette insisted. "She never told me she isn't."

"Bah!" replied Guihen.

Abruptly he became serious. "Terrible things are happening. I'm afraid." He recounted how the folk of the towns had rejected him and his kind—the small, ancient folk people called sprites, dryads, and elves (though most of them, like Pierrette's mother Elen, were as human as anyone). He told of banes hung in doorways, rumors of evil magic and changeling beast-children left in the beds of stolen babes.

For many human lifetimes Guihen and Yan Oors had languished in the vast Rhodanus delta, the Camargue, where ancient magics still worked. Pierrette had urged them out to play pranks and do kind deeds, recreating the climate of belief that had once sustained them. She thus felt a proprietary interest. "If you've been playing evil tricks, and not giving people any pleasant surprises, you have only yourselves to blame."

"It's not so," Guihen protested. Other forces were at work. Trees crept through the night like stalking hunters, rocks rolled uphill when no one was looking, and ancient graves folded back their mossy blankets, releasing the dead into the land of the living.

"It's true, little witch," agreed Yan Oors. "I've seen the graves—and bodies wearing iron casques or bronze helms, with no faces inside them."

"Are you sure?" Pierrette shuddered. His words evoked a vision long past, a Gaulish sanctuary where niches held the heads of dead heroes and enemies, reeking of cade oil and spices, iron spikes driven ear to ear: a dream of the very place the goddess*Ma* wished her to go—Ugium.

"They are*fantômes* ," said Yan. "Ghosts of ancient Gauls."

"How can that be?" she asked.

"A body is ash and earth," Yan explained, "quickened by breath." The word "*spiritos*" could mean "ghost" as well as "breath."

"A*fantôme* ," he said, "is desire and craving, hunger, lust, and anger—all things that promote survival. Without a*fantôme* , a heart would stop and flesh rot. Sometime after death, the*fantôme* departs."

"How can you know when it's gone?"

"Rot or cremation release it—but if someone preserves the head, the soul is trapped too, so the*fantôme* must linger. It will obey its captor, for a promise of eventual freedom."

"I don't understand," said Pierrette. "Christian beliefs have supplanted old Gaulish ones. No one has taken heads since before the fall of Rome. Where are these*fantômes* coming from?"

"Perhaps they are ancient, only now called to service."

"Could heads remain uncorrupted for a thousand years? Wouldn't they rot?"

"I believed so," rumbled Yan, "but*fantômes* march now."

"What do you expect*me* to do?"

"Find out why this is happening."

"Help us!" interjected Guihen. "Folk blame us for the ghosts' deeds."

Things got worse and worse. Uneasily, Pierrette recognized that*Ma* 's demand and theirs were not unrelated, but she did not mention Ugium. "When I return to Anselm's keep, I'll look in his scrolls and books."

* * *

The rocks of the Eagle's Beak slanted upward and westward, overhanging the sea. Built of the same red marl as the scarps, the magus Anselm's keep blended with them. Only a columned portico stood out. Thinking the columns were Moorish, locals called it "the Saracen keep."

A narrow path wound across the scarp to the portico. Steep cliffs fell away on both sides. Pierrette watched her step: the rock was brittle and unstable. A misstep to either side would end in a tumble hundreds of feet to her death.

Safely between the columns at last, she breathed a sigh of relief. Taking a small bell from its niche, she summoned her master to open the weathered wood door. She heard the clatter of sandals within as he descended the stone staircase.

"Where have you been?" he demanded crankily.

Pierrette sighed. Inside the keep it was always day, the same bright day when the spell had first been spoken. A century might pass unnoticed. After a week of study inside, Pierrette could emerge on the causeway at the exact moment she had entered. Perversely, Anselm might never know she had gone, or might think she had abandoned him for a decade. She had never figured it out.

There were compensations. Time yielded to necessary tasks, and there were always hours to finish them. That was how Pierrette, only a girl, had mastered history, Greek, Latin, and especially geometry, from which she had figured out how magic worked—and why it sometimes did not.

"You must have been very busy," she said, "to think I was gone so long."

"I was reading ibn Saul's geography. If I am ever to venture to far lands—or to find my way home—I must know what to expect." Home was far away, in a place that no longer existed—in this world. But that is another tale. . . .

They ascended the long stairway, and emerged in the bright light of eternal noon. The air was always pleasantly cool on the rooftop of Anselm's keep.

"I wish historians and copyists were as reliable as your Arab friend," she said. "Do you remember who won the battle beneath Mount Sainte Victoire in the year 650 after Rome's founding?"

"Calvinus? No, it was Marius."

Pierrette explained what she had read—that Marius had lost that battle.

"Not so. Come. We'll check my copy of Diodorus." He unrolled a scroll on his library's long reading table, and found the passage in question:

* * *

In the year 650 the Teutons, allied with the Vocontii, were defeated by Marius east of Aquae Sextiae

Salluviorum, and he was accorded a triumph in Rome.

* * *

"How strange," Pierrette mused. "Have you left this open in sunlight, master? See how it's faded?" The earliest writing on the scroll was clear and dark, but as she unrolled it past the passage they had examined, it became progressively fainter. At the end, the parchment was entirely blank.

"I have another copy, unopened since I acquired it."

"Good. I'll need your maps as well." She explained what Yan Oors had said about*fantômes* . She wished to identify ancient*oppida* , abandoned hill-cities of the ancient Gauls, to see if there was a correlation with ghostly apparitions and unnatural events.

"What of your other work?" he asked. Discovering that magic, like geometry, proceeded from stated postulates to logical conclusion, and that spells were in fact theorems, Pierrette had freed him from bondage on the cape. He could now enjoy the company of men in the wineshops in Citharista, or visit his friend Muhammad abd' Ullah ibn Saul in Massalia. His shadow did not disappear when he went too far.

Once sorcerers had whisked themselves wherever they willed, and did not depend on the belief of villagers to give them strength. Why had that changed? Pierrette was close to an answer. Of course Anselm was concerned.

"You're the only person who cares," she said angrily. "All I hear from anyone else is, `Fix this, fix that.' I'll solve this matter of Gaulish*fantômes* who refuse to remain gone and forgotten, and then . . ."

"And then there will be something else."

* * *

Pierrette laid translucent vellum over a Roman chart of the Narbonensis, from the Rhodanus to the Alps. She marked Gaulish citadels mentioned by ancient writers in red: Glanum, on the road from the Alps, Heraclea—now Ugium—and the citadel of Entremont, halfway between Alps and Pyrenees. Entremont had been Rome's first conquest in Gaul, the key to the coastal route to Iberia.

She had two lists of ghostly appearances and unnatural events. One was Father Otho's, copied from the letter he was writing to his bishop. The other was her own—the occurrences Yan Oors and Guihen had described, and others her father had heard in the wine shop. She marked each apparition on her map with a tiny Arabic number.

A pattern emerged: preternatural appearances had occurred near almost every Celtic*oppidum* . Other concentrations must represent old urban or sacred sites lost to historic memory. The two largest clusterings were around Entremont, close to Aquae Sextiae, and near . . . Ugium.

Pierrette's eyelids drooped and the tracing blurred. She shuffled to her room, where heavy drapes blocked the noonday sunlight. She slept. Later, when hunger drove her, she climbed the stone stairs to the high patio and supped on olives, bread, cheese, and figs, washing them down with watered wine.

"I've searched everywhere for accounts of the old religions, master."

"How strange. My library is complete. What, specifically, do you need?"

"The*fantômes* are Gaulish ghosts, but the only descriptions of the Gaulish religion are Caesar's. Where

are the druids' holy books?"

"Ah, child. Druids' apprenticeship lasted nineteen years. Six thousand, seven hundred and ninety-seven days, actually—a Golden Year. That often, sun- and moon-years exactly coincide."

"Did you hear my question, master?"

"Yes, I did. Now, the thirteen lunar months encompass 364 days, but the solar year is 365 and one fourth. That's why Caesar adopted Eudoxius's idea of a `leap year.' It was more straightforward than the Gauls' system, though less accurate."

"That's very interesting. But I need to know the*postulates* of their religion, the irreducible concepts. These ghosts mean that druidic axioms have been incorporated into the magic—the theology—of this time."

Religions were rational edifices constructed upon premises—and magic followed the same rules. A change in premise, in a basic belief, affected the structure above it, just as the replacement of a foundation stone with something else affected a building—for better or worse.

A spell had only one outcome in ancient times, but if its essential postulates had changed, it might have a different outcome today. That was why Pierrette dared essay only simple spells, ones she had examined carefully and tested with great caution.

Anselm sighed. "You won't like what you find."

"Why is that?"

"The*dryadeae* required nineteen years to memorize their sacred texts. They were never written down."

"Then how can I learn them?"

"Isn't it obvious? You must speak with a druid who has completed his Golden Year."

"The last druids are seven centuries in their graves, or are*fantômes* . I can't speak with them in either case."

"You can. You will, if you must."

"*Mondradd in Mon*," she murmured.

Those were the first words of a spell. Once, they had flung her willy-nilly to the end of time, when great, dead machines loomed over Citharista, and the beeches of the sacred grove were only craggy stumps.

"I don't dare." When she had used that spell, she had sensed the tenuous thread that traced down through the centuries, from the Pierrette who lay in deathlike repose by the sacred pool to herself. The thread had been thin, tangled by the seasonal turns of the stars, the spinning of the Earth.

That the world spun about the sun was obvious from the spiralling thread that linked body and faraway consciousness. Her mind recoiled from the ponderous movements of worlds, the fragility of that thread.

"I can't," she said. "I'm afraid."

Anselm raised his hands, palms up. "Is there any other way?"

Pierrette had no answer.

Chapter 3 - The Episkopos's Ultimatum

At the sound of the tinkling silver bell, Pierrette raised her eyes from the scroll. Anselm looked up from a Coptic inscription from the second century. "Tell them to come back later."

"If it weren't important, master, they would not have braved the path. Shall I bring them to the rooftop patio, or the large hall?"

"The rooftop."

Pierrette had avoided making decisions for seven sleeps. As long as she remained in the keep, nothing would change in the world beyond. She would not have to go on the trail of*Ma* 's vision; Diodoré would remain short of proposing marriage, and no new Celtic apparitions would arise from ancient graves.

She opened the door. "P'er Otho," she gasped. "What are you doing here?" It was hardly a Christian place—though not exactly pagan, either; Anselm gave little thought to any gods.

"*Episkopos*Theodosius wishes to speak with*magister* Anselm," Otho said. Then she saw his companion. Bishop Theodosius—lean, ascetic, of middle years—wore a calf-length brown cloak over ordinary wool trousers. But for his bronze pectoral cross, he might have been a merchant. Pierrette eyed him uneasily.

"I'll fetch a light." She could have taken the candle from its niche, and lit it with a flick of her fingers but, under the churchman's eye, she fetched an oil lamp. "Magister Anselm is enjoying the sunlight on the terrace." The sky outside was clear, and it was close to midday; the bishop would not emerge from gloomy evening into the glare of sunny day.

Anselm, unlike his apprentice, was not disconcerted by the eminence's visit. "Bring us wine," he commanded her. "The good*episkopos* and I have many things to discuss."

He assured himself that Theodosius was comfortably seated on a pillow. "I've read your treatise on *daimonion* and*diaballein* —slanderers and spirits. Masterful logic. You must explain your premise."

The old mage's enthusiasm for discourse disarmed the churchman. "I'll be happy to. A man of your learning will have no trouble accepting it, once enlightened."

Pierrette set fine Rhodanus red wine between them. She sat to listen to what promised to be an interesting discussion, but Father Otho gripped her arm. "We must speak." He tugged her down the stairs, toward the library.

"What's so important? I wanted to listen."

"You wouldn't like what you heard." He frowned. "I don't think you'll like what I have to say, either." He nodded to the other bench. She sat.

"His Eminence is the knight Diodoré's uncle. Your suitor has asked him to come."

Pierrette felt a cold weight form deep inside her. "I can't marry*anyone* ! I must remain virgin."

"You're past the age to marry, and too pretty to be ignored. Men don't understand. They strive to bring the wild mare to stud."

The wild mare. Pierrette envisioned a stocky white horse of the Camargue breed—the goddess Epona's own. Would that she were in the Rhodanus's vast delta now, the wild wet plain of grass and reeds where river met sea. "*Epi-skopos*," she pronounced. "Over-seer. I'm not a slave. Tell him—and Diodoré—to look elsewhere."

"Theodosius intends to perform your baptism himself—and Anselm's."

Pierrette feared baptism, which she had concluded was a powerful spell. It would close the doors to her future as firmly as would loss of her virginity. "What can I do?"

"If you leave Citharista, the bishop, a busy man . . ."

She sighed. "Everyone wants me to leave. No one asks me what I want."

"I don't think you have a choice," Otho said, eying the door and the stairs leading upward. "I wonder how the mage and the bishop are getting along?"

* * *

Anselm paced in deep thought, his hands in the small of his back, fingers interlocked. He only did that when upset. "I consort with no demons—I don't even believe in demons. Why demand empty words of me?"

"The*credo* is fundamental truth."

"Your truth! `I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of Heaven and Earth . . . `Define `God.' Define `Almighty,' and `Heaven.' For that matter, define `believe.' Until you're sure that what I `believe' is `Almighty' is what*you* believe, they're empty words."

Theodosius sighed. "You're a difficult man. Credulous farmers find salvation easy. Nonetheless, you must be baptized. You must confess, and attend mass—and above all, you must publicly avow that your magecraft draws only upon God."

"We have not defined `God,' " Anselm protested. "Your Christian magic draws upon the universe at large, and the credulity of witnesses. Will you accept my profession, if that's how I define `God?' "

"If not from God, then your powers stem from Evil."

"I'm neither good nor evil! Have you drawn so firm a line across the world that every creature must

choose a side and jump across? Is an osprey God's, because he's graceful and beautiful—or Satan's, because he kills his prey?"

"Fish hawks have no souls. You are a man."

"Define `soul.' See? We don't speak the same language. You'd have to trust that I meant my words as you define them."

Theodosius nodded. "I'll accept that as given. We need not haggle as long as you know what*I* mean." He got to his feet. "I won't pronounce upon the matter at once. I'll come back in a month. Are you ready, Father Otho?"

"I'll see you to the gate," said Pierrette.

Outside, on the narrow path, the bishop turned to her. "Urge your master to reconsider. If he refuses, he won't have to wait for Hell to suffer."

* * ** * *

"What did he mean?" Pierrette demanded of the mage. "What will he do?"

"He'll destroy me. Can this fortress, preserved in the eternal moment, survive if I deny its premises—set by an older god than Theodosius's?"

"It's my fault," cried Pierrette. "Had Diodoré not become infatuated . . . Oh, I wish I were ugly. Must I go away, master? That's what everyone wants."

Anselm eyed her pensively, without rushing to reassure her. "I don't think our good bishop will let go, now that he's got my soul in his teeth. But you might be wise to disappear."

"What will happen to you?"

"Theodosius and I will talk again. He won't act in haste because, just as I enjoy debate, so does he. No victory is as sweet as the battle itself. Take what time there is, and discover the source of what plagues us."

"The source?"

"Isn't it apparent? Our side can never win, you know. As long as people like Theodosius keep drawing lines in the sand, they will place more on evil's side than good's. I hear it all the time, from people who ask my aid. At Easter they say `Sell me a bane to drive away the evil fox. It killed my favorite hen.' Then at All Saints, they demand that I furnish poison to kill the evil rabbits that have eaten their garden—the rabbits no fox was there to eat. Definitions of evil expand. The Black Time will arrive when the last wart and toothache have been declared not unpleasant, but evil."

"It's*him* , isn't it? It's a new trick, to bring the Black Time." It was true. She had seen it. Priests called old Pan the Devil's disguise, and he acquired the old god's cloven feet. They called Cernunnos evil, and Satan grew horns. Name a thing evil, and feed the appetite and growing power of the Christians' other god.

"You must find out how it's being done. I don't think the answer is in my library."

* * *

Pierrette did not want to believe that. She did not want to tread the path to Ugium. Seeking an alternative, she spent long hours with her maps and scrolls, and went through several thick tomes before she found the clue she sought. It was in Titus Livius, Book LX:

* * *

124 B.C.: C. Sextius, proconsul, having failed to destroy the Salluvian capital, retired to Rome in ignominy.

* * *

That was clearly wrong. The siege of Entremont had not been lifted. C. Sextius Calvinus defeated the Salluvian Gauls and Ligures, and overran the*oppidum* of Entremont—not in 124 B.C., but in 127. He founded Aquae Sextiae Salluviorum on the site of his camp, by the thermal springs that gave the colony its name.

Just as Diodorus's scroll had faded, so had Livy's book—as if all history following the critical siege had itself faded. Or, she realized with cold dread, as if the*new* history that resulted from the revision had not yet been written.

She awakened Anselm from his doze in the sun. "It's now clear. Marius lost his battle against the Teutons because Calvinus did not take Entremont and remove the Salluvian threat. With no secure base, his rear was unprotected. He only dared put half his infantry in the field."

"You speak as if things actually happened that way," reflected Anselm. "But we know otherwise, despite what those books now say."

"Do we? I fear that the history we remember has been falsified, and that the Eater of Gods is writing a new one, in which Rome never won Provence and Julius Caesar, having no secure Province west of the Alps, did not conquer Gaul, and founded no Empire."

"How can you be sure?"

Pierrette laid her hand on a thick tome whose green leather covers were inlaid with silver and garnets. "Do you recognize this?"

"It's Virgil's*Aeneid* —his mythical tale of the founding of Rome."

Pierrette opened the book. "What do you see?"

"It's blank! Where has Virgil gone?"

"Virgil, Rome's foremost propagandist, was a Gaul, from the Padus Valley. In this new history, he never wrote it. Without a victory at Entremont, Calvinus did not found a colony. Without a colony, Marius lost Provence. Without a base for his legions, Caesar never came, saw, or conquered." Pierrette did not have to pull*De Bello Gallico* from the shelf to know it too would be blank.

What else would change? She pictured Entremont as a stone tossed in the sacred pool, ripples spreading, changing the world she knew, effacing first written histories, then events themselves, until a strange new present emerged without Rome. Without Rome—and thus without Emperor Constantine to legitimize Christianity. Without saints to convert Gauls and then Germans to the new faith.

In this new history, had the Eater of Gods found a better source of sustenance than pagan gods and Christian sinners?

"You're right," she said, slapping Virgil's cover. "You, Guihen, and*Ma.* I have to find out what's behind this, before the world changes to match what we've read."

"You'll go to Ugium?"

"I'll go where the Gaulish*fantômes* are thickest. Where this all began—Entremont." She felt herself clever. The ruins of Entremont were a short walk from the bishop's city of Aquae Sextiae, which was said to be lovely, with fountains that jetted warm, healing water. Whatever she found there would not be as bad as Ugium.

Part Two - Vidi

The old gods are not especially clever, and they can sometimes be tricked by mortals, but gods are manifestations of more fundamental principles, and those are immutable. Even gods cannot cirvumvent them. Better to abandon the gods (which we ourselves create to explain why things are as they are) and instead to study those immutable principles.

Otho, Bishop of Nemausus

The Sorceress's Tale

Chapter 4 - Changing Times

Citharista bathed in miraculous sunshine reflected through clean, pine-scented air from white rock and azure ocean. Would she see the first sign of change, or would she change with it, remembering nothing of a past no longer hers?

She found herself looking closely at familiar things, like the incised Roman letters on the stable's old stone blocks. Had the inscriptions, belonging to the old reality, begun to fade?

"There you are," she said. The buff-and-white donkey rolled his large, brown eyes. "Yes, you." She

reached for a rope halter. "It's time to earn your oats."

The beast sidled away.

"Gustave!"

Reluctantly, the donkey allowed itself to be haltered. Pierrette draped wicker panniers across its skinny back. One, she filled with cloth sacks of grain, and the other with a thick wool blanket, a cooking pot, two jugs of wine that would serve as canteens later, clothes, and simple food—dry cheese, salted mullet, olives, figs, bread, and a fat sausage.

On the way through town, she did not look up from beneath the brim of her conical straw hat, afraid of what she might—or might not—see. When Citharista was a scattering of red-roofed miniatures below, she did not look back, afraid she might see the shadows of great machines, enormous engines that could lift a cargo-laden ship like a child's toy, visions of the Black Time.

The road north of the town led only past isolated farmhouses. In each succeeding valley, a trail joined it, and her road became wider and well-trodden.

On every ridge-top, and again in each valley, she uttered the words of a small, simple spell. In Citharista or Anselm's keep, it was a fire-lighting spell. In other places, it caused a glow like marsh light or a white, heatless glare. On high ridges, the spell had no effect. She used it to warn herself when the magic of a region changed, because innocuous spells sometimes became dangerous, where their postulates meant something the writer had not intended. High ranges stifled spells, and if there were to be a change in magics, it would be on the far side of a ridge. Thus far, the hills had not been high enough. She had not needed flint and steel to light her fire, the first night out.

There were few other travellers. When she heard someone ahead, she hid until they passed. For all she knew, others did the same when they heard her first. Sometimes she felt eyes upon her back.

She encountered a carter in a narrow defile. His wain was heaped with hay, and she could pass only by squeezing close by his cart.

He had a fatherly face. "Climb up, girl. Old Brownie won't notice he's pulling a bit more."

Her sandalled feet burned from two days' walking. Still holding Gustave's lead, she put a foot on a spoke. The carter grasped her arm and lifted her—one broad hand cupping her buttocks. "Soft little thing, aren't you?" He seemed less fatherly.

He climbed up beside her and, grasping his switch pole, goaded his mule. Ahead, the roadway widened. He laid the pole against the wain's side posts. "Brownie knows the way," he said, laying down the reins. "Come here now."

Grasping a handful of her skirt, he pulled her toward himself. The slippery hay offered no purchase. She could not pull free. She felt a calloused hand under her loose blouse, and cool air and sunlight on her exposed legs. His weight pinned her into the deep hay.

He struggled to get his rope belt loose and still keep her from getting away. Pierrette's mind raced. He thought it only rape but, deflowered, she would be no more a sorceress than her mother. She would fail. The Black Time would come. She whispered soft words.

"What?"

Her nostrils widened. "I said, `Your hay is on fire.' "

"Hah! Are you that hot?" He reached between her thighs. "I'll quench you."

His mule and Gustave brayed, and the cart lurched. The carter raised his head, cursing. Both beasts' nostrils flared, and their eyes were wide. Sharp, white smoke billowed from the hay.

He leaped to calm his mule, and Pierrette rolled off the cart. She flung herself belly-down across Gustave. The donkey honked loudly, and half carried, half dragged her away. A hundred paces down the track she got her feet under herself.

The carter was pulling armloads of hay from his wain. Pierrette saw billows of smoke, but no fire. She hoped his entire cartload would burst into flame.

A mile down the trail, she watched the smoke pinch out at its base, the column thrashing like an angry snake's tail. She had gotten her wish—dry hay in full flame gives off little smoke, but the heat of it still rises. Then she felt sorry. The man surely had family, who would suffer for his loss.

She camped early that afternoon, off the trail a distance. She shook out coarse woolen*bracae* , Frankish trousers, and donned a grayed cotton tunic—boy's clothing. She should have done it at the start.

The baggy*bracae* were less loose than a year before, but her hips had not widened too much. Her small breasts pressed against the fabric across them. In the morning, she would bind them with cloth torn from her skirt, and would tie her hair atop her head in a soldier's coif. Her floppy hat would cover it.

* * *

There was a village at the intersection of the stone-paved Roman road and her trail. She skirted it and crossed the Roman road. She had expected traffic, and was not wrong—but it was all one way. A steady trickle of carts, mounted men, and folk afoot headed eastward, none west.

Where her chosen trail led north toward a cleft in the next range of hills, rough mule teamsters had kindled a fire. One hailed her to join them. She shook her head. Beyond were a man, woman, and two children. She approached their fire instead.

She had checked her appearance that morning, using wine poured into her pot for a mirror. She looked boyish enough.

"Are you from the coast?" asked the man, a sleeping baby on his lap. "Are things as bad there?"

"What do you mean by `bad?' "

The man glanced toward his wife and their older child, a boy of three or four. When he saw that the child slept, he spoke. "There are demons," he whispered. "They've taken Aix." Ecks? Oh—he had slurred "Aquae Sextiae" into a single syllable. Was that how languages changed . . . ? She should write that in her journal, when she returned to the cape. If she returned . . .

"Have you seen them yourself?"

His eyes filled with tears. "My brother has become one," he said.

With gentle urging, Pierrette encouraged him to tell her that tale.

* * *

The brothers Barcos and Cotos shared their father's farm, a wife, and two children. There had been no strife until Cotos took their olives to market. He returned covered in mud, sullen, and would not say what had transpired.

One night later, when it was Cotos's turn to lie with Dosia, she fled the little*cabane* , and sought Barcos, who was sleeping warm among the pigs. "Cotos desired an unnatural thing," she said, but would not describe it.

In the morning Barcos remonstrated with his brother. "It isn't your affair," said Cotos, "what I do with my wife."

"She's my wife too."

"Last night she was mine."

When the brothers went to their grove, they worked apart, neither holding the ladder for the other.

Days passed.

"Where did you get that?" Dosia asked Cotos. It was a battered bronze sword, an ancient thing. Cotos was sharpening it with a stone. He muttered something unintelligible.

"What did you say?"

"Are you deaf?" he growled.

She backed away, not having understood him at all. His words were foreign and harsh. That night she did not go to bed. Cotos had to find her. He had stiffened his blond hair into spikes with white clay. He dragged her to the tiny hut and raped her brutally.

Next day, he put on a pitted iron helmet. He would not say where he had gotten it—even had he tried, neither Dosia nor Barcos could have understood him. Strangely, he was angry with them, as if they were the ones who no longer spoke intelligibly. Odder still, little Galbos, probably Cotos's offspring, understood him, so they were able to continue with the work of the farm.

When the last olives were in, Cotos donned his rusty helm and, sword in hand, made as if to leave. He had packed food in a scrap of cloth. "*Wend'h 'hra teutos malos rheeks,*" he said.

"What did he say?" asked Dosia of her small son.

"He's going to find some people's hammer," said Galbos.

"We don't own a hammer," Barcos mused.

Cotos set off on the road to Aix. Perhaps the hammer he sought was in the grave where he had found the sword and helm.

* * *

"Where will you go?" asked Pierrette.

"Away. Anywhere." Barcos shrugged. "It doesn't matter. A flux took the pigs, and the olives will endure until we can return."

The boy Galbos had awakened. He saw Pierrette, and said something that his parents could not decipher. Pierrette responded in the same tongue. After that, both parents stared at her with such unease that she got to her feet, and bid them farewell. She was no longer welcome there.

Barcos was right, she reflected as she put the crossroads and the wide valley behind herself. It did not matter where they went. The blight would follow them. She and little Galbos had spoken in Gaulish, a dead language. Pierrette had learned old tongues in order to read Anselm's books, but the child should not have known it.

What Cotos had said was also Gaulish: "I am going to King Teutomalos," he had said. "*Teutomalos*" might mean "Hammer of the Tribe," but it was a proper name. "*Rheeks*"—Rix—meant "king." Teutomalorix. The king who, according to Diodorus Siculus, had been defeated by Calvinus at Entremont—or who had defeated him.

Those poor folk of Gaulish ancestry (as were most people in Provence) could not escape themselves, their blood. Cotos succumbed first, but already little Galbos spoke better Gaulish than Oc, the debased Latin of the formerly Roman Gaul. If Rome had never conquered in the first place, then Latin would never be spoken here, except by traders from across the Alps.

Pierrette slept poorly, and was glad when dawn at last lightened the crest of the mount where Marius had won (or lost?) his battle with the Teutons.

Was she nearing Aquae Sextiae? The mountain's distinctive white limestone scarp was a long, bright line on the northern horizon. The peak was a beacon, visible from any bare hilltop. From ancient times people had oriented themselves by it. By the time she approached the bishop's seat, the massif would be east of her and, seen end-on, should resemble a crooked triangular peak. She still had far to go.

* * *

Magic had not changed. Her fire-spell still lit her tinder when she stopped for the night, between two hills, looking down upon the Via Julia Augusta, as that portion of the main road between Italia and Iberia was called. Moonlight washed the Roman paving stones white. Campfires flickered.

There were dozens of people down there, with carts and wains heaped high with the miscellany of farm and household: refugees. She did not need them to tell her how bad things were. She could feel the old, angry, Gaulish spirits that brooded in the hillsides, in gnarled old trees no Romans had ever cut. In her world, Caesar's men had hacked and burned such sacred trees when he outlawed the druids, and Christians had completed his task.

Screams and the rumble of hooves awakened her. She crawled to the edge of the slope. Swords glinted. Shadowy folk ran this way and that. Plumes of feathers and horsehair bobbed atop bronze-trimmed helms.

A warrior rode down a child. A single swipe of his long sword took head from shoulders. The Gaul gave a harsh cry, and leaned from his horse to sweep up the rolling head.

Pierrette backed away, and vomited her meager supper. By the time she recovered, there were no more cries. The moon had sunk behind the western hills, and below was darkness. An unseasonal drizzle drifted down. The only sounds were Gustave's mumbled complaints.

At the first wan light, she shook out her blanket and loaded Gustave. She did not feel like eating, but she forced down a soggy crust.

She had to cross the Roman road; that meant going through the refugees' camp. Still forms lay amid the wreckage of the camp, but there were no sounds. They were all dead. Men, women, babes . . . all headless, even the littlest ones. Again she vomited.

Eyes brimming, she eyed the hard-surfaced road. The mountain was invisible in the mist, but Aquae Sextiae could not be more than six or seven miles west. What would she find there? The bishop's city, with warm fountains and sunny streets . . . or a Gallic fane below the looming walls of an Entremont grown large, a city never vanquished, that had never known Rome?

Something was nagging at her. Something she had seen in the horror of the refugee camp? She forced herself to look. The headless bodies of children were just dark lumps.

That was it. Gauls took the heads of fighting men. Warrior*fantômes* were powerful. But children? What use had Celtic*druidae* for the captive ghosts of infants? It made no sense.

The clatter of hoofbeats startled her. With nowhere to hide, she stood frozen as a single horseman reined in, his long Celtic spatha bared. His horse's nostrils flared at the scent of blood. The rider looked anxious. He was afraid. Of her?

"Who are you?" His blade wavered between them. He spoke Gaulish.

"I'm called Pierrette," she replied in that tongue.

"You're not . . . with these?" He indicated the sprawled, headless refugees.

"I just arrived from the south. I camped up there, and I heard the sounds in the night. . . . I came down to see what had happened to these people."

"People? These aren't people, they're demons."

"They don't look it. That one's a child."

"An imp." He accepted that she was not a "demon"—because she spoke Gaulish? "They appear out of nowhere, speaking the evil Romish tongue. They worship a horrid dead god who hangs on a tree. If not demons, they are mad. If not demons—then where did they come from?"

Pierrette's mind raced. This Gaulish soldier thought the refugees were demons? Just as such ordinary folk thought the*fantômes* were? But of course—this was the*new* history that she now inhabited. The soldier was in his own world. The refugees were the apparitions here.

"I'm taking you to my*wanak* ," he said, almost apologetically. "He'll want to hear what you can tell him of the south. By the look of you, you're a Ligure, aren't you?"

"My mother was." Ligures had inhabited Provence before Gauls or Romans. In her world they were

considered fairy-folk, and lived in remote places. Was it different here and now? Did her mother's people have it better here?

Wanak? In the Greek of Homer,*wanax* meant "king." Was she to meet a Gaulish king?

"I have little to tell," she lied. "I met no one on the trail from my father's farm. I saw nothing but rocks and trees—until this."

"Nonetheless," he replied. "Come." She led Gustave, and followed him eastward, not toward the town.

She walked and he rode. She prodded him with casual-seeming questions, and got some idea of the changes in this world. Teutomalos the Eighth ruled an empire of Gauls and Germans. The capital had not been at Entremont for generations, but was in the north. The empire stretched from the Alps to the northern sea, from the Atlantic to the great marshes of the central continent.

Things were much as she had imagined, had there been no Rome. The only thing she could not have imagined was . . . the heads. The children's heads. Had the religion of the*druidae* become so corrupt? The warrior—Segomaros—did not know what the priests did with the heads. "I don't want to know," he said.

After a mile, realizing she could not keep up, Segomaros pulled Pierrette up behind him. She tried to imagine herself riding behind Diodoré—but he was in another world. Was it gone—or had she merely passed some unseen line, up in the hills? Might Citharista, Diodoré, and Anselm still exist, if she fled back that way?

* * ** * *

For some time, she had been catching whiffs of a foetid odor, as if something large had died at no great distance. They rode on and on, at a walk, and the stench thickened. Was there another field of slaughter nearby—one days or a week older than the one she had seen earlier?

When she looked, she saw that the mountain called Holy Victory was now an elongated scarp, white teeth gnawing at the horizon, more west than north. Then she knew what the nauseous odor was: she was near the*campi putridi* , the "stinking fields" where Marius had fought the Teutons and had, in this universe, been defeated. The malodorous swamp had been drained in her own "history," and no longer stank, but here . . . When the battle had gone against the Romans, had they fled to the swamp? Were the "stinking fields" the Gauls' victory monument, as the mountain had been . . . might have been . . . Marius's?

There had been a Gallic*oppidum* , a hill-city, near the*campi putridi*, and when she saw hills rising ahead, she knew their destination was near. But before they reached the hills, a sentry stepped out from sheltering rocks. Segomaros explained his mission in a spatter of rapid Gaulish Pierrette could barely follow.

The sentry gestured with a thumb. "The captain"—*wanak*meant captain, not king—"will return at dusk. Take her to the south entrance, and wait there."

They skirted the camp. Segomaros handed her down from the horse. "Wait over there," he said. "I'll get something for you to eat and drink." He rode into the camp.

"What shall I do now?" she asked Gustave, who only snuffled as he tried to reach the pannier that held his oats. What could she do? Had she already lost the battle against the Black Time, before she had

begun to strive? The drizzle continued unabated. She found a dry spot beneath a platane's spreading branches, and sat down to wait.

The sun had just set, and the gloom was deep. Had she drowsed? She heard voices a way off. "Where is she?" boomed a voice that echoed as if from a deep well.

"I left her here,*Wanak* . She must be nearby."

"She is one of*them* ," said the captain, who wore a hooded mantle. "She cast an enchantment on you."

Pierrette edged backward into thorny brush. She looped Gustave's lead so it would not drag. "Go now!" she whispered. The donkey ambled away.

Someone lit a torch. The sappy wood cast an ugly orange light. Segomaros and three others stopped under the platane. "She was here. See? Donkey shit." The*wanak* took the torch, and bent downward.

Then Pierrette saw. Her heart hammered dangerously loud in her ears. The*wanak* had no face. Beneath cowl and helm was only darkness. Couldn't Segomaros see that? Or . . . didn't he care? The*wanak* was a*fantôme* .

The torch dazzled the searchers and left concealing pools of shadow. She remained absolutely still, hardly breathing. The men moved on.

There was no moon. She pushed through the brush, using the flickers of firelight from the camp as her guide. There was a trail, but all too soon—she could not have gone a mile—it petered out. Then she found it again. It had made a complete turnaround, traversing the slope upward in a series of hairpin bends. She would have to walk a mile for every quarter-mile of height she gained, but she did not dare scramble directly upward in the darkness. She plodded on, numb with exhaustion and chill.

When gray dawn edged westward toward her, the sky was still overcast, but she could see to climb straight uphill, over the tumbled rocks. Was there a pass through the forbidding scarp ahead? There had to be, or there would be no switchbacks—that was a trail for laden beasts, not men afoot. It had to cross over. She pressed on, panting, reeling. She had hardly slept for two nights.

"There she is!" Something—an arrow—clattered on the rocks above. She kept climbing. Arrows rattled beside her, behind her. The horsemen were following the trail; their steeds could not master the rocky slopes directly. Arrows clattered behind her, so she guessed she was gaining. She looked back. Two dismounted men were scrambling up after her.

For the dozenth time, she crossed the trail, but now it headed directly south, through a steep cleft. She found a loose, round stone beside the track, and rolled it downward. It rattled and clacked as it went, not slowing at all. "Watch out!" someone yelled.

She hurried on, keeping her eye out for more cobbles. There were squarish ones, and sharp-edged slabs, but no round ones. She was so tired. She could not go much farther. Her breath came and went in gasps. Sweat blurred her vision. The cleft ended in a brush-filled cul-de-sac. Loose twigs and brush collected there, out of the wind and drizzle. She stopped, and wiped her eyes.

There was a pole with lashed rungs. She scrambled toward it, and put one foot on the lowest crosspiece. It twisted, and her foot thumped on the ground. She would have to pull herself up by her arms, and only put her weight on both sides of the crosspieces at once.

Voices echoed between the walls of the cleft. She scrambled upward. Her arms felt like they would pull from her shoulders. She was sure to fall.

"There she is!"

She was over the top. The Gauls were running the last hundred paces to the ladder. She tried to pull it up after her, but could not. She murmured the words of her fire-spell, twisting a tuft of coarse grass. It lit, and she tossed it down. A wisp of smoke puffed from the tangled brush, then . . . nothing. It had gone out. She looked for another clump of dry stuff, but found none.

Weeping with frustration, she got to her feet, to stagger on. She kicked at the pole ladder, and it fell away—into an almost invisible sheet of hot flames. Sparks flew.

"Watch out! Everything's burning." The foremost Gauls pushed back against the rest. The fire spread. Flames rose from the ladder pole. The rungs' lashings flared brightly, then fell away. The flame had not gone out: it burned so hotly there was still almost no smoke at all. Pierrette sank upon the stony ground at the top of the pass, and wept.

* * *

The Gauls had given up. She saw a line of tiny men on toy horses, heading away. Somewhere down there was Gustave, and her few remaining supplies. Thirsty, she sucked sweat from the cloth that had bound her hair. Below, on the far side of the spinelike ridge, was a broad valley, a green, tree-clad vale. There would be water there, amidst greenery as rich as the grove of the sacred pool.

Chapter 5 - The Real Story

Since crossing the divide, Pierrette no longer felt the staring eyes of trees and stones, of a nature in which every entity had a soul, and thoughts. She rested often on her way down the brushy slope to the valley, aching in every limb, scratched, and exhausted. A sun-warmed shelf of rock beckoned. In this lovely vale no clouds masked the sun. A colorful patchwork of cultivated fields spread before her, gold of wheat, emerald green rows of legumes, russet and tan, and the dark shades of fresh-tilled soil yet undried by the sun. The far slopes, leading to a towering gray scarp, were covered with forest, the green of late spring, of*Ma* 's glade.

The warm rock was a balm, soothing her aches. She might take a short nap. Then she would have to decide what to do. Was the change she had witnessed only a patch of another reality not yet spread afar? She hoped so.

It seemed unreal now. Perhaps she had gone mad, and dreamed everything that had happened on the other side of the pass. All thought of visiting Aquae Sextiae was gone. She would not willingly brave the terrifying world of Celtic domination and ancient faceless ghosts again, in dream or reality. Here and now, she felt safe, as if she had indeed passed into another magical realm where her enemies could not enter. She let heavy eyelids close. . . .

"Well, boy! You'll never get a job dozing in the sun." Pierrette sat up, startled. The sun was low. She had slept most of the day.

The speaker was between her and the sun, his booming voice jovial and unthreatening—and he was speaking not Gaulish, but Oc, good Provençal Latin. She rubbed sleep from her eyes. "A job? Where? What job?"

"Why, I suppose that depends on your trade. You're small for a mason or a carpenter. A woodcarver? A glazier, making those brilliant baubles of Celtic glass and lead? How did you get those cuts and scratches?"

Pierrette's confusion multiplied. What did the one have to do with the other? The big man sat. His lumpy leather sack clanked. His close-cropped hair was red-brown, as was several days' unshaved beard. His tunic and trousers, and the leather apron over them, were well-worn.

"I'm not looking for a job."

"No? Have you run away from the monks?" He chuckled. "I wouldn't blame you. Saint Cassien's brothers aren't strict, but I myself wouldn't like such a pious life. I'll build their fine hostel—but when I'm paid, I'll be off again."

Then Pierrette understood. The Saint Cassien monks and their hostel were well known—in*her* history. The establishment lay near the base of the escarpment where Saint Marie Madeleine had spent her last years.

Once, the goddess of the sacred pool had promised Pierrette she would speak with the saint. Only a child then, she had believed it literally, and had asked everyone where Mary Magdalene could be found. Her father and the priest Otho had chuckled indulgently. Otho told her of the shrine and the monks who tended it.

"You're a mason?" His heavy sack was full of tools.

"I'm Cerdos of Tarascon, a master mason. Perhaps you've heard of me? No? Then you're definitely not a tradesman. I've built bridges and churches from Tolosa to Nicaea. I helped build the Frankish king's new palace."

"I'm sure the monks will welcome you. Are they expanding their hostel?"

"Expanding it? They're building it anew. A careless pilgrim's candle set it afire. They're housing travellers in the barns." He stood up. "There's no time to waste. Every hewer and breaker of stone in all Provence is converging on the place, and if they begin without me, there's no telling what mistakes will be made. A good foundation is the key. I won't build a chicken coop on another man's weak courses. Are you coming? Or are you hiding out? You never said."

"I'll go with you. It isn't monks I fear."

A half-hour's walk brought them near a cluster of barns and sheds. "Good," Cerdos said. "They've dug trenches, but have laid no stone."

He pointed to a nearby field. "There are my children," he said. Pierrette had thought the white objects were grazing sheep. They were blocks of quarried stone. Children, indeed, in need of their father's

shaping.

"I wonder who's here?" said Cerdos, eagerly looking around. Monks in dark robes scurried among lay brothers in workaday clothes and tradesmen dressed as colorfully as Gypsies.

"Cerdos!" one fellow shouted. "Are you come to carry my tools? I need a husky apprentice." Cerdos, far from insulted, flung a burly arm around the smaller man, then slapped the back of his head.

"Ow! Release me, you ox."

"This is Ferdiad," Cerdos told Pierrette. "He's an Irish sparrow who plays at joinery. He'd be happier as a monk in a choir, or as a grammarian."

"Don't believe the big liar," said Ferdiad in clear, scholarly Latin, not the patois of Provence. "Just because I speak properly, and sing a bit . . . But who are you?"

"My name is Piers," Pierette said.

Cerdos guffawed. "The boy has no trade, and doesn't know where he's going, so the two of you should get on famously." He looked around himself. "Who's in charge?"

Ferdiad pointed him toward a tall monk who carried a writing-board and a charred stick of vine. Cerdos strode off.

"Cerdos is a good fellow," Ferdiad told Pierrette. "What did he mean about you?"

"Just that I was going to Aquae Sextiae," she said, matching his classical accent. "I became frightened when someone—something—chased me, and I fled here. Now I'm not sure whether to try another route, or to go home, over yonder scarp."

"I've heard tales," said the Irishman. "There may be more than brigands out there. Old ghosts are astir—I know, because I've felt their like in my own land."

"You have? Where is that? I thought such apparitions were new."

"My island is a Gaelic land," Ferdiad explained, "never conquered by Latins or Germans—thus our Celtic ghosts are with us always."

"Are Gauls and Gaels the same?"

"The same stock. We Irish descend from the first warriors to harness horse to chariot—the tribe of Dana, goddess of the great river of the east. Of course we're all good Christians now," he hastened to add. "In fact, we were Christians long before Clovis and his savage Franks professed the Faith."

He peered at Pierrette, who had withdrawn into deep thought. Was the Irish land the source of the *fantômes* , then? Was she wrong to seek their origins in the*oppida* of ancient Gaul?

Cerdos returned. "Befitting my position and repute, the brothers have allotted me a room with a hearth. Will you two share it with me?"

Ferdiad pretended to weigh the question. "If you can refrain from overfilling our chamber with hot air,

we'll be comfortable."

Cerdos guffawed. "Hot air will drive away the icy draft of your piety, Irish midget," he replied.

Cerdos's fat purse implied his boasts of skill and fame were not empty. He bought food and wine for the three of them. Across the hubbub of beasts and men, tents and drays, arose a commotion. A man cried out in anger and pain. An ass brayed, no less upset. "That is Gustave!" exclaimed Pierrette.

"I think Gustave's donkey has bitten him," Cerdos said.

"No—Gustave is my donkey. I thought him lost in the hills." She tried to push through.

"Let me." Cerdos's bulk parted workers, lookers, and sellers as a heavy boat parts reeds. Pierrette followed in his wake.

They broke into a clearing Gustave had opened with his flailing hooves. A man stood nursing a bloody forearm, holding the donkey's lead with his good hand.

"Gustave!" Pierrette shouted. "Behave yourself." The ass stopped in mid-bray and swivelled his laid-back ears in her direction. Pierrette took his lead from the unresisting man. "Thank you for finding my donkey. I'm sorry he bit you."

The wicker latch-loop on one pannier was loose. Though Gustave had himself tried to get at the grain he carried, he had not suffered a stranger to meddle with it. He had no assurance that he was to be fed, so he had bitten the snooper.

The donkey's abrupt change in manner rendered further proof of Pierrette's ownership unnecessary. She led him away.

* * *

Room and hearth were as promised. Having eaten, Ferdiad produced a small harp from a canvas sack. "Let's go to the common fire, where my appreciative audience may throw coins," he said. "I'll sing a tale dear to all tradesmen."

He settled near the fire, where all could hear him. "This is the tale of Master Jock," he said. Soft notes from the harp filled the air.

* * *

Master Jock (as Pierrette later remembered the tale) was an architect in ancient Judea. Everything he built, from cottage to palace, was perfection itself. Had he not designed Solomon's temple and the hanging gardens? Had he not selected just the right stone for the pyramids in Egypt? People said that he gave heart to stones, souls to wooden beams, wings to roofs, and spirit to windows. But his talents drew the envy of one Soubise, an architect who had the ear of the king. . . .

Unwelcome at home, Master Jock departed for Provence to start over anew. Just off the boat in Massilia, he sought a wine shop.

"What do you do?" asked a burly workman.

"It's said I give heart to stones, souls to wooden beams, and wings . . ."

"You are Master Jock!" the fellow growled. He and four others got to their feet. "We are followers of Soubise," he said. They threw the unfortunate architect out. One man picked up a cobble to crush his skull. Master Jock fled. East of the wharves was a cane marsh, where he immersed himself in murky water, and breathed through a broken reed.

At nightfall, he crept from the swamp. He walked eastward through the night, and in the days that followed put many miles between himself and his enemy's supporters.

He arrived in the valley of the Holy Balm, and because it was dusk, missed the hostel of the good brothers. Seeing a glimmer of light high in the cliff, he ascended the rocky slope, and found a lamp burning in the mouth of a cave. No one was there, but he found a soft bed, upon which he fell, exhausted.

In the morning, he saw that his mattress was woven of fine blond hair that shimmered in the early light.

"This is Mary Magdalene's cave," someone whispered.

"She lived here thirty years, naked but for her long hair, from which she made her bed," said someone else. They were high, childlike voices, like fairies.

"Who are you?" demanded Master Jock, terrified. He could see no one.

"We are your apprentices," said a tiny voice.

"We searched all night for you," said another.

"What do you want of me?"

"We'll bring you food and wine. You are safe here. A fresh, cold spring gushes from the rock, in the cave."

"Why are you so kind?" Master Jock still saw no one.

"Teach us to give hearts to stones," said one voice.

"And souls to wooden beams," said another.

"Teach us to build roofs with wings, and to give spirit to windows," the rest chimed in.

And so it was. Master Jock taught them everything he knew, there in the mouth of the cave. Blue thistles nodded in the sunlight, and the lovely vale spread out before him. Soon lovely new houses sprang up in surrounding towns, pure works of art. People said the roofs had wings, and the stones souls.

When word of those houses reached Massilia, the followers of Soubise, ever jealous, set out for Sainte Baume. Following the light of a single lamp on the rocky hillside, they found Master Jock asleep. They stabbed him many times, then fled the way they had come.

In the morning Master Jock was barely alive. That day, for the first time, he saw his apprentices clearly, and thus knew he was dying, for they were small elfin folk, dark-haired men of the race that neither plowed nor sowed, but lived off the bounty of the land, and drank from the Mother's breast. "Don't seek revenge," he begged them. "Continue to build as I have taught you. Thus will I triumph." He breathed his last.

His disciples removed his bloody clothes and washed his body. They buried him naked in the depths of the cave, as was their custom.

Going through his pockets, they found an unbroken fragment of the reed that had saved his life in the cane marsh—that had saved him so he could teach them. "This reed will be our emblem," they decided as one. As was customary, they divided his clothing among themselves.

"This hat is mine," said one who soldered colored glass with lead cames, making lovely windows for churches and palaces, giving them spirit indeed.

"I claim his work-apron," said a stonecutter, promising that he would faithfully follow the master's precepts, and would give heart to his stones.

A locksmith took sandals.

"I will make roofs with wings," said a carpenter, taking Master Jock's cape.

"I," said a hewer of wood, "will give souls to my children."

* * *

"And thus," sang Ferdiad, "down through all the centuries, fair weather and foul, when sun shines or wind blows, we Companions of Master Jock come to climb the rocky hill to the cave, in his memory."

Those who had coins to throw did so. The little Irishman caught them in the air. His purse jingled merrily on the way back to Cerdos's room. The mason produced a clay jug of wine and cups, and fed fresh splints to the fire's embers. "A fine tale," he admitted, ". . . at least, in the presence of the monks of Saint Cassien." He raised an eyebrow at Pierrette. "Now shall I tell the real story?"

"I know it already," said Pierrette—though it had only come to her that very moment.

"How can that be?" asked Ferdiad.

"Within every Christian tale," said Pierrette, "there is an older one. When the priests first came to this land, they chopped down holy trees and built shrines to Christian saints with the wood. They changed the old stories to Christian ones, and at length the old gods and spirits changed also. Saint Giles, who saved a doe by catching a hunter's arrow in his hand, was once Cernunnos, a god. Mary Magdalene—who indeed lived in that cave in the cliffs above us, supplanted*Ma* , the goddess of the spring."

Both nodded thoughtfully. "Father Jock," she said then, "is none other than Lugh the light-bringer. Lugh Long-Arm—whom you Irish call Samildanach, `skilled in many arts.' The disciples unseen were Ligures, small folk, my mother's kind, who build and make, but do not plow, sow, or reap. Is it so?"

Ferdiad nodded. "The god took refuge with the Mother. That is the truth of it. But you're only a boy. How did you know?"

Pierrette then told them everything she knew about the Black Time, and myths that mutated, turning old gods into saints—thus feeding their unassimilable pagan essences, that the priests named Evil, to Satan, the Eater of Gods.

She told them about her master Anselm and his library, and how she had spent years reading his books

and scrolls. "I learned about you Gaels from them," she said.

"You're not a day over twelve," Ferdiad protested. Indeed Piers, her male persona, seemed younger than Pierrette.

"Look within," she said ever so softly, and raised her eyes to his. Ferdiad's eyes widened. He drew back, as if the slight boy had become . . . something else.

"What's going on?" Cerdos asked anxiously, looking from Pierrette to Ferdiad. "What did you see?"

"He's*old* ," Ferdiad said. "And he's a woman."

"Now I know you're mad," Cerdos scoffed. "I always thought so."

"I don't know if I'm old or not," Pierrette mused. "I'm fifteen—or perhaps fifty—and yes, I'm a girl. But there's a long story behind what you saw in my eyes, Ferdiad. Do you want to hear it?"

"I'm a singer of tales. Need you ask?"

* * *

"Two thousand years ago," Pierrette began, "on an island far to the east of here, a great sorcerer sensed changes deep in the earth. He awoke from a nightmare of fires that burned even rock, destroying his island and all who lived there.

"The sorcerer Minho hurried about his island and set everything in order. He banished warriors, tax collectors, and usurers, and invited craftsmen, philosophers, and other peaceful folk to join him there. Then he waited, while the fires and turmoil beneath his land grew.

"When the first wisps of smoke burst from the top of the mountain at the center of his realm, he uttered a spell such as the world had never heard . . . and lifted his island from the world of time and circumstance.

"When men dared brave the roiling sea and the poisonous smoke that welled from it, they found his island . . . gone."

"A volcano!" exclaimed Cerdos. "I saw just such a smoking mountain in the south, on Sicilia."

"Shut up," said Ferdiad. "What happened to the sorcerer and his island?"

"The island appeared again, centuries later, in the gulf not far from Tiryns, in Greece. Some say that Heracles, who built Tiryns's great walls, learned the architect's trade from the sorcerer-king. I'm not so sure of that, because later the islands—actually, there were several, separated by canals and narrow passages—spent many years near the mouth of the River Baetis, and the city of Tartessos grew up under their influence. Since Heracles had to go to Tartessos to steal Geryon's cattle, the city had to be there already, I think.

"Tartessos?" asked Ferdiad.

"Your Bible calls it `Tarshish.' It was once in Iberia, on the Atlantic coast." She shrugged. "The Isles' exact whereabouts don't matter. They were seen again further north, where Phoenecian Ys flourished in Armorica. By then, people were calling them the `Fortunate Isles,' because wherever they were, the lands and peoples flourished."

"I know about the Fortunate Isles!" exclaimed Ferdiad. "Brendan the Bold visited them."

"Shut up!" said Cerdos. Then to Pierrette: "Finish your tale."

"Centuries passed, and again the sorcerer began having fearful dreams—"

"I knew it! The volcano . . ." Pierrette frowned at Cerdos. "Sorry. Go on."

"He dreamed of a new religion, Christianity, that would destroy all the old ways, that would consume all the magic that kept his kingdom safe, and him immortal. So he devised a plan to nip it in the bud. He sent my master, who was his best student, to subvert the promulgators of the nascent faith, to divide it into a thousand cults, like any others. But there is a certain inevitability to history, a pattern that resists being changed, like water flowing around a cobble tossed in a rivulet: there may be much splashing and foaming at that spot, but a few paces downstream, all seems much as it was before. Perhaps had Minho, the sorcerer king, attended to it himself, things would have been different, but he could not venture outside his great spell's influence, and Anselm, a lesser mage, failed completely.

"Now the Isles lie beyond mists of confusion, and can't easily be found. Anselm recreated his master's spell to bind time about his fortress home, and when I go there to learn and to read ancient works, I don't age." She shrugged again. "So I'm only fifteen—but I feel old, and I'm very well-educated."

Pierrette then explained what she had learned from Yan Oors and from the map she had made—and told them what she had experienced on the other side of the mountainous ridge to the north, from whence she had fled. "I feel like I've gone mad," she said. "Perhaps none of it was real. Perhaps you should put chains on me, and let the monks lock me in a cellar."

Ferdiad put a comforting hand on hers. "You're not mad," he said. "The veils that separate our world from . . . another . . . are sometimes thin. I know many tales of voyagers like yourself." He shuddered. "Nonetheless, when I go home, I'll go by ship, the long way around. Though related to those Gauls, I prefer to sit the fence between Christian and pagan. I don't like*fantômes* ."

"I agree," said Cerdos. "Will the blight cross the pass in pursuit of you?"

Pierrette could not reassure him. She had thought to find out about changes in written words, and had discovered a changed world. She had wasted time, and did not know what she could, or should, do. Perhaps with her stalling, it was now too late.

"Tomorrow we will make pilgrimage to the cave," Cerdos declared. "Perhaps . . . someone . . . there will help you."

But the cave had been home to Master Jock—to Lugh, a Gaulish god. Would she be jumping from the pot into the fire? She reassured herself that*Ma* , the goddess, had been here before men had conceived of the sky-god, out on the high plains. Would she still be there, in a shrine dedicated to Mary Magdalene?

She sought her pallet. Just before she fell asleep, she remembered what*Ma* had told her when she had been little—that she would meet Magdalen someday. Reassured, she fell into sleep, hoping that the world was not entirely mad, that she was not either, and that tomorrow would be that long-foreseen day.

Chapter 6 - The Avatar

Dawn arrived slate-gray and somber, like a premonition of despair. Pierrette and her companions lay long abed—they were not eager to begin their long hike to the cave in such wet weather. Pierrette wanted them to leave the room first, so she could use the chamberpot.

Breakfast was soggy bread and a bit of cheese passed out by monks beneath a canvas tent. By the time they were ready to depart, a long, straggling line of pilgrims wound up the mountainside on the switchbacked trail.

"What are those cairns?" asked Pierrette, a half hour into their journey.

"Women add stones to them," replied Cerdos. "They place one for every child they wish to bear." He shrugged. "Perhaps the Magdalen counts them."

"Perhaps . . . the goddess does."

"Indeed. It's said the longer they carry them before they place them on a cairn, the higher on the trail, the more likely the begetting. The women who built these first cairns must not have cared much."

"Perhaps their husbands made them come here," said Ferdiad. "Not all women want children." He looked toward Pierrette. "You haven't picked up any stones."

"I won't. I made that decision long ago," she said. Her eyes moistened despite her plain words. . . .

* * ** * *

Years before, Guihen had warned her. She had been only a child, trudging toward the Eagle's Beak to take service with the mage Anselm—the first of many times she tried, but Guihen had blocked her path. "If you knock on that gate, you won't return to Citharista unchanged," the sprite had said. "Would you deny yourself an ordinary life: husband, children, a place to call home?"

Pierrette had hesitated.

"Go back, or be doomed to make your bed in strange places. Go back, lest time itself bend about you. You won't find what you seek for a hundred hundreds of years! Go home," he commanded. "Enjoy what little you have, for it is sweeter by far than what awaits you here."

On another attempt to reach the cape, someone else had stood in her path. "Go back, child," said dark Yan Oors. From the brush and stones his two ghostly companions' ursine eyes glowed. "Seek happiness, for there is no joy in wisdom." She had heeded those admonitions—for a while.

* * *

Pierrette had decided. Now Ferdiad saw her tears. "I'm sorry," he said.

"Don't be. If I—and the world I love—survive this onslaught, I'll come back here someday."

"Lord, take pity on us," cried out the monk leading a group of pilgrims.

"O Christ, take pity on us," responded the pilgrims.

"Lord, take pity on us," repeated the monk, as the furthest pilgrims disappeared in the foggy drizzle.

Stone monuments were set in the ground at intervals. Pierrette had paid no attention to the first ones. Now she saw that the clusters of pilgrims stopped at each one, and the monk who guided them led them in an incantation.

"Holy Trinity which is one God, take pity on us."

"Saint Mary, Mother of God, pray for us," responded the laiety.

"Saint Mary Magdalene, carrying the alabaster vase, full of perfume . . ."

When Pierrette approached the stone, she saw that it had been carved, depicting a woman carrying a vessel. "The walk—the pilgrimage itself—is worship, isn't it?"

"How could it be otherwise?" Ferdiad asked. "Isn't every act a celebration, every meal a mass? If not—if this life is only a prelude to what really counts—then why not seek an early grave, and get to the meat of it right away?"

"You don't sound very Christian."

"My countrymen kept the holy books when the Roman Church lost them," he said. "Our Bishop Morgan taught that good and evil alike are men's and women's creations, and that we must not simply endure life, but use it to become like Christ ourselves."

"That sounds like Pelagius."

" `Morgan' and `Pelagius' both mean `from the sea.' "

"Then if Bishop Morgan is right, never to know a hearth of my own isn't really a curse, is it?"

"Your words, not mine," said Ferdiad with a smile.

Water trickled between mossy stones, tiny rills with a source high above, in the rocks. Like the vale of *Ma* , beech trees grew there, shaded in summer by the high scarp, their roots deep in moist soil sweetened with decayed limestone. They grew thicker in girth between one monument and the next. But unlike*Ma* 's pagan sanctuary, there was something threatening about their dark shadows.

"Anointing the feet of Jesus with your tears," chanted the pilgrims.

"Drying them with your hair,

"Of whom many sins have been forgiven . . ."

As the pilgrims were swallowed in the mist, Pierrette and her companions approached a stone depicting a rude Magdalene kneeling before a sketchy, big-headed Christ.

"I don't hate your religion," Pierrette said. "If my mother's folk had not had*Ma* . . ."

"There's no reason not to have both."

"Jesus might have agreed with you," she mused, "but Christianity isn't immune to scholars' revisions. His old aunties didn't care much for what Paul made of their nephew's simpler creed." Ferdiad reflected that she sounded as if she knew that for certain. The early church had not, he knew, been without disputes like Peter and Paul's. Had Jesus really intended to create a new religion? Paul surely had.

"Obtaining the resurrection of your brother Lazarus,

"Ministering faithfully to Jesus on the cross,

"Staying by him when the disciples fled . . ." They passed the next two stones without examining them. The pilgrims seemed fewer and further between.

"First among the disciples to be worthy of seeing the risen Christ,

"Marked on your forehead by his glorious hand,

"Apostle of Apostles,

"Apostle of Provence . . ." The voices faded. By the time they reached a stone depicting Magdalene preaching to the Roman legions in Lugdunum, no one else was in sight. No others came up from behind, either. But the mist was dissipating. Could they have fallen so far behind? Something was definitely wrong.

"Oh, no . . ."

"What is it?" asked Cerdos.

"They're fading away! The pilgrims have disappeared."

"We must have lagged behind."

"No, you don't understand. This is the same dank rain that fell near Aquae Sextiae. They have become . . . nothing. As if they never were—there are no Christian shrines in the Gauls' world."

Cerdos shrugged, fingering his ornate bronze torque, that curled like blunted cow's horns around his neck. "Why are you looking at me like that?" he demanded—in the Gaulish tongue. At the foot of the mountain, Cerdos had worn a cross, not a Celtic torque.

"Never mind. I have to hurry," Pierrette said, stumbling uphill, slipping on mossy pebbles. It was impossible to run.

"Why rush?" Ferdiad called after her. "Lugh will be there forever." His plaid Gaulish*sagos* gleamed with raindrops. He had started the climb with a brown woolen cape.

"But will Magdalene?" she called back, over her shoulder.

"Who?" he asked, turning to Cerdos, who shrugged eloquently.

"I don't know. Perhaps she meant the goddess, Lugh Long-Arm's wife."

Pierrette half-ran, half-scrambled upward. She was cold. There was no escape, was there? Like a wind out of the north, the change had swept over the hills and wiped away everything. There would be no hostel in the valley now, no monks. There was no warm sunshine, only the gray sky of . . . of the Black Time. Would it engulf her, too? Would she forget who she was? Who she . . . had been?

No! There was a way out. The nightmare world of headless*fantômes* was*now* . It had only begun to unfold after Calvinus failed to take Entremont, and after Marius lost his battle with the Teutons. Her escape was through the past . . . before Entremont. Years before . . . Breathlessly, she uttered a phrase in a tongue almost as old as the hills themselves.

"*Mondradd in Mon*," she whispered. "*Borabd orá perdó*." The ancient spell was dangerous. If she did not clearly know where . . . when . . . she wanted it to take her, if she had no image to guide her, she would be thrown all the way back to the beginning, to the ashy devastation of the Black Time, which was also the end. . . . Ahead, against the gloom of the gray rock face, was a darker shadow, the mouth of the cave. This time, no lamp shed welcoming light to guide the desperate pilgrim's feet.

"*Merdrabd or vern*," she gasped, "*Arfaht ará camdó*. No thistles nodded in front of the cave. The rain had finally abated, though, and the great slabs of rock she climbed over were dry.

She looked fearfully back the way she had come. Sunlight on fields across the valley to the north caught her eye. As she watched, it lanced over the scarp behind her, sweeping gloom away, lighting fields and forest. She could not see the hostel below, but perhaps it was hidden by the lip of the cave. Had the spell worked? Was she safe from the encroaching change? Safe, in some remote past time?

There was no sound of footfalls from the trail. Neither monks and pilgrims nor Celts clad in plaids, glittering with gold and bronze, strode forth. There were no pilgrims in the cave, either, unless they had all gone onward into the deepest darkness.

A stiff breeze swept the narrow shelf fronting the cave, and in the valley the last cloud shadows chased swiftly eastward, and were gone. Something scratched the back of her hand. She gazed at the bobbing head of a thistle, as blue as the freshened sky. She was sure it—and all its cerulean companions—had not been there moments before. . . .

"Hello, child," said a soft voice. Pierrette spun around.

A woman stood in the cave mouth. Her pale blue dress was like reflected sky or a field of thistles. The gold fibula at the shoulder of her white woolen mantle was a wide-eyed face, with a round, laughing mouth. Her own face was broadly Celtic, her hair blond, her eyes as blue as Pierrette's.

"You're a girl, aren't you? In spite of those clothes?"

"Yes Mother," Pierrette replied. "I am Pierrette."

"A `little stone.' But I'm not your mother. I am Belisama."

Bel-isa-ma? Bel was a Gallic sun god, and the son of*Ma* —or her husband. Gauls weren't particular. Pierrette then realized that even goddesses did not know everything.

"So I amuse you?" asked the goddess. "You smiled."

"I was expecting someone else," Pierette replied. "I think that I have . . . have missed my assignation by a few years."

"You don't look old enough to have lost many years. Come inside. Tell me what troubles you." She reached for a stone-bowled lamp. Unthinkingly, Pierrette reached out and . . . lit it. Belisama's eyes widened.

A rude stone statue glared sightlessly at Pierrette. "A gift," the goddess said apologetically. "Not a very good likeness." The round-headed figure squatted, reaching under its own naked thighs to spread oversized labia. Its vagina was a wide, dark tunnel roughly hacked. Protruding frog's eyes and a round, astonished mouth completed the unlikely picture. Its expression, could such a rude thing have one, seemed . . . mischievous.

Pierrette began to consider how she could depart this place without offending her hostess, who was not at all what she had hoped to find. This Gaulish-speaking Celtic goddess was not*Ma* . Could she repeat the spell*Mondradd in Mon* from within the spell itself or would she only end up whence she had fled?

"Sit," said Belisama, indicating a pallet with a soft pillow. "I sense your disapproval of me, but despite your magic, you're young and impatient—and stubborn. You greeted me as `Mother,' so tell me—do you obey your own mother?"

Pierrette almost defended herself. But no, she had not obeyed*Ma* . Had she done, she would not be here now, caught between conflicting histories, in some past time before Magdalene had come to Sainte-Baume's cave. Tears sprung to her eyes. She wiped them with a grimy, scratched knuckle.

"Tell me," Belisama commanded gently, putting a hand on her shoulder.

Pierrette did. For the second time in as many days, she recounted everything—from her mother Elen's death to her own discovery of*Ma* and the sacred pool, how Yan Oors and Guihen had succored her as a lonely child, and how she had destroyed a demon in Saintes-Maries-by-the-Sea. "I didn't do it alone," she admitted. "I found others who were willing to take bits of its evilness into themselves, dissipating it until it was no more." She explained her belief that evil was not so deadly when people accepted their own shares in it. It could not then coalesce into a hideous, terrifying god.

"You speak of things beyond my understanding," Belisama said at last. "Perhaps the old goddess would have understood."

"The old goddess?" Pierrette felt suddenly hopeful. "Where is she?"

"Back there, in the cave. Buried. She died only months after I arrived here. She had only begun to teach me . . ."

"Where did you come from?" Goddesses did not "arrive." They simply*were* . Like*Ma* . This Belisama was a woman, not a goddess.

"I'm from Setomos. That's a village on the coast."

"Then you weren't always a goddess."

Belisama laughed. "Of course not. Not until I was chosen." She recounted how, when the old goddess felt age and impending death, she had summoned the village*dhru-vedo*to select her replacement. Each village's wise man chose a candidate from among the prettiest girls, the most intelligent and the most pious. All were taken to a*drunemeton* , a holy grove many weeks' journey beyond the Alps. They were questioned and taught, until at last the goddess of that far place decided. She, once Doreta, daughter of Melis, then became . . . Belisama.

Then Pierrette understood. The spell*Mondradd in Mon* had indeed taken her far into the past—five hundred years? A thousand? Before Caesar and then Christian priests had put a stop to it, the*druidae* had so chosen women to preside over*Ma* 's grove also. In fact, Pierrette sometimes considered herself just such a priestess—though self-chosen, and though no worshippers had come to ask her intercession with the goddess. If they had come, how would she have served them?

She knew how: she would have plucked a tiny red-skirted dancer from a ring of mushrooms, and . . .

"When people come with questions for you, how do you find answers? Did the old goddess teach you that?"

Belisama flushed. "She died. She said I came too late, and she left me here, alone. What could I do? I made things up."

And that, Pierrette reflected, is how old gods die, and are replaced by new ones. She sighed. "Show me the cave. Show me where the old goddess slept. Show me everything."

Startled by her visitor's air of authority, Belisama did. She led Pierrette from the main chamber, paved with flat, fallen slabs of cave ceiling, back into the darkness. Behind a heap of fallen rock was a moldy straw pallet. "She slept here."

There. A niche in the rock held neat rows of small clay jars, cobalt blue Celtic glass bottles and duller green Roman ones. From a stout stick wedged in a crack hung a dozen small cloth sacks, kept from contact with the cave's moisture. "Those are what I need," said Pierrette.

"The old one told me not to touch them," said Belisama.

"As well she should have—until you learned what they are. Some are poisons. Others can heal. Some—like the nightshade in this sack, do both, depending on the dosage and the combination with other things. That chamomile"—she indicated a bundle of dried yellow blossoms—"gives restful sleep, and soothes an uneasy stomach. Next to it is mint, for indigestion, and boneset, which does what its name says."

"How do you know those things?"

"Some things my mother taught me as nursery-songs. I was lucky, too—the first thing I tried was a mushroom that grew in plain sight by the sacred pool, and was bright and pretty. It was . . . that." The jar held brown, shrivelled mushrooms. "They're red when fresh. They must be eaten sparingly, or they can kill." She broke one in half. "Here."

"What will it do? I'm afraid."

"Eat it."

Belisama did so, making a wry face as she chewed.

"The old one should have showed you this right away," Pierrette said. "Now take me to the spring."

Belisama led her to the west side of the cave, where a tumble of stone blocks had been piled into a rough stairway. They descended into darkness so thick the lamp hardly penetrated. Pierrette heard the plop and plink of water droplets on her left, then saw the glimmer of the lamp's flame, reflected. They edged close to the stone-rimmed pool, almost too small to take a bath in.

"Sit," said Pierrette, "and wait."

* * *

Belisama waited. The lamp flickered. The strange girl—she thought Pierrette a Ligure, from her looks—had closed her eyes. Belisama kept hers open. She did not want to miss anything. What was this all about? Despite her resolve, her eyelids began to feel quite heavy. . . .

"Awaken, Doreta." She opened her eyes, feeling someone squeezing her shoulder. But Pierrette had not spoken. The Ligure girl still sat by the pool, smiling, as if having a pleasant dream.

"Who . . ." An ancient crone smiled down at her. Long, silvery hair, soft as a cloud, swirled around her wrinkled face.

"I am Belisama," said the crone. "Or*Ma* , or . . . I have many names."

"No—I am Belisama. The*dhru-vedos* said so."

"Listen to priests, child, but don't believe everything they say. Do you feel like a goddess?"

Doreta shook her head.

"Good. You aren't one. You have much to learn before you are even a masc, a country-witch."

"How can I learn? The old goddess died."

"She was no goddess either—not then. Now, she is, in a sense, because she is one of me."

One of . . . ? That made no sense to Doreta.

"Look," said*Ma* , or Belisama. She swirled the pool's surface with long, wrinkled fingers. . . .

* * *

Pierrette opened her eyes. She smiled, watched, and waited, unable to see what Doreta saw in the pool. She did not need to know anyone else's visions. She was not aware that the girl saw a crone; she herself saw*Ma* as a slender woman of middle years, with honey brown hair and an arching, almost Middle-Eastern nose.

At last, the goddess arose from the pool. "Go now," she said to Doreta, pulling her to her feet. "Sleep. When you awaken, remember how to come to me. I'll continue your lessons."

She turned to Pierrette. "A sorry fix you're in, child."

"I'm sorry, Mother. I should have obeyed." She hesitated.

"Yes, child? What is it?"

"You look like . . . like Mary Magdalene. I saw you once . . . in a vision."

"Not yet," said the woman. "Not for a bit more than a hundred years."

How strange. Did this goddess know the future? All the spells Pierrette had studied, even*Mondradd in Mon* , pointed only to the past, as if the broken wheel of time turned only one way, and the future was on the other side of the break—of the Black Time.

"Will she come here to serve you, for thirty-three years?"

"She may come. That's not yet clear. But know that she will serve her own God, as her Master taught her. She will preach in Lugdunum, far up the Rhodanus. Then she will come here to rest." There were no tenses in any language that could fit around this sense of future in the past, of conditional events that had taken place long ago, but not yet.

"I don't understand how that can be," said Pierrette. "Why would you allow her, a Christian, to supplant you? They worship . . . will worship? . . . a male God."

"Her name will be*Ma* ria. Do you think that is a coincidence? And their God is not male alone. Many wise men and women consider her female as well."

"They deny women any place in their rite. Only male priests celebrate the mass."

"For many hundreds of years, in the Celtic lands, it will be otherwise—almost until your own time. Who can say when it will be so again?"

"But she is . . . will be . . . was . . . a Christian saint. You'll be forgotten here."

"She considers herself no saint. She is lusty, and had lascivious dreams of her Master, Jesus. She wanted to run away with him, to marry and to nurse babies. Her years here will be as much penance as refuge, atonement for her anger that he let himself die on a cross. She could run away with a man, but cannot lust after a resurrected God."

"Will he be reborn? A god?" If that were so, Pierrette feared, then she herself was only mad, a poor delusional girl lying in stupor on a foggy slope, while ever-wearier pilgrims passed her by, thinking her resting.

The goddess sighed. "Where does a prayer go, when someone utters it? Do you know?"

Pierrette shrugged. "Whose prayer? To what god or goddess?"

"You see? I don't know. When Christian pilgrims beg Mary Magdalene's intercession, who hears? I can't tell you. You see me now as Magdalene will be when she arrives in Provence, a century hence. Other times, you have seen me as crone, and as your own still-young mother. Which am I? When you speak to me, who hears?"

"Father Otho says his God does. He hears all prayers."

"Well then. There's your answer. Simple, isn't it?"

"No! It is not simple at all." Tears of frustration sprang to Pierrette's eyes.

*Ma*laid a consoling hand on her cheek. "You're right. When anyone says `It is simple,' beware. I myself am no wiser than you, than poor Doreta. I am a little wiser than Father Otho, because I know how deceptive `simple' is, and he is only slowly learning that."

"What must I do? I've made a terrible mess of everything, haven't I?"

"Doreta's pallet is wide enough for two. Sleep. In the morning, you will find out—and before you leave this place, Belisama will give you what you need—and take a selection of the herbs and potions for yourself. You can never tell what you might find useful."

How strange, that*Ma* should refer to Doreta, and Belisama, and herself, as separate individuals. Who exactly was whom?

The thought of a soft straw tick, and of sleep, was sweet. Pierrette stumbled up the rough stone stairs and found Doreta sleeping soundly. Her own blanket was far below, in a hostel that did not even exist in this time, but the warm night air from the cave mouth offset the earth's damp chill. Pierrette soon slumbered.

Chapter 7 - The Road to Hell

"Who are you?" demanded a male voice. "What are you doing here? Where's the priestess?"

Pierrette sat up, experiencing a sense of déjà vu. Someone was silhouetted against the streaming daylight. Cerdos? Had she just awakened on the far side of the valley from the hostel? Had everything since been madness or an improbable dream? But it was not Cerdos's jovial booming voice, and the question he asked was different. She squinted.

"I . . . I was asleep."

"I can see that," said the sharp-tongued newcomer. He spoke Greek, and she had responded in that tongue. Now she could see him better. He wore a dirty-white, pleated kilt, and had knobby knees. Over his shoulder was a*sagus* , a blue-and-yellow Gaulish greatcloak.

Where was Doreta? Her pallet was still warm. "I am . . . Petra." That meant much the same as "pierrette," which was "little stone," or "pebble."

"Oh—you're a girl, despite those trousers."

"Would you want to hike these hills in a long dress?"

"I suppose not." He looked around, seeing nothing but a rather ordinary cave. "I hope I've come to the right place. Is this Lugh's sanctuary?"

Pierrette thought of Ferdiad's song. "Among other things, yes."

"Then I must ask his blessing on these." He held a leather cylinder that might contain a scroll.

"What is it?"

"Drawings and plans of the great walls I have built for Heraclea. The town's elders require changes, and I must have the god's approval first."

"Heraclea? You mean . . . Ugium?"

"Oogey-yum? What's that? It sounds ugly."

"It is. Never mind. Are you an architect?" Once Gaulish Vindonnum, Greek Heraclea would not become Roman Ugium for centuries, Pierrette recalled.

"Not exactly. I build walls, not bridges, and who puts fine arches in defensive works?"

Again she had confused terms. Arch-builder. "Architect" was more specifically defined in this age. Later it would mean any builder at all.

Doreta, who had washed her face in the pool, came forward. "I will show you where to leave your gift for Lugh," she said with a confidence Pierrette had not seen before. "Come." She led him back into the cave.

Pierrette poked about, and found a basket of bread, cheese, and pears, the gift of some recent pilgrim.

The Greek emerged without his leather package. Lugh's rite must have been short and simple. "That looks good," he said, eying the bread and cheese. Pierrette's mouth was full, so she merely gestured him to sit.

Even with his own mouth full, the busy fellow was a talker. He was Enakles, a student of a student of Ictinos, who had designed the acropolis in Athinai. The Massiliotes, he explained, also Greeks, wished to monopolize the trade with the inland Gauls, and the Heracleans feared war. They had hired him to replace Gaulish stone-and-timber walls with modern stone ones with projecting bastions. The Massiliotes would not make war if their spies found his walls too formidible.

"Are there still Gauls in Heraclea?" she asked.

"Of course there are. Only a quarter of the population is Greek, though it's beginning to look like a real *polis* ."

"Are there*druidae* ?"

"What?*Dryadeae* , you mean?" He used the Greek pronounciation. "Hah! Whose idea do you think it was that I come here? There's a temple to Herakles Wall-builder in the town. Why do you think it's

called `Heraclea,' anyway? He was the first Greek to visit the place. Not that I don't appreciate Lugh's blessing, mind you, but it took me three weeks to get here, and the trip back will be little easier."

"I wish to go with you."

"You do? Well, that's your business. I suppose I can lend you a horse. You're light enough you won't need a remount. Other than that, you'll have to pay your own way."

Pierrette had no money. How could she pay?

Doreta again emerged from the darkness, and blew out her lamp. "Your walls have my husband's blessing," she said. "Do you have mine?" It was not Doreta, Pierrette decided. That was truly Belisama, daughter of Bel and Ma. The girl was learning fast. She had a good teacher, too.

"This seeress has business with the*dryadeae* of Heraclea—my business. She needs only one single coin to pay her way." Belisama held out her hand, and a tarnished coin. When Enakles had seen it, she offered it to Pierrette. "This is for the boatman, when you cross the great river."

"Is she going to die?" blurted Enakles.

Belisama silenced him with a stern look. "Will you live forever, architect? When your time comes, will you have a coin for Charon in your teeth?"

He paled, and glanced uneasily at Pierrette. Charon was the boatman who ferried the souls of dead Greeks across the River Styx to their underworld.

Pierrette took the coin. She rubbed it on her coarse tunic to remove a bit of the tarnish. Its highlights now delineated an ancient face. Their pure, colorless shine suggested the coin was silver. She tied it in the hem of her boy's tunic. "Thank you, Mother," she said. What had*Ma* shown Doreta? That Pierrette was going to die? She compressed her lips. She would not ask.

* * *

Doreta sent Enakles outside the cave. "A famous seeress must not arrive wearing a boy's baggy pants," she said. "Come. Let's get you dressed properly." She helped Pierrette don a lovely sky blue dress not unlike her own. Doreta instructed her how to drape her white woolen mantle just over her left shoulder, so the two gold fibulae that secured it, connected by a fine-wrought chain, would show. When Pierrette admired the fibulae from the side, they were rampant stags with coral antlers. Like all Celtic art, when she viewed them from a different angle, they were something else—in this case, gnomish faces with inlaid coral hair. Their shifting, curvilinear design was difficult to focus on—much, she reflected, as time and reality had become. She presented Pierrette with a tan leather belt set with round gold phalerae and a little sack of uncut gems.

Doreta's last gift was a single large bead on a cotton cord, translucent white glass veined with red and blue, patterns like twisted, fraying cords that went into the depths of the orb, not painted on its surface, a masterwork of the Celtic glassblower's art. "It's called a `serpent's egg,' " she said. "Keep it concealed under your cloak, and reveal it only at the necessary moment."

"When will that be?"

"Right now, if you're in such a hurry," Doreta snapped.

"I'm sorry," Pierrette replied contritely.

"There are things you must know," said Doreta. (When she spoke authoritatively like that, Pierrette could not help but think of her as Belisama.) "Your name will be Petra. Petra Veleda, *guatatros* —a speaker for the goddess Veleda. You are a seeress yourself, but you don't know very much about us Gauls. The *dhru-vedi* will not accept you as their equal unless . . ."

Enakles was not summoned back into the cave for many hours thereafter, while Pierrette heard what she needed to know, and while she packed a variety of herbs, dried mushrooms, and powders, each in a tiny, folded square of parchment. She wrapped them all together in cloth, and secured them in a leather pouch.

Before departing with Enakles, she changed back into her boy's clothes. "It's safer being a boy," she said. "Besides, I've been one longer than I have a girl, and much longer than a woman."

She gave one last glance at the enigmatic fibulae before wrapping them in a scrap of cloth. Time and reality, she reflected. She did not even know what year it was. She was sure she remembered that Heraclea's walls had been built late in the second century B.C., only a short while before Massalia had allied with the Romans for the conquest of Provence. She would have to find out.

* * ** * *

Enakles had not come to the cave by the pilgrims' route. "We must climb higher, and descend on the south side. My horses and servant will be waiting at the head of the trail."

From the summit she could see everything merely by turning in a circle. There, due north, was the long line of Mount Sainte Victoire, glimmering gold in the sunshine. Directly below was a cluster of huts, a village, on the site where Cerdos might—or might not—lay his foundations. West of it were hills gray with distance; on one stood Entremont. Further west, at the limit of vision, water gleamed—the great lagoon she had sailed in Caius's salt-boat. Heraclea was somewhere on the far side, invisible below the horizon.

She turned southward. The sea stretched across her entire field of vision. There was the Saracen's Hat, a distinctive crag like an overturned jar or a turban. There, on that deep, shiny bay was—would be—Citharista, encircled in the protecting arm of Eagle Cape. Anselm's keep would someday be there, just around the corner of those high cliffs, too small to be seen at this distance.

The world was immense, and she had seen so little of it. From this barren mountain scarp she could encompass, in a single glance, lands beyond anywhere her feet had trod. And the entire vista was only the tiniest patch on a world that went on, perhaps forever.

* * *

Enakles's servant was a taciturn Illyrian Greek who (when he spoke at all) had an impenetrable accent. There were six horses, and a Gaulish one-horse cart with ash springs and iron-tied wheels. Enakles was indeed wealthy and important. They would ride in style, with remounts for the two men.

On the long eastward ride, she quizzed Enakles, and ascertained that the year was 620 from the founding of Rome, or 134 B.C. The siege of Entremont was almost a decade away, and Marius's decisive battle twenty-odd years beyond that. The brilliant sunshine seemed to brighten even more. The shifting breezes brought the salty tang of the sea to her nostrils with one breath, the scent of rosemary crushed beneath horses' hooves the next, and the rich aroma of sun-heated pines moments later. It was a wonderful . . . time . . . to be alive.

Pierette resolutely refused to think that there might be*another* Pierrette, lying cold on a rainy hillside, connected to her by a thread so tenuous she could not feel it at all. She felt real, and alive. She was. She had to believe that, or go mad.

* * *

The road was smoother than even the best-preserved Roman ones Pierrette had seen. She abruptly realized that the legions had not found Gaul a tabula rasa, and written their*viae* and*iterae* upon it.

"Gauls have always built the best roads," said Enakles. "Do you think Hannibal crossed the whole of Gaul, elephants and all, on goat tracks? Even much of the route through the Alps was graded, if not all paved with stone."

Eighty years hence—in the history Pierrette remembered—Julius Caesar would use those roads to move his troops with lightning speed. Ironically, had the Gauls been the savages Roman writers portrayed, and had Caesar needed to hack his way through dense forest, to wade bottomless swamps, he could never have conquered Provence.

The travelling party slept at well-maintained inns at crossroads where there was a spring or a dug well. Many had names like Lunemeton or Vindonemeton, "Lugh's sanctuary," or Belenemeton, "Bel's shrine," and were run by devotees of Vindonnos (Lugh), Belinos, or Sequana. Gods and goddesses existed in dazzling numbers. There were, according to a blacksmith who repaired their cart's worn iron tire, thirty-three deities. His own tutelary god was Sukellos, a hammer-wielder like himself.

Yet Pierrette counted a hundred names, and she began to think that as a "priestess" of Veleda, who had been a seeress, she might not make much impact among the intellectual caste of Heraclea. If every smith was priest by virtue of his practice of Sukellos's art, every milkmaid an avatar of Damona, a cow-goddess, and if every woman named Brigitte was a*gutuatra* who spoke with and for the tribal goddess Brigantu, then was she, a druidess, a*dryade*, devoted to Veleda, only one more tradeswoman, whose particular art was . . . inference?

She would need every bit of aid Belisama had given her to impress the*dryadeae* . They must speak freely with her, so she could find out what she needed to know. She made a mental note to say "*dryade*," not "druid." Only centuries hence, when Romans and Christians forced Celtic scholars and holy men into the secrecy of the forests would a "dryad," persecuted and exiled, become a forest spirit. Words—postulates—changed, and reality with them.

The smith consulted with a carpenter (when an iron tyre needed to be removed, it only made sense to replace a worn nave, a cracked spoke, or a rotted felloe at the same time). The woodwright's god was Esus. Was it a coincidence that the Nazarene Jesus—Esus, given the almost-silent nature of the Roman "J"—would also be a carpenter? For the Celtic lands to become the stronghold of Christianity that she remembered, there was no room for accident.

* * *

Their route led almost straight west for several days. "Massilia is ahead," Enakles stated one afternoon. "It would not do for me to be recognized, so we'll turn north in the morning."

"Will we cross the . . ." She did not know what the Estaque range was called, now. " . . . the ridges between the sea and the great lagoon?"

"I thought to skirt them. There's a goat path over their west end. We'll have to abandon the wagon, but

it's the*dryadeaes'* money paid for it, and they want me back safely. If soldiers from Massilia were to catch me . . ." He shrugged. She could imagine what pressures the Massiliotes would bring to bear on the architect of their rival's walls.

Her question about the hills had not been idle. The last time she had crossed the Estaque, her fire-spell had changed. In Massilia—the post-Roman Massalia of her day—it had given forth only clear sunlike light: Christian light, she called it. She reminded herself to call it Massilia, because it would not be Roman for centuries—if at all. Beyond the Estaque, it had produced a sickly, oppressive red glow. Only past the River Rhodanus's main channel, in the Camargue, had it again made fire.

In the morning, as Enakles made ready to depart, Pierrette slipped away and, behind the windowless rear wall of the inn, essayed her small spell. She was rewarded with a very ordinary little flame that consumed the dry olive twig in her fingers. They were as near Massilia as when the spell had changed, in her own era, which confirmed that the city's future Christian aura, not geography alone, had effected the change: Massilia would not become Christian for centuries.

There were no inns on Enakles's chosen route, only cleared places flat enough to camp. The road degenerated. When it divided into two narrow paths, Enakles sold his cart to a traveller coming down from the hills. They packed most of their necessities on the horses. Without remounts, they would have to rest more often, but they would anyway—it was a long, steep climb.

Descending the far side the following day, Pierrette verified that the spell was unchanged. In this age, the environs of the future Ugium (only a few miles to the north) were like any other place. That was reassuring. Perhaps it would not be as bad now as it had been, in her vision.

That afternoon, when they stopped to rest the horses, Pierrette slipped into her dress. It was too warm for the mantle, so she draped it over her horse, behind her. She tied wide-strapped Gaulish sandals on her feet, and after tying her gauzy veil in place, pulled it down around her neck. She would wear it if they encountered anyone.

She was glad that her horse was small. Encumbered as she was with clumsy footgear and yards of cloth, she had to ask Enakles's help to mount.

Chapter 8 - The Dryades

Enakles's servant rode ahead to give the Heracleans time to prepare a proper welcome. The road passed east of the town's looming walls, white stone ramparts glowing brilliantly in the noon light. The fields on either side of the road were lush, already full of summer's promise, and the soil between neat rows of crops was dark and rich. It was no wonder that the Gauls had located a city and a sanctuary there or that the Greeks had chosen it for their entrepôt.

Coming in sight of the city walls, Pierrette pulled her veil up over her face, and shook out her mantle, pinning it with the gold fibulae and chain, as Belisama had showed her. Four men awaited them at a new gate set between projecting ramparts. They wore white ceremonial robes over Celtic*bracae* and laced tunics. Was Enakles's arrival a ceremonial occasion? Was hers?

"Do you bring the god's blessing?" asked the tallest*dryade* .

"I do," Enakles replied solemnly. "I bring also the*mor'h-ganna* Petra, a devotee of the goddess Veleda. She has seen these walls in a future time, when all now living are dust." That caught the*dryades* ' attention. "*Mohr'-ganna*" meant "great seeress," a title not lightly given.

One of the four—the only one with white hair—addressed her in a fatherly voice. "Welcome, seeress. I am Ortagion. Your presence honors us. We look forward to hearing all that you have foreseen." The other three remained silent—a portly, graying man, another whose broad shoulders and erect posture denoted a soldiering past, and a fourth . . . His cowled robe shadowed his features, revealing only a beaky nose and the gleam of sharp, dark eyes.

He was no*fantôme* , but his demeanor gave Pierrette a chill.

"I'll be happy to recount my scryings for you," she replied.*Though not for the reasons you may expect* .

The crowd inside the gate was reverently silent. The god's blessing upon their city walls was a matter of life. Most were Gauls in*bracae* and tunics, with colorful*sagi* over their shoulders—plaid with fine red lines crisscrossing the larger green and brown squares, the design favored by the Avaticii tribe. Greeks in pleated white kilts stood out like ducks among magpies.

"Come," said her*dryade* host, when they reached the edge of the crowd. "We have prepared a proper dwelling for you."

"How kind," she replied, gazing at the neat row houses, their walls plastered and washed with white lime, their stone sills lifting flagged floors inches above the cobbled street. Doors and shutters were mostly ajar, because it was daytime, and quite warm.

Unlike Citharista, few roofs were tiled. Instead, low parapets surmounted projecting pole rafters. Flat roofs were like sunny outdoor rooms, busy now as women washed clothes and spread slices of fruits out to dry. In springtime, she reflected, when the*Mistral* blew down Rhodanus's valley, the houses would be chilly and damp, and their tile drain gutters would be hard put to cope with midwinter rains.

The*dryade* Ortagion stopped. Their course had been leftward along the new city wall. Now before Pierrette was a stone staircase that led up the side of the wall. "What is this?" she asked, suddenly suspicious.

Ortagion lowered his head as if ashamed. "Your residence, seeress. The tower."

Her eyes moved up . . . and up. The staircase led to a walkway atop the wall. Another flight led higher still, to a timbered landing a full story above the crenelations, and from there, a leaning ladder gave access to the tower's flat roof.

"I would prefer somewhere else," she said, uneasily.

The soldierly*dryade* spoke. "You claim to be Veleda's*gutuatra* . Her avatars have always chosen to live in towers."

"Anyplace else would be unthinkable,*mor'h-ganna* ," said the fat*dryade* . "The people would think you an impostor if you slept in an ordinary house." His words had an oily feel. What did they have in mind for her? The threat was clear: if she did not accept their choice, an isolated, windowless room, they would

brand her a fraud—and what was the penalty for impersonating a goddess's speaker?

"I only meant that there are no windows," she said, thinking quickly. "I'm not a bat, to live in the dark."

The soldierly*dryade* pulled a dagger from his belt and dug at the mortar. "Enakles!" he growled.

"Yes, Ambioros?"

"This mortar's still soft. Send men up there to cut a window for the*mor'h-ganna* ."

"I'll have it done shortly," the architect said, fawning.

"It must face the sea, else the odors of the town . . ."

"Of course." Enakles scurried off to rally his workmen.

So, Pierrette thought. She was to be isolated high above the edge of the town, with a view only of fields and lagoons. Even from the doorway, she would see nothing but the northern stretch of wall leading to the main gate. There was reason behind that, beyond Veleda's requirement. She shrugged. She could always climb the ladder to the roof, to survey the town.

"Take me to the*nemeton* ," she said abruptly. "I'll pay respect to your city gods, and will return here when the workmen's dust has been swept." She glared at Ortagion, who seemed least hostile of the four.

"Just so," he agreed. "We'll show you the extent of our proud new walls, and on the way back . . ." He was stalling. Why? She must not let them have the initiative.

"Don't toy with me!" she snapped. She swept her arm upward along the stonework. "I have seen these walls fallen, your city destroyed, and the roots of great trees amid the broken stones . . ."

"Say no more!" blurted the fat one. "Not here! We'll take you to the gods' sanctum."

"My walls will not fall," protested Enakles.

"I have had three visions," she stated. "In only one have the walls fallen. But I'll speak of them only after I have visited the*nemeton* , the sanctuary."

Three visions. It was no lie. While asleep aboard Caius's boat, she had treaded Heraclea's streets as she did now, in clumsy sandals, her face veiled. The walls had stood, manned by soldiers . . . and by *fantômes* , the spirits of the city's heroic dead.

The second vision, the fallen walls, was the Ugium of her day, its defenses sapped first by Rome, then again by Abd al Rahman's Moors, and never rebuilt in her time.

The third was a waking dream born of her fears of the Black Time, of metal-walled prisons the color of old blood, of living flames within and the stink of death without, carried on the smoke.

But she would tell those tales in her own way and time, to serve her own purpose—or she would not; it remained to be seen. She would visit the*nemeton* , and wait for her quarters to be readied.

Ortagion led her westward toward the center of the town. The other*dryades* . . . no, only Ambioros and

the fat one . . . followed. Where had the sinister cowled man gone?

"There is the Herakleon of the Greeks," the*dryade* said. "Come, I'll show you . . ."

"Later, perhaps," she replied firmly. "That would be unseemly. I must call on the gods of the Avaticii first."

"Of course, seeress. It is this way. . . ."

It was not. They crossed a wide way where five carts could pass abreast. There the narrow street resumed, and led out into a wide*ahoras* , a marketplace. Did the*dryades* hope to distract her with jars of wine and sweetmeats, with bolts of fine red and blue silks from the farthest East? Why were they keeping her from the sanctuary? Was that where the fourth*dryade* had gone? She should have figured it out earlier.

The major east-west street was paved in fine split basalt cobbles, quarried many miles away. The *nemeton* would be on the city's finest street. Was that it? That edifice with the red tile roof that glowed like fire in the noon light?

She turned angrily from Ortagion to a boy selling apples. "Where is the gods' house?" The child pointed back the way they had come, along the broad way.

"It seems I can find my way about your city more easily than you can," she said to the*dryades* . She strode off.

"I'm sorry," Ortagion said, hurrying to catch up. "Cunotar went ahead to prepare the gods' sanctum for your visit."

"To sweep the floor, you mean? To dust off the statues?" What were they hiding? What would she*not* see, when she got there?

Nearing the red-roofed place, Pierrette stopped abruptly, feeling something unpleasant, as if she had just passed through a cloud of noxious air. As if something had died. But there were no odors except the scent of food cooking, of garbage left a little too long, of a chamberpot not carried to the oubliette at cliff's edge, where the wall was low. What was it? What had made her uneasy?

"*'Ganna?* " enquired Ortagion.

"Is that the*nemeton* ?" She pointed at an iron-bound door. In her head, she heard desparing wails, souls tormented and angry. "*Nemeton*" meant "a grove." How different these Gauls' holy places had become from*Ma* 's glade . . .

"That's the back way. It's barred. We're going around the corner to the front—but how did you know?"

"I sense spirits in anguish. Someone raging, unkindly bound. What have you been doing there?"

Ortagion would not meet her eyes. "Please,*mor'h-ganna* . Don't judge us yet. All will be explained."

The sanctum of the Gaulish gods was open to the street: squared stone columns supporting lintels, which held sloping pole rafters and red roof tiles, the only ones she had seen here. From the darkness within, she heard a squeal and a heavy thud as of a massive door closing. Abruptly, the horrid voices in her head

ceased. What had they been? What hideous things were the*dryades* doing?

But now all was tranquil. Had she imagined it? This was, after all, a holy place. . . . She steeled herself to enter.

She must not show what she felt. Deeply carved into pillar and lintel were ovate niches. Some were dark holes the size of large melons, and empty. Some were not. . . .

She found herself drawn to a human face. Its leathery skin was dark, shiny with oil that smelled like crushed cypress needles. Eyelids stretched tight over sunken orbs were sewn shut with fine black thread, painted with white lime, then dabbed with powdered blue copper salt—false irises that gave an expression of wide-eyed surprise. A startling shock of pale yellow hair, blond at the roots, was stiffened into bunches with lime. It pushed out from the niche around the head. Beneath a blond, trimmed moustache were lips sewn shut, stretched now as they dried in the bright sunlight.

The sense of horror she had expected did not materialize. This was not the spirit she had felt, before. She felt rightness, a firm, calm resolve, as if the warrior's ghost was atop the wall, alert for danger to its city, but sensing no cause for alarm. The children in the streets he guarded need fear nothing that day.

"A good man," she said softly. "He watches from your walls." All four*dryades* drew hissing breaths of surprise. This was no arrogant country*dryade* .

"He is Velarix," said Ortagion. "He led our soldiers for twenty years." Velarix. King Vela, or Velarion. That was as it should be. A king's place was with his people, in life and death. How different was a head steeped in oil of cedar from Saint Claire's bones, lovingly wrapped in fine wool within P'er Otho's reliquary?

There were other niches, mostly empty, and other heads, but Pierrette forced herself to ignore them. She was as disconcerted by her sudden perceptions as the*dryade* was impressed by them. But there—set in the long rear wall—was the iron-bound door she had heard close. What had they hidden behind it? She thought she knew, but now was not the time to confront it. She looked around . . .

Within the*nemeton* , statues of mail-clad warriors stood or knelt, some with the heads of vanquished enemies in hand, beneath a raised foot, or balanced on a knee. There were no statues of women, but that stood to reason. This was a city temple, and*Ma* was no lover of the stone warrens men built upon her high places.

Pierrette recognized Taranis, holding the serpent Lightning, his hair like black, roiling thunderheads. That triggered a memory, which erupted unbidden. . . .

* * *

Black clouds mounted the horizon, swirling, twisting, darkening the foam-tipped waves of the world-river Oceanos. The young woman's fingers tapped a rhythm on the gilded arms of her throne. "Come, Taranis," she said. "*Venet Taran*'." She laughed, and raised her fingers. Storm winds whipped her long black hair. Lightning glittered from her fingertips, and leaped toward the swelling clouds.

Beside her was another throne—and a man. Black, oiled curls tumbled to his shoulders and intermingled with gold ornaments about his neck. Flashes from the approaching storm highlighted his features. "Enough! Send it away." He laughed without condescension.

She waved a hand as if dismissing a servant. Lightning ceased, winds abated, the sky lightened, and

distant currents of air pulled at the anvil-clouds, tearing wisps from their tops, dissipating them.

"There! Your Fortunate Isles are again at peace. See what a terrible disruption I would be?"

"Better storms with you than life without," exclaimed the sorcerer-king Minho. "Marry me! Rule with me!"

* * *

"*Mor'h-ganna*? Are you all right?" She realized that she had sagged to her knees beside Taranis's image. The*dryade* Ortagion leaned over her.

"I don't command the visions," she murmured. "They come when they will."

"What did you see?"

"A far place. A kingdom long departed, that may yet endure when this world is no longer." Oracles' words, ambiguous. Ortagion drew back.

"Be easy," she assured him. "That vision doesn't concern you, or this place." Not directly.

* * *

Twice she had spoken with Minho of the Isles. That memory had been of the first time: she had been only a child when*Ma* had first swirled the waters of the sacred pool and shown her herself on that throne. She had not understood what it meant. For the second meeting, she had arrived on a cloud-chariot of her own conjuration, wearing green of tamarisk, gold of spring irises, and a dress teased from a tuft of passing cloud. Her slippers had been moon-traced silver plucked from the water of the Camargue. It was her test, her "graduation" from masc to incipient sorceress. The spells had been difficult, complex, and dangerous.

"I missed you," Minho had said. "It's been so long, so many centuries. Have you come to stay, at last? . . . I've yearned for you while great nations rose and fell."

She had not understood. She was not yet fifteen. No nations had fallen in those short years.

His arms about her had been warm and strong, his stolen kiss troubling, tempting. She had flung herself away and, as a raucous magpie, had fled Minho's palace on iridescent wings.

* * *

Why those memories? Why now? She sighed. It was time to get down to the business that had brought her here.

"I don't have a Great Year to learn history and mysteries," she said. "There's no time, but there is much the goddess commanded me to learn." She stood, shakily. Ortagion took her arm.

"We will speak of that, but not today,*mor'h-ganna* . Come. I'll call for a litter to take you to your tower."

* * *

The bed's coverlet was fine white wool. Moonlight from the newly cut window was as cool as the night breeze off the sea. The air was sweet, high above the odors of the town. She fell atop the pristine bed wrapped in her*sagus* , her travelling cloak, and was instantly asleep.

Thankfully, she did not dream—or if she did, no traces lingered when the sun's warmth and the bustle in the streets below awakened her.

* * *

Veleda's tradition demanded Pierrette neither judge nor prophesy outside the walls of her tower. Though she considered her confinement to be the*dryade* Cunotar's trap, neither was she comfortable amid the statues and brooding spirits of the*nemeton* . Before the sun was high, the four*dryades* came to her.

"I don't know what I need to know," she said. "I'll know what it is when I hear it. You must teach me—everything."

"Even for the most talented of us, that takes nineteen years."

"Ortagion, nineteen months will be too late."

The other three*dryades* had kept silent until now. Sabinos, the youngest (perhaps the least patient) cleared his throat meaningfully. "Tell us your visions—the fate of our city," he said. "Then we may know what to teach you."

She sighed. She most wanted to know about*fantômes* , and trapped spirits who raged. But Ortagion had temporized in the*nemeton* , and had acted uneasy, even ashamed. She could not approach the subject directly. Besides, their choice among the paths her visions indicated would not necessarily be the same as hers.

"Then hear my most frightening vision," she intoned. "Your city's walls encompass the*salins* and lagoons that surround it. Its walls are woven iron, and whoever touches them dies. There are no houses, no temples, only metal places that hum with the voices of demented things. They are lit by lamps without flame, and by iron torches higher and wider than my tower, that burn without smoke and leave no ash. Men slave within those precincts. There is no day, no night, only gray skies in which no sun can be seen."

"What lies beyond the walls?" asked Sabinos.

"Bare dirt, wind-blown ash, and the burnt stumps of long-dead trees. There are no wells or pools, only puddles in which the dead lie unburied, and do not rot." She shuddered. "That is my vision. That is the Black Time at the beginning, and at the end."

Ambioros, the tallest*dryade* , had a warrior's mien and abruptness. "What path leads there? What must we do to choose another?"

At least he had not asked "When?" Might he choose to ignore a fate that would not take place in his lifetime or his grandchildren's? But*dryades* were philosophers and scholars, judges and astronomers. Their traditions descended from the same tribes who, beyond the River Indus, had become the Brahmin caste. The Greeks of their day respected them, as would Roman scholars to come. Their thinking spanned ages. They should care.

"If the Romans come, and conquer," she said, "a new religion will arise, whose priests divide all things between good and evil, and find more things evil than good. Left unchecked, that will lead to the Black Time, once all has been divided."

"The Massiliotes treat with Rome," Sabinos remarked. "There was the matter of the pirates of Aegitna,

and the Roman fleet has controlled our coasts for a Great Year, even before their consul Opimus defeated the Oxubii and the Deciates, our allies. But our walls can withstand them."

Ortagion was not as sure. "Hannibal shocked the Romans," he mused. "Though they defeated him at last, and now have levelled Carthage, they have not forgotten how close he came—with our help. We allowed his elephants to cross the Alps from Iberia to the Padane valley, on our roads. Romans see us as a barrier between their divided holdings."

"We give their merchants passage along the coast," Ambioros said.

"But their armies? Do we permit their legions to march where they will? No. But less will not satisfy them. When next our Iberian kin rebel, Rome will require a land route from Latium. . . .

Pierrette did not want to waste time on political or military matters, but she realized that such issues were at the root of the problem, and could not be ignored—only steered in a direction more useful to her. Whatever evil they planned, that she had sensed at the*nemeton* , would be done with only the best motives: to preserve and protect their city, their way of life, from Rome's legions. They believed it would work—and it would, unless her terrifying experience east of Aquae Sextiae was only an insane vision . . . And unless this "now" was also a delusion. . . .

"You have the means of defeating Rome," she said, "but it will not forstay the Black Time's coming. It will only change the path taken—and the nature of your victory will be evil itself."

Ortagion and Sabinos avoided her eye. Ambioros drew himself up in stiff defiance. Cunotar, the fourth *dryade* , remained expressionless. Of the four, he made her uneasiest: his name meant "Taranis's hound." The storm god for whom he spoke made few distant rumblings before he struck. And he had still not removed his shadowing hood.

They all knew what evil she spoke of. It had to do with the ghosts they kept in the sanctuary—not the *fantômes* of the Avaticii tribe, like Velarix, but ones like the bitter, chafing spirit she had briefly sensed, approaching the*nemeton* . But she did not know enough about such ghosts to prod the*dryades* further without giving herself away.

Her "three visions" were not equivalent; that was a problem. One was her own world, in which ulitmate dissolution loomed, but had not yet come. The vision of the iron towers of the Black Time itself was the only possible outcome of several courses of events, themselves yet undetermined.

The dream of Ugium, dominated and defended by bitter ghosts, was perhaps the same universe she had fled from on the slopes of Sainte-Baume.

She had no knowledge of other possibilities. What would the end of the universe be, if there were no Black Time? There was no possibility of such an alternative, except within the chain of events that she called "my own history."

Ambioros got to his feet. "I will come back when you know what you wish to learn from me." Cunotar also rose.

Sabinos glanced from the departees to Ortagion, who remained seated. "I'll help if I can," he said, "but Ambioros is right—you'll have to formulate questions before we can answer them." He departed, shuffling his sandals on the stone steps down the cityward face of the square tower.

"We're at an impasse." Ortagion made no move to leave. "You aren't willing to reveal what you don't know by asking questions, but you sense things that trouble us, that we won't speak of."

"You're afraid of what you're doing," Pierrette replied. "You've chosen an end—victory over the Massiliotes and their Roman friends—but you're uncomfortable with your chosen means." She saw she had struck a nerve. "You're*experimenting* with those*fantômes* , aren't you? You're using the dead for worldly ends."

Ortagion's expression revealed the accuracy of her thrust. "We can't be sure . . ."

"Oh, you can win your immediate battle," she interrupted him. "I've seen that—the tribes of Gaul, united with the Teuton tribes north of the Rhine, can become a great empire. Rome will lose Iberia and Africa, will retreat to the plain of Latium, and will pay tribute to you. You*can* succeed." She sighed, and shook her head. "You won't like the outcome, though—not any more than you enjoy the means by which you get it. You already have doubts. Shall I increase them?"

"We have doubts. We're only men. We play with things beyond our understanding, believing that what works on the small scale will also on the large. But a single raindrop tells us little about water in general, except that it's wet." He sighed. "Ask what you will. I won't reveal our words to the others. I need to know."

She had won this skirmish. "Tell me everything about*fantômes* ."

"They are spirits," he said. "They are what a man leaves behind, when his body dies and his soul departs . . ."

* * *

Ortagion had stayed long. Now he was gone. Pierrette's head was filled with new facts and speculations. She had promised the*dryade* to think on it, and to tell him how it all fit with her disparate visions. There were connections—but what were they? She tried to put what she now knew into some kind of structure.

Yan Oors was not a*dryade* scholar. He could not have told Pierrette what she needed to know. He knew bodies with legs and arms, genitals, senses like scent and touch, vision, taste, and hearing. Bodies were ash and earth, ephemeral manifestations soon gone. But Celts thought in threes, and body was only one.

Heartbeat and breath enlivened the body. Hunger and lust drove it. Growth staved off rot, postponing its end. Those things were the*fantôme* —desire and craving, anger, elation, pride and hope. Urges: what everyday people called . . . life. Without its*fantôme* , the body died, because there was no lust to perpetuate it, no thudding heart to drive it on, and no fear to foresee what might destroy it.

Only at death did the lusty ghost depart, as morbidity set in and rot claimed its home. If the body was preserved—trapped in the ice of a mountain glacier, pickled in soured wine or packed in salt, unnaturally embalmed or mummified, the*fantôme* lingered, unsure if its role was ended, its purpose served. Such ghosts made folk uneasy when they walked by a tomb.

On Samonias—which Irish Ferdiad had called Samhain and Christians were coming to call All Saints, such ghosts were uneasy. The door to the Otherworld opened just a crack for a night and a day, halfway between the equinox (when night and day were equal) and the winter solstice (when night came closest to total rule).

Cremation freed*fantômes* immediately. Where did they go? Ortagion did not know. "Perhaps they dissipate into the life forces we sense about us," he speculated. "Perhaps they quicken the winds and make sunlight feel warm on our faces. Perhaps the roots of growing things suck them up in their sap, and newborn babes imbibe them with their mothers' milk."

There were three parts to a man or a woman, and the third, which Yan Oors had not mentioned, was . . . soul. The Greek Pythagoras, centuries before, had learned of the soul from druids of the*Keltoi* , whose lands bordered his peoples', and wrote his doctrine of metempsychosis, the transmigration of immortal souls, and reincarnation. The Hindus east of the Indus (the same root stock as the Gauls) espoused a similar doctrine.

Unlike*fantômes* , souls did not lust, because they were not bound to bodies of ash and earth. When heartbeat ceased and breath faded, souls moved on. To what Otherworld did they go? On Samhain, men claimed to have passed through to the other side, and to have returned, but none told the same tale of what they had seen. Perhaps they all lied, or perhaps none did. Ortagion did not know.

Some souls, he was sure, returned and wrapped themselves in newborn flesh—for where else sprang the memories men called déjà vu?

Souls, new or old, were not bound to flesh. In sleep, they wandered, adventuring in the Otherworld . . . and men dreamed. The souls of mystics, soothsayers, and prophetesses departed at the person's will. Was "person" thus soul, or a synthesis of soul, ghost, and flesh? Ortagion did not know.

There was much, Pierrette reflected, that he and his colleagues did not know, but that had not stopped them from experimenting. If preserving the head of an Avaticii warrior in cedar oil caused his ghost to linger, to add its strength to living warriors in the ranks atop the walls, what happened to the soul? Did it remain, tied to flesh and*fantôme* by an unbreakable thread?

The soul and ghost of the warrior-king Brennos had remained within his severed head for decades. Dying, he ordered his men to strike it from his body, and to bury it in Lugdunum. The voyage home took forty years. Brennos's head guided his men, and cajoled them, and only when it began at last to rot did he become anxious. Had the thread begun to fray?

Pierrette thought of another slender, tangled thread. Was she still tied to an immobile form lying damp and chilled on Sainte-Baume's mossy rocks, amid the gray beech trees? How long could she remain here before that frail husk died, and its*fantôme* dissipated? When the cord broke, would she die, or merely be trapped here?

She pushed her anxieties aside. She had to think, not worry.

The*dryades* ' scheme, said Ortagion, was to take heads not only of loyal Gauls, but of others. To a degree, that was traditional: warriors kept the heads of valiant enemies (and hopefully wealthy ones). They held them for ransom—their weight in the balance pan, in yellow gold.

But the*dryades* had no intention of returning those heads for gold. They would only return them (or let them rot, or burn them so their souls could fly free) when the*fantômes* had served them—when the Massiliotes and the Romans were defeated. Those were the agonized spirits she had sensed, that Cunotar had hoped to conceal from her, delaying her until they could be removed from their niches, their silent wails muffled behind a bronze door bound, hinged and locked with iron.

"It won't end there," Pierrette had told Ortagion. "Eight hundred years from now, headless bodies will command Gaulish troops—bodies driven by ghosts whose heads are kept safe elsewhere. Those *fantômes* will not be honored warriors, friend or enemy; I saw headless babes in their headless mothers' arms. In that future, the living will be ruled by a headless king, himself a slave."

"Whose slave? A god's?"

"He will be more powerful than your gods. He will consume them as easily as he does hapless ghosts. I won't speak his name, lest he hear me—for he is here, in this world, and you are doing his will."

"How can that be?"

"Was it your idea to trap the*fantômes* of foreigners and force them to your will? Was it Ambioros's, or Sabinos's?"

"Cunotar . . . He said he heard it from Teutomalos of the Saluvii." He drew anxious breath. "But we are not the only ones. Teutomalos also spoke with*dryadeae* of the Vocontii, the Decivates and Segobrigii, the Camactulicii . . ."

"Of every tribe, every*oppidum* . I know. How many*fantômes* will there be, for the Eater of Gods to command?"

Ortagion's head had sagged in gloomy shame. "We are to procure a hundred. What shall I do? Already ninety are lying in jars of cedar oil."

"Free them. Break or burn them. Bury them at sea, where fish will make short work of them."

Ortagion shook his head. "Sabinos might agree, but Cunotar? It will take time. I must convince them."

"Be sure that you do."

Chapter 9 - An Ancient God

The seeress known as Petra Veleda was bored. Ortagion did not come back that day or the next. She began to worry. The view from her tower window was charming—the distant glitter of the azure Middle Sea, the nearer lagoons red with algae that thrived in concentrated salt, the rich fields where farmers labored—but that panorama soon became ordinary. What was happening in the gods' sanctum? What were the*dryades* deciding?

Ortagion had had his doubts about Teutomalos's plan, and she had surely intensified them with her visions, but would he prevail against oily Sabinos, pragmatic Ambioros, or the sinister Cunotar? Would the vision of a great Gaulish state override their disgust at the abomination of the headless innocents who served it? Now that she understood the nature of the threat, was she helpless to do anything about it?

Her saddle pack lay unopened on a low bench. She shook out her boy's clothing. Would her disguise

work here, where she had already been seen by everyone as a woman? She shrugged. If she were caught, she would think of some explanation.

She bound her breasts tightly and slipped into her tunic. Her hair was again a problem: tradesmen and boys wore theirs less than shoulder length, and warriors either stiffened theirs into spikes or braided it in a tight coif to fit beneath a helmet. Being small, she could not make herself a credible warrior.

She did not want to cut her hair. She had wasted her youth as a boy, and her decision to let her locks grow had been the first step in revealing her true nature in Citharista. Now, at last, it was long enough to reach from behind—halfway down her back. She tied it with a cord, and tucked it inside her tunic. That would at least conceal its length.

Enakles's camp was beneath the unfinished wall, a hundred paces south of her. She would have to wait until dusk to slip down the stairs, before moonrise—but dusk was a long time in coming. Time was subjective, when awaiting an event. With nothing to fill the hours, they stretched interminably; yet when there was much to do, hours flicked by too quickly to grasp, and not everything got done. Was time truly inconstant, or did it only seem so?

At last the stars appeared; the glow in the west faded. She slipped out the tower door. Barefoot, she edged around the corner, not looking directly at the sentry on the wall, lest he sense her eyes on him. The stairs led down behind the tower, so as soon as she was out of his sight, she would enter that of the sentry south of the tower.

Pierrette had stalked deer with the hunter Aam; she knew how to observe from the corner of her eye, using peripheral vision to sense the slightest motion. The sentries, facing half away from her, looking outward, would not see her directly, but were ideally placed to sense her movement. How quickly the skill came back: sliding her toe forward, seeking any brittle twig or loose stone chip that would betray her if she stepped on it. Then a smooth, slow forward surge, hardly recognizable as human motion. She envisioned a sea-slug pushing its inner mass of organs forward inside its skin, then pulling the empty sack after.

It was as if she were in the high forest above Sormiou with her golden-haired not-quite-lover Aam. Aam had lived out his uncomplicated life millennia ago, and had perhaps died an old man long before history was conceived, before good or evil had been defined. He had taught her not magic or spells, but the slow, calculated, intermittent movements of the hunt, the concentration on being one with leaves and branches, with one's prey. It had a magic of its own. She had not—yet—been seen.

Once having descended the first flight, Pierrette was level with the sentry atop the wall, totally exposed. She slid another step forward and felt the lip of a tread with her bare toes. Again, her body undulated ahead, a slow wave on a sea of honey. Down one step, then two, and she was below the sentry's natural line of sight; he would have to look down to see her. Another, and her head was level with the top of the wall. She bent her knees, then backed down the remaining treads on all fours, into deep shadow.

Enakles and his men lived in tents aligned like a military camp, now steeped in darkness, but there—a lamp's glow was diffused by a fabric hanging. Enakles was working late. She crept close enough to hear a quill scratching on papyrus.

"Psst!"

"Seeress!" Enakles looked up. "Or should I call you `boy'?"

" `Boy' is fine, for now. I need your help."

"Pull that curtain shut, then pour yourself tea—it's a stimulating herb, just the thing for late-night plotting. Good. Now tell me what brings you here."

"I found out from Ortagion what I need to know. He believes the danger I have envisioned is real, but I'm afraid the others won't heed him—especially Cunotar—or allow him to do the wise thing."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

She sighed. "What were you told, then, in the cave where we met?"

"Only that I should help you, if you asked. You'll have to tell me what I need to know."

It was going to be a long night. She sipped tea, then began to tell him what she had foreseen, and what the*dryadeae* were doing to bring about the worst of her visions.

* * *

"I think you guessed right," Enakles said at last. "Cunotar is your worst problem. You won't convince him. Ambioros will take the bird in hand, without regrets for a future he will never see. Sabinos will side with whoever seem most sure of themselves."

"I have to try to sway them."

"You may try—but you need a plan to deal with the possibility of failure. Unfortunately, your vision of a united Gaul is appealing to us Greeks. We've done well under Celtic rule, oftener than not. The local Greek factotum won't help."

"Celtic rule? Who?"

"Maybe Alexander wasn't exactly a Celt, but Makedonians aren't really Greek, either."

"If not the factor, then who?"

"I met you in Lugh's cave. To my men, Lugh and Herakles, who built Tiryns's walls, are one and the same. They will help, if they can—and we shall have to see what the god has to say. Come."

"Now?"

"Are gods bound by day and night? If we hurry, we can still get you back into your tower unseen."

The Herakleon—Herakles's temple—was built in the Greek manner: two stone chambers entered from beneath a colonnade of fat Doric posts. The triangular gable above was a bas-relief of one of the god-hero's labors: he rode amid a herd of cattle painted red-brown; their horns were long, and curved up like the arms of a lyre.

Pierrette hesitated at the outer door. "How shall I address him? Is he really a god, or a hero?" Such things changed with time and the climate of people's belief; the hero of one age was a god in the next, and old, neglected gods assumed lesser roles: unseen, brooding spirits lurking in dark, stony places, beneath bridges, and in hollow trees.

"He was a god long ago, before he became a hero. Now . . . this is his temple, isn't it? Therefore he must be a god again."

The cool, scented air that blew from the open doorway was neither musty nor damp, nor laden with incense, cedar wood, or oil. It smelled like the clean breeze across the Crau, the Plain of Stones that bordered the vast delta of the Rhodanus—the plain where Herakles was said to have called down stones from heaven, burying his enemies. The plain was still stone-strewn, vast, and barren. It lay just west and north of Heraclea.

"I must enter alone," she said.

"I'll wait here." Enakles stepped behind a pillar.

There was light, faint and diffuse, as if the temple had no roof, and the stars shone in. Ahead was the door to the inner chamber, the god's sanctum. She pushed. It opened silently on oiled bronze hinges. By misty light she discerned the god's image: bronze hair leafed with gold, eyes of nacre and green malachite, enameled skin the color of pale coral. His lean, muscular body was robed in red silk that waved gently in the draft from the opening door.

She froze, startled by the motion—as if sculpted bronze could come alive. The robe was actual cloth. It moved . . . but statues' eyes did not. Statues' muscles did not flex, as if stretching after a nap. And Herakles, a Hellene, should not look . . . exactly . . . like Aam, her Golden Man. . . .

"Pebble," he said, smiling, his face crinkling as no bronze or gold could. Pebble: that had been Aam's name for her. He had splashed her with water to see if . . . "If you shine even more brightly when you are wet," he said.

"Aam?" She was dreaming—or she was entirely mad.

"Where did you go?" he asked, stepping down from his low, marble pedestal. "I looked for you outside the cave, but you were not there." The cave . . . chambers whose walls were covered with stencilled human hands, painted with deer, seals, and animals Pierrette had never seen, like elephants, and brutal-looking, flat-footed unicorns. The cave's entrances were closed in Pierrette's time, the upper beneath masses of fallen rock, and the lower far beneath the risen sea.

"I went home. To my own world and time." She would have said more, but his arms were around her, his mouth on hers.

"No!" she gasped, turning aside. "I must not."

"This is not my world," Aam said in a hurt tone. "You will not be trapped here. And you want to love me."

"It isn't my world either! My world is . . . far away. I must remain . . ." She could not say it. There had not been a word for "virgin" in the age of stone. She had wanted him, once. In a way, she still did, but she wanted more. She turned away so he would not see her tears, and mistake them for lack of resolve.

"I need help," she said. "I sought the god of this shrine, and I don't understand why you are here."

"Tell me what you need," said Aam.

She did not know how much sense a man of the deep past, before gods had been conceived, would make of her tale, but she told it . . . again.

"You will have to make your own fate here," he said, pensively. "I can do nothing for you." Her shoulders slumped. Hadn't she feared that all along? But he was not finished. "Remember this: when all else is lost, seek safety on the Plain of Stones."

"The Crau?"

"The Plain of Stones, where I first met you, long ago."

"But I have never been on the Plain of . . ." She turned toward him. His voice had changed. Aam was gone, and in his place stood another, whose black hair was oiled and curled in thick, shiny ringlets. "Minho!" she gasped.

"Why are you wearing such unbecoming clothes?" the sorcerer-king asked. "You looked prettier in clouds and moonbeams."

"Why are you playing tricks on me? You're not Minho of the Isles! You're Herakles, aren't you?"

"You know who I am. What do names matter?" He shook his head sadly. "I can't save you, if you choose to stay here. Come away with me. Come to my kingdom, and let this ugly world fade away. What can it offer you?"

What, indeed? Not hope. Only the ever-encroaching end of everything, and the rule of the Eater of Gods. But she could not give up. There was still a chance—a slim chance, and she had just thought of it. She glanced toward the door, where Enakles waited. "I must try to save it," she said. "I can't give up."

No one answered her. There was no one there—only a bronze statue with gilded hair and seashell eyes.

* * *

"Take me back," she asked Enakles. On the way, she told him what she planned to do. He did not protest. He and his fifty workmen would be leaving soon anyway, when the last courses on the east wall were finished.

Chapter 10 - Sacrifices

Unable even to consider sleeping, Pierrette climbed the ladder to the tower roof. South, the wall stretched past a gate, then turned west, petering out at the steep cliffs. North, it curved westerly past the main gate and ended in a similar way, at the other end of the unscalable cliff. Near the northwest end was a sally port that opened onto a trail invisible from below. "A town can't be defended from the inside against sappers digging beneath its walls without," Enakles had told her. "There have to be ways for warriors to get out. There are two such gates. One is on the south, where it can be seen by any Massaliote spy. The other is concealed within a cobbler's wooden shack—there. Only the king and his sons know of it." She fixed the location of that secret exit in her mind.

Peering across the town from above, she observed white-kilted Greeks on the way to the Herakleon for

devotions before the start of the workday, though it was not yet dawn, and the moon was a thin crescent far in the west. She had no trouble seeing, almost as if it were already day. She saw people clustering in the*ahoras* , the square. The*dryades* were speaking with a large group of armed men. Now they were coming her way. She scrambled down the ladder. Suddenly, she wished she had left by the hidden gate, when Enakles had showed it to her, and not waited to try to reason with them one last time.

"Come down, seeress," shouted Cunotar, his voice harsh as gravel. "Today we shall have an oracle who will tell us the true fate of our great walls."

*True*fate? Then the*dryadeae* had chosen not to believe Ortagion—or her. What did they intend? Two soldiers held a man whose arms were bound behind him. Black hair marked him as a foreigner. He was clothed in a single rag wrapped around his midsection. Diodorus Siculus had written of Gallic divination. She knew what the man's fate would be, and her blood ran cold. She was ashamed that her first reaction was relief: she was not to be the victim herself.

There was no time to change out of her boy's clothing. She wrapped a skirt over her*bracae* and shook out her hair. A shawl and the drape of her veil covered her tunic. It would have to do. . . .

"I have no need to take lives to see true futures," she called down to the*dryades* . "You have no need of my presence." Was that blood spotting the hem of Cunotar's robe? How many men had died while she waited, looking out over the countryside? How many empty niches were left in the pillars and lintels of the*nemeton* ?

"Come," said Cunotar, more softly. "Do you wish to be dragged forth?" What choice did she have? Could she break free, slip away in the crowd, and make for the secret gate?

Pulling her veil across her face—grateful, now, for the concealment it offered—she descended the stairs. Two husky warriors took position beside her. The crowd was not all men. Mothers had brought their little children to witness the rite that would take place. Horribly, they all smiled, even laughed nervously, in an uneasy, almost festive mood.

It was the longest walk of her life. And it was not the first time she had walked it.*This is the vision that has terrified me for years. This is the Ugium of my nightmare* . As in the dream, she sensed the excitement of the crowd, the faces a blur, the cobbled street . . .

She felt the brooding, bitter*fantômes* atop the city walls, the aching misery of those who were not Gauls, not of the city. Threads of emotion like cobwebs brushed the surface of her mind: a Greek merchant betrayed by Ambioros, murdered with his own sword. He yearned for a far land of gray, barren hills dotted with sheep, where lemon trees grew in the thick soil of watered valleys. He pined for his father, whose bones lay in a hillside crypt, for his mother asleep beside him. He yearned. His soul yearned for release, for the funeral pyre that would free it to fly away on smoke-laden winds. He yearned for true death.

She sensed his discontent at a body already consumed with rot, that he wanted to shake free of, but could not. Wander as he might, he was always drawn up short as by an invisible tether, long before he was near home.

Pierrette felt other bound souls. A Briton yearned for his family's burial plot near the wall of his village, in the shadow of a great circle of standing stones. An Etrurian wine merchant, stealthily slain, mourned the lost, vast graveyard, like a city of houses, all underground. There lay parents and grandparents, amid painted scenes of everyday life. There would children and grandchildren come to light a fire on the

funerary hearth, to feast among the beloved dead. But he was not with them. He was here in Gaul, and his head lay unsmiling in pungent oil, behind the bronze-and-iron door at the back of the*nemeton* , now ajar.

Pierrette felt all their tales of woe, their pleading to be freed—and their despairing willingness to obey the *dryades* ' demands, all for the promise of freedom in some indefinite future time. She wanted to scream at them: "No! It's a trap. You'll never be freed. If you do evil, the Eater of Gods will consume you, and all your yearnings and pain will be no more than salt sprinkled on his meat."

But they would not hear her. And now she had arrived at the sanctum. Torches flared in bronze sconces by the door, though it was no longer night. Cunotar was speaking to the assemblage. "Behold the messenger," he cried, holding his sword over the unfortunate foreigner's head. "Behold the sacrifice."

"Namnites hear us!" shouted Ambioros. "Taranis send lightning to burn the Massiliotes."

"Deafen them with your voice," Sabinos shouted. "Wash away their blood with holy rain."

"Vindonnos, harden us like the mortar that holds stone to stone," added Ortagion—weakly, thought Pierrette, as if he were only going through the ritual motions, without conviction.

A woman stepped forward, tossing aside veil and mantle, revealing herself naked. "Andrasta quicken us," she demanded, clutching her belly. "Give us strong sons to defend us, to take the places of those who will soon die."

Anarchy! Did every person in the crowd appeal to a different god? Then what was she but the priestess of one very minor goddess indeed—and without the slightest power or influence. Was that what the *dryades* intended to show her?

Cunotar motioned to a soldier. Two warriors grasped the prisoner's arms. One cut his bonds. The crowd grew silent as Ambioros raised his hands. "Now we shall pierce the veil of years, and know our fate—and our enemies'."

No! That was all wrong. Parting the veil of years did not work like that. Once time had been a wheel, and the future could be reached by seeing—or voyaging back through—the remote past, but the disastrous spell that had created the Black Time at beginning and end alike had broken the wheel. *Mondradd in Mon* only looked back, not into the future.

The victim was as white as if already drained of blood. His eyes were wide and glassy. Cunotar grasped the short sword with both hands . . . and plunged it into the victim's belly. He tugged upward, widening the cut, then stepped back as pink, glistening entrails spilled in a slow, viscous cascade. Only then did the man scream.

The soldiers released his arms, and he crumpled to the cobbles, his arms scrabbling against them, his body humping. "He's not moving enough," Sabinos muttered anxiously. "How can we read the days to come from his thrashing?"

"Shut up!" Ortagion hissed out of the corner of his mouth. "Let Cunotar work."

The hooded*dryade* turned the victim over with a foot. Pierrette saw him reach inside his robe, then make motions over the spilled entrails. . . . The man began to thrash and moan. He burbled, unable to draw proper breath to scream. His fingers clawed at his midsection, his heels drummed the cobbles, and

his head jerked madly from side to side.

Cunotar hovered over him, as if his thrashings were indeed signs from the gods—and not the result of whatever corrosive powder he had sprinkled on the man's innards. The thrashing weakened. The man's hands alone twitched.

"It's too soon," Sabinos whispered. "He mustn't die yet. . . ." But with a last bubbling sigh, the victim stiffened, and was entirely still.

"Raise him," Cunotar grated. "Hold his hair." One soldier lifted the lifeless head from the ground, and two others lifted his torso by the arms. The sword arced downward with all Cunotar's strength.

Pierrette swallowed bitter bile, and fought neither to vomit nor weep. Cunotar held the head up. "One more guardian for our walls!" he cried. "Now there are . . . ninety-nine."

The crowd roared, a cacophony that beat on Pierrette's eardrums. Ninety-nine. One less than the hundred Teutomalos had demanded.

"Come," said Ortagion. He guided her into the*nemeton* . "Cunotar will be a while, recounting what the gods have told him."

"What he wants people to think they said!" she spat. "Why are you going along with this farce? That was no proper spell, no proper augury."

Ortagion looked away, suddenly old and defeated. "There are now ninety-nine*fantômes* . Cunotar offered me the chance to serve my city as the hundredth."

"Petra! Petra Veleda!" Enakles shouldered his way to the door, where two soldiers stopped him. "Remember what I told you." What did that mean? What did it matter? She now knew who the hundredth*fantôme* would be. Not Ortagion. Her.

The inner door was open, and Ortagion led her through it. The odor of cedar oil was almost overwhelming. Pierrette's eyes burned. Sabinos brought the severed head inside.

The inner room was not a sanctum, it was a butcher's shop, a warehouse for heads. Shelves lined the rear wall. False painted eyes stared down from them. Sewn lips drew down in scowls or up in grimaces. The floor was a litter of open pots, liquid-filled. In each was a dark, rounded shape. Sabinos thumped the fresh head on a stained, scarred table. He picked up a large bronze needle threaded with sinew.

He nudged the room's only oil lamp close to the dead face . . . and Pierrette could sense the spirit behind that visage. For a moment she was relieved, because she sensed no pain. The trapped soul was confused, as if awakened abruptly in a strange place.

"Flee!" she commanded silently. "Flee before you're trapped behind sewn-shut eyelids."

"Flee? How?" The thoughts were jumbled, confused . . . and then were overwhelmed by others. Ninety-eight others, all at once—bitter, jealous thoughts.

"Stay! You're no better than us."

"You're ninety-nine. One more, and we're complete. One more . . ."

"And we'll complete our task . . ."

"Then we'll be free."

Pierrette clapped her hands over her ears . . . but the voices were already in her head. Her head. The trapped souls knew. She felt their eagerness, their craving. "One last soul! Yours!"

"Complete us."

"Help us be free."

"Home! Then we can go home!"

"You'll never go home. They'll keep you for a thousand years." The voices ignored her, drumming in her head, buffeting her. The sharp-scented, heady air was unbreathable. She was dizzy. She felt her knees sag. Ortagion held her up. "You can't do this!" she said. "You'll lose everything. Help me. Help me free them."

His face was a mask of despair. Had he heard them too? "How?" he whispered.

"Take me over to the table."

"What will you do?"

"Just do it—or you're more doomed than these poor trapped souls. Where's that door—the one I saw from outside?"

"Straight ahead, then right."

"Can we get out that way?"

"It's only barred on the inside. But why?"

"Just be ready. You'll know when."

Slowly, hopefully unnoticed by Sabinos, they edged toward the table. Sabinos had sewed both eyelids shut, and was rethreading the needle. He looked up, surprised to see them so close. "What are you . . ."

Pierrette swept her hand across the table. The flame flickered wildly as the lamp flew off the edge. She kicked over a jar on the floor. Cedar oil splashed, and a head rolled soddenly into the spreading flames. With a great thump the air itself seemed to ignite. She heard Sabinos screaming. His garment and hair were on fire. Pierrette squeezed her eyes shut. A hot wind buffeted her. "The door! Can you find the door?"

Ortagion tugged on her arm. She risked a peek. Flames filled most of the room. They were rushing toward the open portal, not toward them. Sabinos staggered blindly through, still screaming, knocking aside warriors who could not brave the heat to enter. She turned. Ortagion was struggling with the door. It would not open. She grabbed and heaved next to him. The pressure of the flames inside held it. Then it moved . . . and the pent flames suddenly leaned their way, rushing toward the new escape route. Ortagion pulled her outside. They sprawled on the cobbles. Flames gouted over their heads.

Inside, one crackling roar followed another as pots of oil ignited, fed with fresh air. The air itself burned. Smoke billowed from the roof tiles overhead. Sabinos no longer screamed, but from the street around the corner, she heard Cunotar shouting. "Save them! Save the heads!"

"It's too hot!"

"No one could live in there. They're already burning."

"Try the back way. Quickly."

"Come on!" Pierrette pulled Ortagion now.

"Where? They'll find us, wherever we . . ."

"I know a way out. There's a cobbler's shack west of the gate, along the wall. Can you find it?"

"Meclos's place. But he's dead, and it's boarded up. . . ."

"Get us there, quickly."

The streets were empty. Everyone had gone to the*nemeton* for the spectacle. She glanced back the way they had come, and saw a column of black, spark-laden smoke.

"Here," Ortagion said. "What now?"

"Get us inside."

The*dryade* launched a flat-footed kick at the boarded doorway. Several planks fell. He did it again. "Now what?"

"There's a hidden sally port somewhere . . ."

"That's the city wall." He pointed to the stone rear surface—and then to a tiny door, heavily reinforced with iron, only waist high. "And there's the exit." He struggled with the heavy bars holding it shut. Light streamed inside. Beyond, Pierrette could see only large coursed stones. Was this a mistake? That looked like the city wall out there. Were they still trapped? She wriggled outside. The stones were a staircase. A natural stone rampart concealed the gate from below. A paved path, two men wide, led down the side of the scarp. She could see the rusty red of a*salin* , a salt-basin, down there. A long way down.

"Good-bye," Ortagion said.

"You're going back?"

"No one saw me. I'll say I saw you burning in the*nemeton* . You'll have time to get away. . . . But where will you go?"

She pointed beyond the*salin* , where the land was as flat as the undisturbed water. "The Plain of Stones," she said. "I think someone's waiting for me there."

The way Ortagion peered at her, she knew he was seeing the*mor'h-ganna* Petra now, and that her

reply had come from no reasoned source.

* * *

She felt eyes upon her as she emerged from the narrow path, at the brushy edge of the*salin* . The unknown watcher's gaze was cold, malevolent. Who? Ortagion had hurried away. She looked back up the rocky slope to the top of Heraclea's wall. Then she knew; all the*fantômes* had not been destroyed. The ninety-nine—the foreign ghosts—had fled homeward on the wings of smoke, and were free, but Heraclea's own honored dead, in niches around the*nemeton* 's portal, had not burned.

She shuddered and quickened her pace. Had the ghostly sentry told Cunotar? Then Ortagion was surely doomed. But she could do nothing about that, except to make his death count, by winning free herself.

Chapter 11 - The Plain of Stones

The afternoon sun broke from behind unseasonal clouds, and warmed Pierrette's clammy skin. A breeze out of the northwest carried fresh scents of warm grass, devoid of the salty tang of sea and*salins* . The Crau—the Plain of Stones—lay ahead.

Once before she had smelled that aroma, debarking from Caius's boat on the far side of the plain. Then it had enticed her with a promise of a warm hearth at nightfall, a lost love awaiting her. But then she had not known a lover, except in daydreams and visions. That impression, that someone awaited her on the broad, flat plain was what she had alluded to with Ortagion.

But the plain was open and exposed. She would have to leave the shelter of willow and tamarisk, and would be visible to her pursuers. She had no sense of being followed, yet, but she could not believe Cunotar would forego revenge for the burning of the*nemeton* and its grisly contents. But what good were visions like hers, if she ignored them? With a tremulous sigh, she set out onto the plain.

* * *

The stones must have been laid down in some cataclysmic event long past. They ranged from gravels to bulging boulders, but most were rounded cobbles long overlain by soil. A casual observer would not have known most of them were there unless he set plow or shovel to the ground—neither would have penetrated more than inches. Yet there was enough dirt for a thick carpet of short grass, and exposed cobbles to turn an ankle on, if she were not careful. Despite that, she made good time.

Her first sight of pursuit was a line of heat-distorted specks miles east of her. Men on horses. Had she been spotted? If so, why were they spread out so? Wouldn't they be in a single file, if they were hurrying toward her? She concluded she was less visible to them than they to her. She pressed on, frequently peering anxiously backward. The distant specks became no clearer, but neither did they fade.

Her heart sank. They didn't see her, but they were trailing her. Her trailing skirt had left a broad swath of bent grasses. She loosened the skirt, then wrapped it in a tight roll, grateful now that she had not had time to change that morning, and still wore*bracae* . She would keep to bare patches where her passage would not show. She eyed the distant line of trees, then set off at an angle to her earlier straight course.

She would not make as good time, but if they continued straight on, she might lose them.

The sun was past zenith, the hottest part of the day. The heat was intense, but her sweat dried immediately, cooling her—and its loss made her thirsty. Her pursuers probably had water sacks. She pressed on, careful to avoid grass and keep to bare gravel, or to hop from cobble to cobble. Her trail was now so intermittent—some grass was unavoidable—that the horsemen would have to know her direction already, to know where to look for it.

The sun moved too quickly; all too soon it was shining in her eyes, which made it easier to look back. The line of horsemen was no less visible. Were they actually closer?

Another hour's walk convinced her they were. They had not been fooled by her change in direction, or her efforts not to leave a trail. Why didn't they just ride her down? While looking backward, she tripped and sprawled on the hard ground. That was why. The horses could easily break legs here. But still, they gained on her. They were soon close enough for her to see that there were more horses than men; they had brought remounts.

Over a long stretch, an unburdened person afoot could outdistance a horse. Horses could only outrun a man for a short burst. But with fairly fresh horses, unridden, riders could keep up. The sun was still too high. Darkness would be her friend; they would have to stop, or lead the horses—but she did not think she could last that long. Every time she looked, they were closer. There was not enough time, and there was too much of it.

Time? Was it possible to use time to . . . Her thoughts raced. She had gotten here—already in the distant past—by using the spell*Mondradd in Mon* , to escape one terrifying circumstance. Dare she use it again? A spell within a spell? Could she flee further into the past? What choice did she have? When she recognized Cunotar's cowled figure atop the leading horse, she began to speak those words, ancient even in this time long ago . . .

* * *

Mondradd in MonBorabd orá perdó.Merdrabd or vernArfaht ará camdó.

* * *

There was no way to tell if anything changed. Always before, it had seemed gradual: she would wait, perhaps dozing in the sacred grove of beech trees, and awaken in another time, or outside of time. Or, walking, her surroundings would shift gradually, a change definable only by the presence of works of man—a church spire visible one moment, then gone the next time she looked . . . because it had not yet been built.

Here there were no churches—nothing but boulders bulging up from the ground, cobbles, grass, and gravel underfoot. Behind her, the riders loomed taller than before. The sun's low-angling rays glanced from polished bronze-trimmed helmets.

She staggered. Her feet were battered and sore, and she was woozy with heat and water loss. But the ground underfoot felt softer. . . . She was walking across a patch of short leafy stuff. How could that be? She had seen the Crau from the other side; it continued all the way to the boat canal that paralleled the Rhodanus. There were no patches of leafy green. She splashed through a rivulet. Her feet were wet. Ahead, several small channels or streams glistened.

She reached down and cupped water, sweet and fresh. Forcing herself on, she waited until the next small waterway—almost knee deep—to dash her face with water, to gulp down several mouthsful.

Thus freshened, she stretched her pace. The ground was hummocky and soft now, with few rocks to trip her up, but vinelike vetch tangled her feet instead, and slowed her. She was confused. If this was no longer the Crau, the Plain of Stones, was this before the cataclysm that had deposited the rocks? Then why had the horsemen not faded away between one glance and the next?

She heard distant shouting. Cunotar. He waved an arm over his head. "You aren't the only one who knows the spell, seeress—or whoever you really are. I'll follow you to the beginning of time."

Pierrette stumbled on. It was getting dark. The horsemen were no nearer. The beasts must be exhausted, or they would have galloped the last stretch, on the soft ground, and overtaken her. Ahead was a blaze of red and pink clouds surrounding a sun half-set. Darkness was minutes away. Her pursuers would have to stop. How much longer could she continue? She parted tall, sharp-leaved rushes. She had seen their like before, in the Camargue, the delta of the Rhodanus. Was this also a delta? But what river? No stream crossed the Crau.

She could hardly see to place her feet. She had to find dry ground where she could rest. . . .

* * *

Firelight, and warmth on her wet clothing, awakened her. She tried to sit—but could not move.

"Ah! You're awake." It was Cunotar. What had happened? She remembered making a nest of dry reeds, and falling asleep. Then, like a nightmare remembered over a morning's porridge, it came back: Cunotar, still far off, holding a torch high, chanting words more ancient than the Gaulish of his day; the torch's smoke, curling outward like a swarm of bees, seeking . . . And finding her, pointing her out, hovering above her. She ran, but ended facedown in shallow water, between a horse's hooves. Now she lay bound at wrists and ankles.

The*dryade* had thrown back his cowl. Pierrette was surprised how young he looked. His hair was auburn, his teeth fine, large, and white, his brows bushy. She had imagined him as old as his corrupt spirit, with gapped yellow teeth. His youth made him even more frightening. "I've had time to think what to do about you. At first I thought I'd use your head to replace one of those you burned. But you're no warrior. What good would your feeble ghost be? There will come a time when women's and children's spirits will serve—cooking and sewing. Imagine—an immortal slave to polish my armor and . . . But that's the future, and now . . ."

She now knew why the Gauls of Entremont had beheaded children. Just because "ordinary"*fantômes* had been warriors didn't limit*fantômes* ' use to war. Now she understood also that many possible futures, Gaulish, Roman, pagan and Christian, led toward the Black Time of her visions. Instead of machines that damped all magic, and written knowledge that snuffed out the awe and mystery, Cunotar's vision was of a world where the bodies of enslaved spirits labored endlessly. The trap was more elemental, but the result was the same: a world of dead ashes, where despairing souls inhabited bleak cities, where the sea and the sky were like sheets of gray, featureless lead.

Pain jolted her from her miserable thoughts. Cunotar had kicked her. "Don't drift off again," he snarled. "It's your future I'm talking about. Don't you care?"

Did she? Either way it was the same. Either way, it was hopeless. She turned her head aside—the only gesture of rejection her bonds permitted.

"You can't block your ears," the*dryade* said. "Know this: when we get back to Heraclea, you'll have a temple of your own, priestess. It won't be Veleda's tower. It will be Brigantu's house—and you'll have

plenty of worshippers there." He laughed.

Brigantu. A fertility goddess. A corruption of what*Ma* once was. Cunotar knew that she was not of this remote past where he had pursued her, or of his own time. He knew just how to trap her, to nullify her. It was both less hideous than beheading and more. She would not long remain virgin in Brigantu's house.

She imagined her lost body growing cold on the slopes of Sainte Baume, of pilgrims to Belisama or Magdalene—it wouldn't matter whose time she died in—passing her by, perhaps covering her with earth and stones when her corpse began to stink, calling a priest to mutter words over her. She envisioned her other self in Cunotar's temple, living out her useless life, nursing the children of unknown men. . . .

"No!" she screamed, rolling over, struggling with her bonds. Cunotar laughed again, and as she stared hopelessly into his eyes, she saw the hot flames of his own personal hell—and she knew who looked out from those tormented eyes. The Eater of Gods was not bound by place and time, or by the traditions of men. It was not gods alone he consumed.

Chapter 12 - The Herdsman

She felt vibration in the earth, as if the water-saturated, marshy soil beneath her hips and shoulder had turned to jelly. A low thrumming, a muffled, thudding roar, filled the predawn air. What was it? Pierrette pulled her legs up and pushed with her elbows until she could see around herself. She heard the deep, melodious bellowing of cattle. A great red-brown shape loomed up, then trampled past, scattering Cunotar's fire, setting Pierrette's damp tunic asmolder. Another followed. Great horns the length of a tall man swept back and forth like scythes.

Panicked horses whinnied and men shouted. A shadow fell over her. Cunotar? No—a big man, red-haired. A stranger. He grinned. Why did his expression look so familiar? "*Hya, koukla*," he said. "You're in big trouble—or you were, until I got here." He drew a bronze dagger and sawed at the ropes that held her. She hissed as painful circulation returned.

"Come on. Can you walk?" Then he shrugged, and swept her up under one thick arm, heading in the direction the cattle had gone. Ahead and behind, she heard their bellows still. What madness was this? The giant man had spoken in a peculiar, archaic Greek. "Doll," he had called her—and with her legs and arms dangling, she was no more than a doll for him to carry.

"Put me down!" she yelled.

He set her on her feet. "Hurry. We'll get you somewhere safe—then I have to collect my herd. Those Ligures won't be looking for you for a while."

"They aren't Ligures," she said. "They're Gauls. I'm a Ligure. Or my mother was."

"What are Gauls? Here? I've been followed by a bunch of Ligures, so I just assumed these were the same ones. Maybe I made a mistake. . . ."

"I'm glad you did—if you did. I'm glad you got me out of there." How could there be two groups of warriors wandering about this flat, wet plain, without them encountering each other? Were his Ligures

and her Gauls one and the same? Was Cunotar's spell subtly different from hers, so instead of merely thrusting him into a different existence, he assumed the existence of someone already here? What of his men? Were they the same ones who had chased her when the plain was of stones? She had recognized only Cunotar. . . . But she had never seen his face clearly, in Heraclea. Who was to say that the Cunotar she knew was not as old and as horrible as she had imagined him before she had seen him? Perhaps his spirit now animated a young Ligure. But weren't all Ligures small and dark-haired, like her and her mother? There were questions, but no answers.

The big man tugged her along at a half-run—a moderate walk, for him. He was not really a giant, as she had first thought. He was no taller than Citharista's castellan Reikhard, a Burgundian, and his shoulders were no broader than many a fisherman's, after a lifetime pulling oars and nets. His thighs were no thicker than the stonemason Cerdos's. But putting all those things together . . . he was big, and strong not in one way, but every way.

"Here," he said. "This is high enough ground. You'll be safe here." Indeed the ground was dry, though no hill. It was covered in brush, not reeds or purslane and vetch. Safe from what? "I'll get my cows together," he said.

He pushed back into the tall rushes at the base of the almost-imperceptible slope. Soon, a broad-horned head appeared there; a big reddish cow ambled forth, then stopped to nibble at greenery almost at her feet. Another cow appeared. Or was it a steer? No, a cow. Was there a bull? She was not sure she wanted to be so close, if there were a bull. More cattle drifted from the reeds. How many did he have? How many had it taken to drive off her captors?

He came, driving a last recalcitrant cow with taps of a big staff. She thought momentarily of Yan Oors—but this staff was wood, not iron, and looked fresh-cut. Was Yan who he had reminded her of when he first grinned at her? She did not think so. Give it time. It would come to her.

"My camp's not far," he said. "Are you up to walking?"

Pierrette groaned, but got to her feet. "Why did you say they were Ligures? Those were Gauls."

"Gauls? Is that a tribe? I thought I knew all the local tribes. They've been following me a while, since I left Vindonnum, over there." He pointed toward Heraclea, whose scarp was a gray line blocking dawn's glow.

"Do you mean Heraclea? The city?"

He peered at her, as if she had said something strange. "Heraclea? No, that's not it. And if you call that a city . . . mud houses inside a wooden wall . . ."

Then she understood. She had indeed parted the veil. The changed vegetation reflected not her movement across the land, but her devolution through time. Vindonnum was a Ligure village, not yet become Greek Heraclea or Roman Ugium. In this era, even the Celtic Gauls had not yet arrived in Provence. Then . . .*when* was this?

His camp was a greased goatskin lean-to and an earthen hearth atop a slight rise. Day had come while they walked, and she could see quite a way. A faint trickle of smoke marked their pursuers' camp.

"We can rest a bit. I want to lead them a few miles north today." He gestured. The northern horizon was marked by a range of sawtooth ridges. People in her day called them the "Little Alps."

"Tonight we'll camp on the far side of the river," he said. "If we're lucky, they'll be close on our heels."

River? Had she gotten turned around? There was no river this side of those mountains. Not in her time. How could she find out when this was? She couldn't just ask. What was his name, anyway?

"Alkides," he said. He pronounced it*All-kee-thays* , but it was Greek nonetheless. Greek had become a distinctive tongue two thousand years before her own time, so that did not say much.

"You want them to follow you? Why?"

"I want them in the right place, at the right time. And since they're mad at me, what better way to get them there than chasing us? If we cross the stream right at dusk, they'll have to wait until morning. Then we'll see."

"What will we see?"

He chuckled. "It's a surprise. Now come. Help me roll up this tent. I'll carry it. You can lead the goat."

"Why do you have a goat anyway?"

He put a finger across Pierrette's lips. "I'd best not discuss that in her presence." Food on the hoof, she realized.

* * *

Alkides told her he was a trader, exploring new routes to the west. "The Phoenicians have locked off the sea trade," he said. "There are tin mines out there, somewhere, but they allow no ships but their own into Oceanos." Oceanos—once that meant "the world river" that surrounded everything. The Atlantic. "I went to Tartessos to buy cattle—these big red beasts—but that was only an excuse, really. I wanted to find a land road around the Phoenicians' bottleneck, but no such luck. There is no good route north."

"There is a route to the tin country, the Cassiterides," she said. "Pytheas found it."

"Who?"

"Pytheas of Massilia." Alkides had never heard of either Pytheas or his city. Like Vindonnum, Massilia was only a Ligurian*oppidum* now, and the way he looked at her, he must be thinking she was a bit crazy. She changed the subject.

"What will you do with the cows?"

"If I can get them across the eastern mountains"—the Alps—"then I'll ship them home. They're all pregnant, so I don't have much time. That's why I have to shake these Ligures. If the calves come before I'm across the mountains, I'll lose most of them—and their sires' blood."

He had allowed them to be bred by the black swamp cattle of this land. "A fine strong breed—but not docile enough to be herded."

They reached the river in late afternoon. Alkides got a rope around the lead cow's neck, and by dint of persuasion, blows from his staff, and main force, got her to wade the broad, shallow stream. The rest of the herd followed, with Pierrette chasing the stragglers, yelling and waving a leafy branch.

Alkides eyed the steep northern bank. "We'll camp up there," he decided.

"It's nice and flat here, near the water," Pierrette protested, dreading the scramble up the rough clay bank.

"You don't want anyone sneaking up on us, do you?" She sighed.

"There!" Alkides pointed across the silvery river, where red firelight flickered. "They've made camp. We're safe here for the night." The ascent was just as rough as she had feared, but she climbed willingly. It was almost dark.

They stretched goatskins over a bent sapling poplar, and Pierrette kindled a fire. Alkides's eyes widened when he saw the small flame leap from her fingertips to the tinder. "You're a wizard!" He looked more closely at her. "But you're only a boy. I would never have suspected. You're so young." Again, his expression—surprise, this time—was like a tantalizing snatch of familiar song half remembered. It was a warm, comforting memory with no trace of fear to it, and Pierrette abruptly decided to do something perhaps unwise.

As she knelt by the quickening fire, she reached to the back of her neck, and loosened the thong that bound her hair. She pulled the length of it from beneath her tunic, then shook her head. Long swirls of rich, black hair tumbled about her shoulders.

She grinned as Alkides' eyes widened further still. "There's much about me you wouldn't have suspected."

He squatted across the tiny hearth. "Why have you done that? You were safe from me, when I thought you were a boy."

"I think I'm safe from you anyway. I trust you—don't ask me why. I just do. I didn't want to deceive you."

"Now I see you so differently," he said, amazed. "How could I have thought you a scruffy youth? Was it a spell?"

Was it? Somewhere, a long time ago—as if it had happened to another Pierrette entirely—she had told Cletus that "Little girls don't use magic." But was that so? Even as a child, had she used more than a physical deception to maintain her boyish semblance?

"What you see now is real," she said. But was it? Was she? Was he? Doubts and depression flooded over her. Was anything "real"? Was reality a mad girl dying on the slopes of Sainte Baume, her cold body untenanted? Was*Ma* real, or was the sacred grove only a gully where shade and moisture allowed foreign beeches and maples to grow in a dry land? Or did the madness have even deeper roots, in a strange girl-child of five whose mother had been killed almost before her eyes?

"What's wrong?" Alkides swiftly knelt with a protective arm about her shoulder. She was like a sponge, absorbing the warmth and comfort of that human touch, real or insane illusion. She now knew why he seemed familiar. Only two men had held her so. Not her father, who always distanced himself, uncomfortable with her resemblance to Elen, his dead wife. Only Aam, the golden man of her girlish daydreams, whom she had at last met by a shore now uncounted thousands of years ago beneath the sea. Only Minho, the sorcerer-king, who had begged her to stay with him, whose single kiss had been

hot on her lips. . . .

Two men, both met within spells like this one, that had thrust her into a remote past when even Greeks were only beginning to explore lands beyond their own inhospitable peninsula, their scattered islands. Two men, and now a third, Alkides, who was no more real than his predecessors. She hid her face in her hands, and wept for all that was not, or might not be. She wept for her own helplessness, for the terror that Cunotar represented, consumed by the hideous spirit of the Eater of Gods, and for the bleak emptiness, the soulless desolation, of the Black Time. Above all, she wept because she could not determine whether even her worst fears were real, or only an insane girl's imaginings—the Eater of Gods representing the little-girl terrors of her mother's murder, the Black Time her personal distress.

She must have spoken aloud. "This is real," Alkides murmured, now holding her close, wiping away her tears with a big, calloused finger. "You are real," he said, running a broad hand up her back. She quivered, and not with fear. She felt his hardness against her stomach, the thumping of his heart, with her ear pressed against his chest. He turned his head and bent down toward her, and she lifted her face for his kiss.

It was madness. She knew it, but she did not care. This was what she had forsaken to follow the goddess's wishes—her womanhood, her very self. "No!" she pushed against his chest with both hands. "I can't! I must not."

"You want this," he murmured, his broad hands covering her buttocks, lifting her against him.

"I do! Please, no. Stop. Put me down."

His whole body shivered . . . and she felt his hands loosen. "You must tell me," he said softly. He let her slip all the way to her knees, and he knelt beside her. His hand trembled as he laid a small branch on the fire.

She told him of*Ma* , of the prophecies of Yan Oors and Guihen: "Follow this path, and be doomed to wander forever, never knowing hearth or husband, with never a child at your breast . . ." All that, she gave up—to become a sorceress. All that, to save the world of forest sprites and old magics from the devastation wrought by scholars' writings, magic-destroying machines, and world-spanning religions whose precepts were the greatest spells of all. . . .

Alkides waved a hand in front of her face, bringing her out of her monologue. "Did the goddess command you not to have fun?" he asked. "Did she say `never enjoy yourself or you'll not become a sorceress, no matter how many spells you learn'?"

*Ma*had not. "We humans can't always do what we think the gods want," he reflected. "It suffices to do what they command. And when those commands leave room for human cleverness . . . we have to outwit them."

"I don't understand."

"Come here," he said, pulling her onto his lap. She did not resist. Why did she trust him—because, before, he had stopped when she pushed him away? His hand slid up the bare skin of her back, lifting her tunic. She felt warm firelight on her exposed breasts. "You must remain a virgin," he murmured, cupping a breast and leaning down to it. "But that is just the kind of technicality gods depend upon . . . and virgin you will remain."

He carried her to the goatskin hut, and she watched as he unfastened his leather kilt. She stared, fascinated, not quite frightened, at his manhood. "We need not prick your bubble to enjoy what your goddess never denied you," he murmured as he knelt to remove her boy's trousers, and to explore what he discovered beneath them. . . .

Chapter 13 - Lovers

"I'm hungry," Alkides said, beside her. She giggled. "Yes, that too, but I mean, for food."

"We don't have any."

"We have a goat, and it's time to sacrifice her." He pointed skyward. "It's two hours to dawn. Enough time to burn a goat for Zeus, and to have a morsel or two ourselves."

Pierrette's limbs trembled. Was it reaction to all the amazing sensations her body had given her, through that long night, or had the earth itself trembled when he uttered the name of the king of his gods?

She watched as he livened their fire's embers with dry twigs, and as he laid broken branches atop them. He loosened the goat's tether, and lifted the doomed animal by its hind legs. It bleated protests. A long-bladed bronze knife gleamed. "Zeus aid me!" he bellowed, further terrifying the suspended goat. "Show those unbelieving Ligures your anger, and those Gauls too." He sounded as if he really didn't believe Pierrette's story about the Gauls, but had appended that phrase just in case.

"Send them a sign of your might, so they'll let me and my cattle pass by." Pierrette glanced uneasily around, as if an angry god might actually appear. Alkides's words rang with conviction, as might hers, speaking not with a terrifying male deity, but with*Ma* , whom she knew so well.

"Help me, Zeus, and I'll sacrifice the first calf sired by the black bulls to you." He slashed the knife across the goat's throat. Blood gouted. The animal thrashed, and then hung still.

"Soon, we'll eat!" he said, grinning at Pierrette. He dressed out the goat with quick, expert passes of his knife, then butchered it, separating a long, flaccid tenderloin from among the bloody muscles. "For us," he said, "and the rest for the god."

He added substantial branches to the fire and, when they ignited, he laid the goat atop them. He stretched the tenderloins in a spiral around green sticks, which he pushed into the ground close to the fire. The goat crackled and spat as tongues of flame enveloped it, and the air filled with a delicious aroma.

Pierrette had never sacrificed to a god. She was not sure such things were not just superstition. She argued with*Ma* , or begged, but Alkides's Zeus was no elderly earth spirit, and Zeus had not been there, face-to-face with him.

"You don't think it will work, do you?" Alkides took her hand in his bloody one. "Here. Feel." He pressed her palm against the ground. Again she felt the tremor, the faint quivering, like a dove held in her hand.

"What is that?"

"Zeus, answering me."

"But I felt the vibration*before* you killed the goat," she said hesitantly, not wanting to deflate his confidence, but not wanting to be taken for a fool, either.

He grinned toothily. "I think Zeus planned to help me even before I asked him. Sometimes, just knowing what a god is going to do anyway is better than asking him for something."

He turned the meat-stick. One side already gleamed crisply with drippings. Then he turned to her. She smiled at how a man's body gave away his thoughts. She reached out for him, and took possession of her newfound toy. . . .

* * *

"Are you still a virgin?" he asked, some time later.

"I don't feel like one," she replied, stretching languorously, limbs all soft and warm, the aches and tensions gone. She could hardly bring herself to worry that dawn's light was creeping up the eastern sky, and that the men just across the river were surely awake and preparing to ford it.

She basked in the fire's warmth, and in Alkides's admiring gaze—no less intense for all the ways he had taught her to sate him. And she was no less a virgin, for all the pleasures he had given her—for all the ways they had thwarted the intent of ancient magic's rule, without violating the letter of it. She returned his gaze, enjoying the play of muscles, the interaction of their ripples with old scars—and wondering how he had gotten those.

"I suppose we should get dressed," he said. "If Zeus is being a good fellow today, we'll want to watch—and if not, we should be ready to run." He didn't seem to care any more than she did. How could two bodies so pacify the racing, fearful minds within? She felt . . . invulnerable.

The very act of putting on her clothing and tying back her hair, of becoming a "boy" again, made her feel less so. Always before, being a boy made her feel less threatened, stronger, but now she did not. Naked she had felt . . . like*Ma* herself.

"We have to drive the cattle away," Alkides said. "If Zeus decides to act on my plea, I don't want them to stampede or scatter." They harried the herd northward, away from the river, waving leafy branches at them and occasionally striking the laggards.

Returning to the camp, they rolled up the tent and ate the last crackly morsels of meat. Alkides put his hand to the ground. "Come on. Let's see what they're up to."

The river looked higher than the night before, and seemed to fill more of its gravelly bed. "The spring snow-melt has begun in the mountains," Alkides said. That surprised Pierrette, because it had not been springtime when she left Citharista to begin her unlucky journey. It was only another example of the unpredictability or imprecision of the spell. If she had taken time to pursue her studies in the direction she had been going, she might have had a solution to that problem.

The Gauls were testing the water to find the best crossing. "I hope it's too deep," Pierrette said.

"Not me!" Alkides responded. "They could still keep me from reaching the Alps. In fact, I've a mind to encourage them to cross. Come on!" He led her—pulled her—to the edge of the bank, where they were in plain sight. Cunotar spotted them first, and raised a cry, urging his men onward into the untested waters. Pierrette trembled so hard the ground seem to shake beneath her feet. The blood roared in her ears, like surf in a storm.

"They're crossing!" she hissed, trying to pull away, to flee—but Alkides's grip on her wrist was like an iron shackle. Why didn't he let her go? The leading Gaul was almost across, and the rest were following close behind. Cunotar was waving his sword.

The first Gaul goaded his horse up the slope the cattle had trodden, but he slid back, and a sizable clump of soil went with him. Pierrette clung to Alkides's arm, shaking like a leaf in a breeze. Two more horsemen were across, riding along the bank, seeking a way up.

"Now!" Alkides exclaimed—but she could hardly hear him, for the roaring in her ears. She could hardly hear the cries of the Gauls, either. The noise was not in her ears alone. The ground was shaking like a beaten drumhead. One Gaul drove his horse up the bank, which collapsed under the struggling hooves. Man, horse, dirt, and cobbles tumbled back. Cunotar's cries were inarticulate rage, swept away by the tumult. Several Gauls turned their panicked horses downstream, and spurred them to a gallop.

And then she saw it—a towering, brown wall: tumbling water, uprooted trees, even great rocks taller than a man on horseback, higher than a house, filling the valley from one bank to the other. Her feet danced unwillingly on the shaking ground.

The rushing water came faster than horse could run, or bird fly. It reached the first Gauls, curling like the crest of a great wave, and . . . they were gone. Cunotar alone stood firm, his angry cries drowned by the roar that battered Pierrette's ears. A great, branched tree thrust from the mass water-wall just as it swept Cunotar's horse's feet out from under it, and she saw the*dryade* raised high above the torrent, skewered on sharp, broken wood. Man, tree, and roiling water sped ahead, overwhelming the remaining horses. Behind the rushing front, the valley brimmed full and brown, a moving lake that tore at the bank where Pierrette and Alkides stood.

"We have to get farther back!" She hardly heard Alkides, but she understood. They scrambled away from the edge, and uphill. The roaring lessened, but the ground still shook. A huge chunk of the bank where they had stood ripped loose, tumbled, and broke up in the churning water. They climbed farther before turning to look again. Far out on the marshy plain, almost at the edge of vision, the flood spread in a fan, white where it boiled over and around the stones its initial rush had thrown down. Beneath their hill, the river subsided slightly, and enormous rapids foamed over boulders that now filled the channel. The rush of water was still loud, but no longer overwhelming.

"Zeus heard me!" Alkides yelled in her ear.

Pierrette made a face at him. Zeus—or only a terrible springtime flood? Alkides grinned, and led her away. She glanced back anxiously—could anyone have survived? She did not think so.

They found the cattle a half mile further on, still together. "Let's camp there," Alkides said, pointing at a sheltered hollow. Though the day was bright and sunny, the wind had become chill. "It'll be a few days before the upland streams are crossable."

Did he assume she was going with him? While they made camp and gathered firewood, and cut soft boughs for a bed, she considered that. Where was she going, anyway? What could she do, when she got

there? She had fulfilled the goddess's vision: she had sat in converse with *dryades* in Hreaclea, and had freed the captive souls in their *nemeton* . There were ninety-nine fewer *fantômes* than there had been.

But it was not Teutomalos alone who had spoken with the *dryades* of Heraclea. And he had not spoken with the *dryades* of Heraclea only. She had mapped a hundred *oppida* , Gaulish cities. There might be as many as ten thousand *fantômes* in all. There were surely towns and temples not recorded in Anselm's scrolls.

So what good had she done? What possible difference had she made? She could not burn every *nemeton* from the Atlantic to the Alps—and as far beyond them as the river Danu flowed, to the Euxine Sea, the extent of the Gaulish lands. Her success was a single raindrop in an ocean, and signified nothing. It would take some great, all-encompassing spell to do more, a spell uttered at just the right moment. And she knew neither the spell nor the moment . . .

Or did she? But just as she reached for that idea, Alkides interrupted her thoughts. "You're daydreaming! Aren't you hungry? I saved us a bit of the goat." She sighed. Later, there would be time to think, to remember.

* * *

"Zeus didn't save us," she said. The sun had set, the moon risen, and Alkides had just put a fresh wrist-thick branch on the fire, which lapped hungrily at it. "The flood would have come one way or another."

"But it came. Sometimes it's wise to know what the gods intend to do, and to get out of the way of it as we did—as those Ligures did not."

They found wild onions growing in a hollow, and edible tubers to make a tasty stew. They ate well, and then she was sleepy. But when they settled atop their springy boughs, Alkides had other ideas than sleep . . . and his enthusiasm was catching. Though far less skilled than he, she was an apt student, and when her hand found his manhood, she felt a wondrous sense of power that she could control this huge man with a touch of her fingers, her lips . . . as if he were the stallion, and she the rider, putting her great powerful mount through its paces. . . .

Later, it was his turn, and when he let loose her reins, she was sure she whinnied like any other mare. Oh yes, there were so many ways around the will of gods and goddesses—and each time Alkides again rose to her insistence touches, she was determined to discover one more. . . .

* * *

The next day Alkides caught two rabbits, one in a snare, the other with a well-thrown rock. There was no urgency to move on. During the long hours while Alkides foraged or tended his cattle, she had time to think, to decide what she would do—and to think on other things as well. "When we loved on the Plain of Stones," Minho had said to her. She had been confused at the time. It had been only a dream, because she was young, and had loved no one. She thought she understood that now—time was not immutable, and the sorcerer-king had not been speaking of her past, but of his.

The only thing wrong with that idea was that the man she had loved here had not been Minho, but Alkides. She quivered, remembering a particular intimate detail she had discovered just last night . . . but she knew no such things about Minho. Would he have responded in just the same way to her probing touches, to her sly, curious experimentation? And would he have known her in like manner? Minho was dark, not red. She had never seen him naked. She could only imagine.

She turned her mind to the other discrepancy—the "Plain of Stones" itself. In her own time, the Crau was indeed stony—and now she knew why. No single act of a god had flung the stones there. Hundreds of springtime floods had done that, creating a broad delta. She had gone back to the river during the day, and had seen how the floodwaters had spread mud and stone in a great fan—and how, even now, the lessening flow wound among the stones, carrying the mud away. Indeed, by summer's end, the result would be a small "plain of stones," that would grow in future years.

Clever Alkides. He had crossed the mountains before, and had seen the melting fields of snow, the ice dams in the high valleys, and had known that there would be a flood. He had led his Ligure pursuers a merry chase, keeping them in the valley, in the flood's path, always with an eye to the nearest high ground for himself and his cattle. And he was probably not the only one to have used that trick—or who would use it. This time there were no survivors or companions to record the tale, but in some future time there would be. Someone would catch his enemy in a flood, out on a much-grown plain of stones, and the legend of Zeus and Herakles would be born, to be told for thousands of years. She herself had heard the tale from Caius the boatman, a year ago—or a thousand years in the future.

* * *

The tent skins were rolled, the cattle already spread out on the trail east toward the far Alps. "Are you sure you won't come with me?" Alkides pleaded one last time.

Pierrette fingered the coin she had found tied in the seam of her tunic—the coin Doreta had given her in the cave. She was surprised to find it was shiny and new, on one side a face, on the other the image of a woman on horseback. Was it Epona, goddess of horses? "A goddess gave me this coin, to pay a boatman," she said, "and the river Rhodanus lies west of here."

"I saw no boatmen when I crossed it," he replied.

"There will be one when I get there." Only after saying that did she realize her unintentional pun.*When* she got there.

He reached out for her with both arms, but she turned her face from his kiss. The time for that was over now. She had no regrets, and wonderful memories, but those lay in a past now behind her, to which no spell would allow her to return.

A strange, puzzled expression crossed Alkides's face. "What?" she asked.

"I was going to say . . . `I'll see you again, when I am king—and you will share my throne.' But I'm not a king. I'm a cattleman."

"Perhaps you were a king, for a moment, and I your queen. And if you find a throne, I'll be happy for you," she said. Then she shook her head. "But I must go—and you must catch up with your cows, before they stray." She turned, and walked away. She promised herself she would not look back—but each time that she did, until Alkides was out of sight, he did too, and he waved at her. Each time, her tears blurred the image of him. The last time she looked, she couldn't see him wave, she only felt that he had. Then she saw only the brown blot of his herd against a green hillside, and at last, nothing at all.

* * *

The landing where she remembered a boatman, years before, was where the*Fossae Marianae* , the Roman Canal, came close to the Rhodanus, the great river that drained Provence and lands beyond. How far away was she? Fifteen miles? Twenty? The canal would not yet be dug, nor would Arelate, the city it served, be built. The very ground it would be dug through might not yet exist, because it was silty

delta soil that Rhodanus laid down in springtime and took away again at season's end as the centuries passed.

Rivers changed their beds, too. The flooding stream that bore the rocks that in her day would pave the Crau plain was the Druentia—but in her future, the Druentia did not empty into the sea at all. It wound northward and joined Rhodanus at Avennio, Avignon. Now, her crossing place might still be open ocean.

But she remembered how it would be, someday . . . "*Mondradd in Mon*," she whispered as she walked. "*Borabd orá perdó*. Far ahead was a glimmer of water—open water that would in some later time be the Camargue, a broad tangle of channels, lagoons, and reeds. "*Merdrabd or vern, arfaht ará camdó*."

She trudged wearily. Had her nights of play with Alkides drained her? A frightening thought occurred: what if he had been wrong? What if her magic, unlike his capricious gods, did not depend upon the exact letter of the rule, but upon the intent of its wielder? Of her virginity, so long guarded, only a technicality remained. In spirit, she was no more virginal than any prostitute lurking in the old amphitheater in Massalia.

Would the spell still work? Or had she trapped herself in this ancient age, deluded by Alkides's clever persuasion and her own desires? She trudged on. Surely she had gone several miles by now, and the water looked no nearer. But her very fatigue was reassuring: she was still on dry land. When she stumbled over a half-exposed stone she became elated, because the river floods had not come this far in Alkides's day.

When the western sky reddened, and the sun lowered itself below the flat horizon, she made a rude shelter of tamarisk branches, and lit a small fire. When the spark leaped from her fingertip to the tinder, she was again reassured: she was not entirely without magic. She dozed, but with no food in her stomach, real sleep eluded her. When the moon at last arose, she began walking again. When the morning sun's rays made her shadow stretch out in front of her, she rested again, but not long. Now thirst drove her. The rocky ground was bone dry, desert dry. . . . Rocky? When had that happened? She had not noticed. But it was a good sign. A gray line marked the horizon. A cloud? A fog bank? No—trees! She picked up her pace, heedless of stubbed toes. Trees. Willows and poplars. It was the tall, lush growth that lined the*fossa* and Rhodanus's banks. Thirstily, she scrambled down the canal's bank. The old Roman stone was half buried, overgrown, as only centuries of neglect could make it. If not her own time, it was at least long past the Romans' day. The water was brackish. She rinsed her mouth and spat it out. The river itself would be fresher. It was there, just over the far bank, a hundred paces farther on.

She waded into the great stream, and knelt to splash handsful of cold water into her mouth, onto her face. She felt with her toes beneath broad-leaved water plants for their starchy tubers, and collected a dozen. She pulled several tangy wild onions. A stilt-legged bird strutted and chattered angrily. She found the nest it could not defend—and several creamy, brown-flecked eggs.

Hungry as she was, she restrained herself. She lit a fire atop a flat stone. She crushed the tubers between two rocks, added the onions to the paste, and broke several small eggs over them. She made them into patties, and when her fire had burned down, she brushed the ashes away and baked them on the stone. Then she went to the river's edge again, and drank.

The sun was warm. When her belly was full, she was tempted to nap, but instead she looked upriver and down. Which way? There was only one place where river and canal were this close together. If she went upstream and the distance widened, and she found no ferryman, she would only have to retrace a half-hour walk. So: upstream.

It was not far. The landing was laid with cobbles. There were no boats, so she sat down to wait. She would have to hire passage downstream. She now had a destination. It had not come to her all at once, while she sported with Alkides, but when she had faced the conclusion that she could not destroy all the *fantômes* ' heads in all the*oppida* in Gaul, she had sorted through what she knew, especially the histories, and had found what she wanted: the specific, well-defined turning point where she might—only might—be able to make a crucial difference. . . . But she had to get there first, and that would not be easy.

First, she had to get to Massalia. She rubbed Doreta's coin between thumb and forefinger. It was no longer shiny. It was even more worn than when she had received it—as worn as it should be, hundreds of years after that. Then she was sure she was truly back in her own time.

* * *

The first boat coming downriver was heaped high with bales of hides. It kept to midstream, and did not stop when she waved. The second was a smaller, lighter craft.

"I'll take you as far as the river's mouth," the boatman agreed. "After that, you're on your own. A galley stops there every once in a while, and there's an inn where you can wait for it. My father owns it."

He bit her coin. "That's silver all right. I can't take that, not for a trip that I'm making anyway—and going downstream, I don't even have to row. You can break it at the inn, and I'll take my share then." She had worried how to stretch her single coin to cover her voyage. Now the problem was solved.

* * *

She stayed at the inn for two days, until a coasting galley put in at the stone wharf. Its passengers were two priests from Saintes-Maries, the seaside shrine where Magdalen and the other Christian saints had landed in Provence long ago. The priests' destination was Saint Victor's Abbey in Massalia, where Saint Lazarus was buried, having lived out his second life as bishop of that town.

Before boarding the galley, she put on her skirt, her shawl, and a warm, serviceable blouse given her by the innkeeper's wife. She had no money left, and she had guessed—rightly—that the galley's captain would be more likely to trust a woman than a man. She promised him she could get more money from friends when she arrived in Massalia.

They departed at dawn. A fisherman's daughter, she loved the sea, and though the drumbeat and rhythmic surging of oars was far less pleasant than the tight-lashed thrumming of sails and rigging, the leap and plunge of a small boat on a close reach, the miles flowed steadily beneath the galley's shallow keel, with no thought for the fairness of the winds, and they pulled into the stone-lined port of Massalia just as the sun was setting.

Her eyes greedily scanned the waterfront, examining every detail she could remember—the broken shutter of a yellow stone house, the placement of drying racks for fish nets, even the styles and colors of clothing worn by a group of wealthy wives haggling over fresh-caught fish.

She repressed her urge to kneel and kiss the worn stones of the wharf. She was home, truly home. Not in Citharista, but home in her own time, her own unchanged world. And she was not, definitely not, asleep or dying outside a cave many miles away, linked by a tenuous thread of life force that might snap and leave her trapped.

Alkides had been right—the gods could be fooled. The rational nature of spells demanded adherence to

the letter of their expression, not the intent of their makers. By the definition of her age, she was virgin still, and*Mondradd in Mon* had brought her home.

Part Three - Vocavi

Do even gods ask themselves "Why can I do this, and not that?" They might better retire to some quiet place amid books and scrolls containing the wisdom of the ages, and winnow through the chaff of theology and natural philosophy for their answers. One such answer, they might discover, is that they themselves are only images of men grown large, so what men can do, they can do more so, but what no man can do, they cannot.

Otho, Bishop of Nemausus

The Sorceress's Tale

Chapter 14 - A New Destination

Pierrette's Journal

The Eater of Gods consumed Cernunnos when the Christian bishops declared him Satan's avatar, and he took for his own the magics of the small places—
the holy springs, caves, trees, and crossroads—when the priests declared them evil. The more things the ruling Church rejects as evil, the stronger its adversary becomes.
How ironic then, that the likes of Muhammad abd' Ullah ibn Saul, as skeptical of priests, popes, and saints as he is of pagan gods, demons, and the souls of rocks and trees, may be the morsels that most upset the Evil One's digestion. How can he consume them, who don't believe he exists, without ingesting a meal of self-doubt? The thought gives me a bit of comfort in this uncomfortable world.
Another comfort: I am now convinced that the spell*Mondradd in Mon* is indeed variable. When*Ma* first showed me the past, I was acutely aware of the thread that bound me to my sleeping body, still in the sacred grove. But each time I have used the spell that awareness has lessened, and now is entirely gone. If I am right, that I am indeed physically present here in Massalia, in ibn Saul's house, in my own time, having travelled here in two different eras, then I must have been physically present in those times, and thus no unconscious body was left behind on the slope of Sainte Baume.
My conjecture is testable. I need only find the mason Cerdos, or Ferdiad, and ask what became of me . .

. if I dare return to Saint Cassien's, if I win this match with the Eater of Gods. Or, if I make a distinctive mark in some secret place, in the distant past, a sign that will endure the years until this, my own time, and if I rediscover it, my physical presence in that past time will be proved, for a soul travelling outside its body can make no physical mark in a world that is, after all, as insubstantial as a dream.
As for the cause of the spell's "improvement," there are three candidates. Either the spell itself is now stronger, for reasons unclear, or the setbacks the Church—and its Adversary—have suffered have allowed a resurgence in the strengths of all ancient magics, which I can verify experimentally. Lastly, my own skill as a sorceress may have improved. Of course it might not be easy to distinguish between the latter two possibilities unless other wielders of ancient lore have also experienced improvements in their strengths. Yan Oors or Guihen?
Whatever the reason for the change, I am cautiously optimistic. And the "experiment" I will propose to Master ibn Saul may shed light on it.

* * *

The scholar Muhammad abd' Ullah ibn Saul was a friend of her master Anselm's. He would happily pay the galley crewman who dogged her heels in the narrow streets. But that raised a problem. Ibn Saul and his household knew her as Piers, a boy. Even so, the scholar had on one occasion hinted that—as Piers was as pretty as a girl—he would not be displeased to expand the nature of their acquaintance. But the galley's men knew her as a woman.

If she arrived on his doorstep as a woman, would that be less awkward or more? She instead had herself rowed to the south shore of the harbor and to another familiar, friendly doorway—the nunnery where her sister Marie lived. She often stayed there when their father Gilles brought his catch to Massalia to sell.

"Pierrette!" Sister Marthe hesitated before lifting the door's bar. Several of the nuns disapproved of her, because she was unbaptized and never attended Mass when she visited. They did not understand why Mother Sophia Maria was so friendly with her. "You won't be able to see Marie," Marthe said, sniffing disdainfully.

Pierrette grinned. "Is she in trouble again? What is it this time?" Marie was firm in her determination to adhere to her vows, but she had a mischievous streak.

"Mother can tell you, if she wants to. Come in." She frowned at the sailor. "You'll have to wait outside."

"I'll be back shortly," Pierrette told him. He was uncomfortable letting her out of his sight until he had coin in hand—but what choice was there?

"Child, come here," said Mother Sophia, spreading her arms wide. "You look so pretty, in that dress." Pierrette bathed in that warm, uncritical affection, so like—and unlike—what she had felt from . . . Alkides. Shortly later, the abbess sent Marthe with coin to pay the sailor. "Now let's talk. What have you been up to?"

"If I were Christian," Pierrette said when they were alone, "I think I would have much to confess. . . ."

* * *

Abbess Sophia Maria was a good Christian, but she was as much a child of Provence as was Pierrette. Old blood flowed in her veins, and she was no stranger to old ways and beliefs. Besides, she had long ago decided there was no great evil in the child.

Even the nature of Pierrette's magic, in this Christian city, lent itself to that conclusion, for magic changed,

and here only Christian magic existed. From the Estaque hills to the northwest, the Etoile range on the northeast, and the rocky highlands on the east and southeast, it was all the same.

Here, Pierrette's fire-making spell evoked no flame, only a clear, pure white light. "Saint Mary's light," the abbess called it. Only clear Christian purpose could call it forth, and then only in the presence of some holy relic, like that rude crucifix a martyred saint had made in his prison cell. . . .

Mother Sophia requested the rich fish stew Pierrette loved, and they dined privately in her austere chamber. Unhesitatingly, Pierrette told her what brought her there.

"It's as I've told you all along," Mother Sophia said. "Whatever you think you are, you serve a Christian purpose. Were Rome never to exist, this would be a pagan land. If indeed you stem this pagan blight, you will have served the Church."

Pierrette was not so sure. Always before, she had perceived Christianity as the antithesis of magic, created by a good God whose alter ego collected and consumed all the old gods the church rejected. But she could not disagree that the Gaulish alternative, the world of*fantômes* enslaved by Teutomalos's evil empire, was far worse. And it seemed that the Eater of Gods must agree—that a Christian world, for all the forest sprites and small gods of springs, lakes, trees, and caves whom the church had fed him, was less satisfying. Pierrette's problem was that though she knew it, she could not understand why.

* * *

In the morning, well freshened—because Marie had maintained a solitary vigil, penance for her unmentioned transgression, and had not been able to keep Pierrette up all night talking—Pierrette set out around the harbor to the city gate. She was again dressed as a boy. By the time she arrived the vast market square, the old Roman forum, was already crowded. She pushed through to ibn Saul's quiet street.

Lovi, the scholar's Frankish apprentice, let her in—with his usual truculent, disapproving frown. He had never liked her. She suspected that was because his master liked her all too well. Was he simply jealous? She had never given him cause.

Ibn Saul was tall, with a beaky nose and hooded eyelids. Was he a Moor, a Jew, or something else? Ambiguity, he claimed, aided him in his travels among foreigners. "A chameleon," Pierrette had once called him. Now he seemed fluttery and excited. Several leather and canvas bags were stacked in his courtyard.

"Are you leaving soon?" Pierrette asked. "Where are you bound?"

"Gades," he replied. "I'm looking for the city of silver, the biblical Tarshish."

"Tartessos," she mused. "I've heard that it sank in the mud of the Baetis's delta. Are you going to dig for treasure?"

"Knowledge is treasure. I think the ancient city drifted away, and did not sink."

Then she understood what he was seeking. Cities did not "drift away"—but magical islands might, islands not bound to the bedrock beneath them. And behind all the tales of such mysterious drifting islands was one reality alone: the Fortunate Isles. King Minho's realm. But if the scholar found them, he would write about them. He would explain how they came to be, in some extraordinary—but entirely natural—cataclysm. His reasoned explanations would nullify the magic of Minho, because they would be

a greater spell than his.

And if the Fortunate Isles became ordinary rocks imbedded in the ocean floor, then what of Minho, shorn of his ancient magic? What then of his promise to marry her? Scholars' successes gnawed at the very structure of her world, and brought the End closer, when no magic would be left.

"But what brings you here, all out of breath?" he asked. "What exciting news have you? Does Anselm thrive?"

Pierrette thought quickly. Could she use ibn Saul's skepticism for her own ends? Better still, could she distract him from his quest for the Isles with a promise of an even more fascinating challenge? "I have an experiment to propose," she said. "And a wager for you."

That piqued his curiosity. "Go on."

"If there is indeed more to our existence than can be observed and explained—if there are indeed paradoxes that only gods and magic can explain, then I will prove it to you. If you accept that, it's prize enough for me. If I can't show you such a thing—then I'll become your apprentice, and will exert all my efforts in helping you find the Fortunate Isles."

He smiled broadly. "One single experiment? You'll risk everything on it? What can it be?"

"I'll need access to your library, master. The experiment deals with the nature of time itself. I propose to use a spell to visit the long ago, and to change something that happened then. When I return, I'll bring proof—written in your own hand—of the change." She refused to say more, until she had consulted his sources. She had little fear that the creeping changes in her own history books, in the fading of Anselm's Virgil, would have spread within this bastion of skepticism and reason.

She chuckled quietly at that thought, which sent other ideas tumbling through her head. "May I have a sheet of vellum or parchment, Master ibn Saul? And the use of pens and ink? I brought none with me, and I haven't kept up the journal I promised Master Anselm I would write."

* * *

Ibn Saul's library rivaled Anselm's, and had an additional advantage: it was organized. Each scroll was catalogued by subject and author, and the shelves were neatly labeled. Pierrette had no trouble finding what she wanted. She explained her thesis to the scholar.

The siege of Entremont was the critical event. The Romans, at the request of their Massilian Greek allies, sent troops into Gaul. When Entremont fell, in her universe, the rest of the Gallic and Ligurian strongholds soon collapsed as well. With that event, Rome took the first step toward empire.

The land became Provincia, "the Province," and two decades later, when the Teutons and their allies invaded, Marius could defeat them, because he had home bases at Glanum and Aquae Sextiae. Rome's hold on Provence would be secure.

With that security, with almost unlimited resources for his legions, Julius Caesar could feasibly venture north from Provence into the "Three Gauls," and then across the channel to Britain.

One hundred and fifty years after the fall of Entremont, the saints, among them Magdalen, Lazarus, Martha, and Jesus' two elderly aunties, Mary Salome and Mary Jacoba—would come to Provence because, far from being a remote outpost of Rome, it was the new heart of the burgeoning empire, and

the words of their teacher were aimed in every way at the heart, not the head. Their missions would bear fruit, and Provence would become a Christian land.

"Entremont fell in 127 B.C.," Pierrette said, pointing at the passage that confirmed it. Ibn Saul made a note of that on his vellum. That, though he didn't know it yet, was the essence of the experiment—he was to write every step of their way in his own distinctive hand, one copy for him, and one for Pierrette. Ibn Saul listed the critical events, and Pierrette confirmed their correctness:

* * *

134 B.C.: Heraclea's massive walls are completed by

the Greek architect Enakles.

133 B.C.: Massilia requests Roma's aid

132 B.C.: Fulvius Flaccus besieges Heraclea, and subsequently captures it—and several lesser

oppida of the Gallo-Ligurian confederacy.

130 B.C.: Fulvius Flaccus is accorded a triumph in

Rome.

129 B.C.: C. Sextius Calvinus, at Massilia's request,

besieges Entremont, the surviving major

stronghold of the Gauls and Ligures.

127 B.C.: Entremont falls.

125 B.C.: Aquae Sextiae Salluviorum becomes the first

capital of the Roman Province.

104 B.C.: Marius has a canal dug from Arelate to the

sea.

102 B.C.: Marius defeats the Teutons at the foot of

Montagne Sainte Victoire.

55 B.C.: Julius Caesar secures the northlands as far

as the Rhine and Britain.

* * *

"Now that we have settled that, Master ibn Saul, will you take my copy? I'd like you to continue writing everything that we do, in your own words."

"May I ask why?"

"Because at some time hence, I'll want to show it to you. If I'm right, you'll have a difficult time believing what you wrote. Perhaps you might also write, in an obscure way no one else would understand, of some past event that only you know of. That way, when you read it, you'll know no other person could have written it."

"I confess bewilderment. Do you expect me to forget my own writings? I'm far from a doddering old man, you know."

"Write that also. Write your doubts about what I hope to do."

"And what—if I may ask—is that?"

"If indeed there is magic, and it is not just delusion as you believe . . . if indeed the spell I'll utter transports me to some past time where I'm able to change the course of events in some way, then you, here and now, will be part of the changed history that results. Only if you read of the other `history' that no longer exists—written in your own hand, and containing references only you could know—will you be able to believe what you read."

The scholar grinned. "I think I see where this is leading," he said, "but there's a flaw you haven't addressed: what if the changes wipe clean the slate? What if, in that world, I am no scholar but a shepherd—or if I am never born, because my parents never meet?"

"If I come back, and if the historic events we've listed are even substantially the same, that will mean I have thwarted whatever, or whoever, is trying to change the history you and I know, and I will have succeeded—even if I can't rub your nose in my victory."

* * *

Pierrette explained that she needed a place, a particular place, to speak the spell's words. It had to be near enough to Entremont that she could get there and back again even in a world long past, much different, and in the middle of a war. And it had to be unchanged in this time from the way it was then. Ibn Saul suggested several places, but Pierrette rejected them for one reason or another. Then his eyes brightened. "I have just the place!" he explained. "The baths of Aquae Sextiae. It's not a long trip, and if all this proves to be nonsense, as I suspect it will, I'll still be mostly packed and ready for my own expedition, with only a few weeks lost."

When Calvinus built his camp by the hot springs, in 128, he laid down streets and dug fortifications that included the springs within them. His battle-weary troops could thus enjoy the restoring water without leaving their safe haven. And in those days, ibn Saul explained, there had been a Gaulish fane over one spring, sacred to Madrona, the Mother.

"It's still there today," he said. "The Roman engineers incorporated it into their baths—a single room now, out of many, but in a more ancient style. If what you wish happens, you'll be able to walk into the bath in this time, and out the other side into another—not that I hold out much hope of that of course."

It was settled then. Again, Pierrette reflected, she would set out for the source of the*fantômes* , the city that was the center of their infestation—but this time in the company of a man whose unbelief in such ghosts was so ingrained that they might pass right through him without disturbing the fabric wrapped about his head, or the oily curls of his beard. At least she hoped so. Maybe this time she would actually

reach her destination. . . .

Chapter 15 - Parting the Veil of Years

Pierrette's Journal

One of my first hints of the nature of the Black Time was that in the vicinity of salt mills, spells failed. Later, I formulated the "Law of Locks," that states that machines of all sorts bend reality in direct proportion to the product of their complexity and mass. But machines are not the only works of man that shape the supernatural. I should have figured that out much sooner. All the evidence had been long in front of me.

* * *

The road from Massilia to Aquae Sextiae Salluviorum had been a trail between villages in 600 B.C., when the Greek traders established their emporium. It rapidly became a cart track as far as Entremont, then a gravel road. The*via principalis* that bisected the Roman camp, later Aquae Sextiae, was a segment of it. A generation after Calvinus's victory over the Gauls, it was paved with stone. Centuries of use had worn ruts in the Roman slabs and rounded their once smooth-fitting edges, but the road was far from worn out, and its influence upon the land was undiminished, as Pierrette would soon discover.

Seven miles beyond Massalia's north gate was a village called "The Seventh," after the milestone in the town square, an impressive square pillar that listed designer, architect, and the consul who had financed the road—actually who had financed the stone surfacing, a few culverts, and a causeway where the old road had skirted a marsh—but the Romans had never been averse to taking entire credit for work they had merely put the finish on.

The first seven miles were the easy ones. Pierrette and ibn Saul strode ahead, engaged in their plans, and Lovi trudged behind in the company of an inarticulate donkey, his scowl deepening every mile. Was the boy Piers the apprentice, and he relegated permanently to this menial role?

The day was sunny, the clouds few and white, the sky intensely blue. The air was dry and cool, and walking a pleasure. But Pierrette's eyes crept often to the shadows of rocks and brush, as if sinister creatures lurked within them. She observed southbound travellers with an eye to the details of their clothing and demeanor: that carter's faded cloak—was it once a Celtic plaid? Was that glitter a priest's bronze pectoral, or the gold of a Gaulish torque?

But everything seemed normal. By the time they reached Milles, "The Thousand," a village whose name meant simply "milestone," they were only three miles from Aquae Sextiae, and there was no trace of the changes she had felt, seen, and experienced on her last attempt to reach the city. That should have been reassuring, but it was not entirely so: either the destruction of the*fantômes* of Heraclea had weakened the

Gaulish "invasion," or the presence of skeptical ibn Saul suppressed its manifestations, or she was as delusional as the scholar suspected. There was no way to tell.

Beyond Milles were stands of old forest, orchards, and small fields on relatively flat ground. "Let's rest in the shade," suggested ibn Saul. "Better still, let's camp for the night, and approach the gates of Aquae Sextiae at dawn."

When they had gathered a meager heap of firewood and a few pats of cattle dung, Pierrette lit tinder with subvocalized words and a wave of her finger.

"Someday I'll figure out how you do that," the scholar said.

"I hope not," Pierrette rejoined. Of course he took that to mean she didn't want him to discover the trick behind it—but there was none, and if he found the truth, he wouldn't believe it. If he "explained it away," then wrote his explanation, the spell would no longer work. Given enough men like him, no magics would work, as long as their writings survived.

That reflection did nothing to ease Pierrette's troubled mind, because the failure of all magics meant the arrival of the Black Time, when everything was hard and mechanical. Her success could only be reached by one narrow, twisting path, but several great roads led to that dark Beginning and End. . . .

Ibn Saul seemed beset by uneasiness of his own, and Lovi as well. Though hours remained until dusk, they crowded close by the fire. "What's that?" Lovi whispered, eyeing the shadows beneath scrubby trees. "Something's watching us." For once, ibn Saul did not laugh at him.

Pierrette felt it too—as if the trees themselves had eyes, and dark, brooding spirits within. It was not an unfamiliar sensation. She eyed her companions, almost expecting to see an ornately convoluted Gaulish fibula where Lovi's simple cloak pin pierced his garment. . . .

She got up. The road, fifty paces away, was indistinct . . . almost as if it were not Roman stone, but a Gaulish cart track once more . . . but no. There were the worn slabs, only concealed by the grass on the verge. The uneasy sensations faded as she stepped out on them, solidly grounded in their long centuries of existence.

"Let's move our camp nearer the road," she said shortly later, picking up their firewood. "No telling what thieves might creep up on us, here."

Both her companions scrambled to comply. Lovi dragged the donkey's wicker panniers, and ibn Saul raked coals and smoldering dung into their single pot, then rebuilt the fire at their new campsite. "This is much better," he said, squatting.

It was, but only Pierrette knew why. The*fantômes* were not gone. The encroachment of that other history, begun long ago, had not ceased. Only the road, written in a different reality, resisted the change. Only the heavy permanence of stones cut by Roman hands, worn down by Roman feet and wheels, endured. Beyond it, in the magical shadows of ancient trees, there was nothing to anchor them to that comfortable existence.

It was a long and uncomfortable night, and no one slept well. Pierrette lay awake, pondering the nature of roads. She pictured the land as a fisherman's net. The great roads, like the Via Tiberia, that stretched across Provence from Iberia all the way to Roma, were the main strands, and the tracks and trails the finer reticulations.

That gave her an idea. She got up, and stepped toward the road. "Where are you going?" Lovi muttered.

"I thought I heard someone coming," she lied. She muttered her firemaking spell, but the dry tinder remained unlit. Of course. Roads, locks, and salt mills bound the elements in one form: earth remained earth, air air, and water wet—and none could be transmuted into . . . fire. Like mountain divides and rivers, well-made roads fixed the nature of things as they were. Unlike their natural counterparts though, roads were built and it was the builders' reality they supported.

She felt better. She had resented being forced to leave her studies in Anselm's keep, on a hopeless mission. She had thought the answers to her questions, true mastery of her profession, would be found in her mentor's books, scrolls, and maps. But she had seen the maps, the fine lines of roads, and had overlooked what they meant.*Ma* had been right. The answers lay not in the books but in what they portrayed.

It was a long night indeed, but her racing mind saw her through it. By sunrise, she felt as alert as if she had slept.

* * *

"What are you writing?" Pierrette asked the scholar.

"I'm saying what a miserable night I had. You want me to write everything, don't you? I saw no Gaulish ghosts, no capering horned forest gods or apparitions, but even among the savage Wends I never spent a worse night. Perhaps there's something to what you told me."

"There is," she agreed. "And it's important for you not to stray far from the road and from other great works of man unless you want to discover more of it than you wish to." For once, the ordinarily skeptical ibn Saul did not raise an eyebrow or smile condescendingly at her innocent superstition.

* * ** * *

Aquae Sextiae Salluviorum. The locals called it "Aix," contracting the three words into one syllable. It was indeed a magnificent place, though smaller than Massalia. They entered via the south gate into a street lined with fine, tall stone houses that stood shoulder to shoulder, their doors and shutters gaily painted, the cobbles swept clean.

"This way," ibn Saul said, picking a narrow street leading northward. "Once these avenues were straight, but there's hardly a trace of the Roman camp's layout now. But ahead, by the basilica and baths, the old *via praetoria* hasn't been built over."

In the forecourt of the cathedral stood a fountain. Pierrette rushed forward to drink. "It's hot!" she exclaimed.

Lovi laughed. "Now you know why they built the town here: hot baths for even the poorest servant." But the fountain was not a bath. Pierrette glanced around herself.

"This way," the scholar said again, taking a narrow street Pierrette had thought was someone's doorway.

The Roman baths might have been magnificent, before dozens of houses had been built right up against them. Now the fine old marble walls were hidden behind other buildings, probably plastered over. Only a patch of dull veined stone was exposed, at both sides of a pair of wide oaken doors. They tied the

donkey to a stone post, under the watchful eye of the bath's doorkeeper, whom ibn Saul paid a small coin.

Inside, though . . . the curving limbs of a vast, barrel-vaulted ceiling disappeared in darkness that flickering oil lamps could not dispel. Their voices echoed in the towering emptiness. Fat, polished columns streaked with rich red crystals—porphyry, ibn Saul said—marched in long rows, and where they ended, daylight glowed. Separate bathing chambers lay behind doors in the shadowy recesses between columns.

Ibn Saul brushed off a solicitous attendant, slipping him a copper. "The old sanctuary stands in the courtyard ahead," he said.

Several steps led down to the court, which was well below the level of the building and the streets outside. "I suspect this was the original ground level," he said. "The present town is built on the rubble of generations past."

The Gaulish temple had been designed, Pierrette decided, by Etruscans. Originally it had been simply a roof supported on six square columns, but subsequently those bays had been infilled with rougher stonework, perhaps to provide privacy that the original Roman bathers had not required. The end nearest them had a heavy door.

Pierrette scuffed her feet. That pavement was not sandstone, but bedrock, the oldest floor of all—the earth itself. That, more than anything, convinced her that the shrine built on it was indeed ancient.

"There is an identical door at the other end," said ibn Saul. Pierrette walked around the little building, no larger than five by ten paces.

This, she decided, was perfect. "Now you must catch up on your writing," she said. "The account—both copies—must be complete right up to the moment I go inside." The scholar sat on the steps up to the more recent baths, and spread fresh vellum on his writing-board. He scratched rapidly, eager to find out what would happen next or eager to win their wager, and prove her to be mad.

Pierrette pushed the heavy door open. "Are we ready?"

"Lovi is watching the other door, so you can't sneak out," ibn Saul confirmed. "Here is your copy, which, like mine, is up to this moment. Only the door closing after you has not been written."

Pierrette took the sheaf of documents and rolled them. "Good-bye then." She stepped into the fane, and pulled the door shut.

* * *

"Lovi?"

"I'm here, master. I'm watching the door. Has Piers gone in?"

"He has."

"How long must we wait here? I'm hungry."

"I agreed to wait before opening either door. Then, if Piers isn't there, we'll wait a month to see if he returns. Now be silent. I wouldn't want him to argue that his magic failed because your complaining

distracted him, when it's time to pay off."

* * *

Inside the small fane, Pierrette heard their words. But now both were silent. Enough light crept in under the door to see that there were benches along both walls and a rectangular pool of steaming water in the center, cut into the bedrock itself.

Would this work? Nervously, Pierrette murmured the spell*Mondradd in Mon* , envisioning a time when this fane stood alone, just inside the dirt berm and wooden parapet of a Roman camp. . . .

How could she tell? Would the stone-filled column bays be suddenly open to the glory of summer sunshine? Always, the transition was gradual, deceptive. She reached for her pouch. There. A brown, dried mushroom taken from Belisama's cave. A pinch of dried flowers, once yellow and blue. She ate, and sat on a bench to wait. At Sainte Baume, and on the Crau plain, she had not needed such aid, but this was a more difficult endeavor, and if anything could help . . .

Time passed slowly, and Pierrette felt a sense of wrongness: there had surely been no benches in the original Gallic fane. She got up. The steam from the pool failed to obscure the wooden seats' sharp outlines. She sighed.

"Is it noon yet?" asked Lovi, outside. This was not going to work. The skeptical presences of the scholar and his apprentice were as good as a counterspell.

"Shut up until I say you may speak. Only minutes have passed." Ibn Saul sounded annoyed.

Pierrette shifted from one foot to the other. The steam made her feel drowsy. She eyed the pool. Why not? Setting her bundle of clothing and vellum on the stone pavement, she undressed and eased into the warm water. Ah!

Her aches melted away. Sweat sprang to her brow. She shut her eyes, and leaned back, resting her head on the stone rim. It felt soft as a pillow. . . .

* * *

"You'd better get dressed, girl," someone said. "They'll be back any time."

"What . . . who?" Pierrette said. Billows of steam rose from her skin. She wiped sweat from her eyelids. "*Ma*?" she gasped. "Belisama?"

"Call me what you will, child. But get dried off, and quickly. You don't want to be here, and naked, when half a legion returns from the siege."

"The siege? Then I did it! I'm . . . here."

"Of course you are. If you weren't, I wouldn't be urging you to hurry and be somewhere else."

"No—I mean, I'm . . . in the fane inside the Roman camp. Not in the baths, in Aquae Sextiae."

"I don't know what you're talking about. Figure it out later. Here." The woman held out Pierrette's tunic. She took it, and pulled it on.

The woman looked middle-aged. There was a resemblance to the goddess*Ma* —who sometimes

appeared old, sometimes not—but it was more of a family resemblance than anything else. Was there once indeed a goddess, a spirit, for every pool and source? Not just one, who appeared wherever she wished? She wore a crimson dress with a bright border embroidery of gold and yellow threads, and a gold torque's bulging ends almost met between her collarbones. Her black hair was bound with a crimson scarf.

She handed Pierrette her*bracae* , and frowned in distaste. "You're pretty. It's a shame to hide the mother's gift under man's clothing."

"It's served me well. But I have a skirt in that bundle."

"You'd best wear it now. There are Celt women in the camp, but no urchin boys. In trousers, they'll think you a spy."

Pierrette put the skirt over her trousers, and draped a plain, light woolen mantle over her shirt. "Better?"

"It will do. Now go."

Pierrette had a dozen questions, but the woman was adamant. "You'll have answers in good time. But not now. Go."

Pierrette stood in front of the door, afraid to open it. What would really be there, on the other side? Then she noticed that the wood was raw and new—and that it was not even the same door. It was made of roughly split planks. And the walls . . . the mortar between the rude infilling of stones was new and white. She pulled the door open.

* * *

"Lovi! It's noon. Are you ready?"

"I could eat a goat—an old buck. I'm so hungry."

"Then open your door. I'm opening this one." Ibn Saul gave the door a push. He peered into the steamy gloom. Then light flared as Lovi opened the other door.

"Where is he, master?"

"He didn't slip by you? You're sure?"

"I'm sure. He is not here. How did he get out?"

"I can't say." Ibn Saul circled the pool, waving away steam to peer into the water. No Piers. And he wasn't under the benches. "Examine the walls for loose stones," he ordered Lovi. "Wiggle them all."

"Can't it wait until after we eat?"

"We'll eat when I'm satisfied there's no way from this building except those two doors."

While Lovi examined the walls, ibn Saul pried at stone flags with his dagger. There were no loose ones. At last he stood straight, and rubbed his back. "That's that," he said. "The boy's won half his wager. We'll see if he can win the other half." He hefted his roll of documents. There was no possibility that Piers would win that bet.

Chapter 16 - A Familiar Face

There were no pillared public baths. There were no other buildings all, only neat rows of Roman tents, fenced corrals, and great stacks of wood. The fane stood in the northwest corner of the camp. The amount of open space disconcerted Pierrette. She had expected the camp to be crowded, a huddled confusion of men, tents, and stacked arms, all within close-pressing walls. But the neat rows of tents, the nearest ones hundreds of feet from where she stood, were exactly as the historians had described them. She had thought they idealized Roman precision and discipline, but it was not so.

The Romans' settlement was both like and unlike what she had expected from her readings. It was much more orderly than a merchant caravan camp. With its watchtowers, it was more permanent than the camps Julius Caesar described, set up in an afternoon, with an outer ditch, a berm heaped up from the dirt removed from it, and atop that a palisade of stakes the troops had carried on the march. Of course this was a*castra stativa* , a long-term siege camp, not an overnight fortification, and she suspected that troops in the camp had to be kept busy somehow.

Nearby, several uncovered pools—natural hot springs—steamed in low spots, and clothing fluttered from cords strung on poles. These were not sacred pools—they were laundries. Women in plain, brown clothing bustled about. No one paid Pierrette any attention.

The women's speech was Gaulish. Whores, she thought. Local women who found it more rewarding to serve the Roman legionnaires than their kinsmen in the beleaguered*oppidum* . She was glad she had changed clothing.

No one paid heed to one more camp follower with a bundle of clothing. Ibn Saul's writings were now hidden in her parcel. Could she just walk out the gate? She eyed the two heavy timber towers set at a break in the berm and palisade. Beyond lay the freedom of the countryside—and on one of those hills, only a few miles away . . . was Entremont. She caught a glimpse of a red-clad soldier atop one tower.

She decided to watch to see if others went in and out freely. After all, this was a military camp, not an ordinary village. There—she could sit by that stack of firewood unnoticed. She tossed her bundle down and sat on it, then leaned back and pretended to sleep.

Something felt subtly wrong. Just as she had felt unseen eyes upon her outside Heraclea's walls, she felt them now. It was not a hateful stare, but someone was watching her—and whoever it was, he was close by. She could not see anyone, but she felt it—a frustrated, impatient presence, as if her own presence there was an inconvenience. As if she should have found some other place to be inconspicuous in.

But there was nowhere else she could have hidden. So where was the invisible watcher? The woodpile was a heap of assorted logs and branches, piled there when the soldiers had cleared the campsite. It had been there a while, because a clump of woodbine sent tendrils up it. The tips of the vine had buds that were fresh and green, which told her she had arrived in the very early spring. But the greenery was hardly thick enough for someone to hide within. . . .

She gasped. Not within. The watcher*was* the clump of vines. As she stared at it, it wavered, shimmering. "Guihen!" Leaves, tendrils, and shadows coalesced, and there, right next to her, was a familiar figure indeed. "What are you doing here?

He did not look happy to be recognized. "You can see me? What are you—a witch?"

"Of course I can see you. Your spell never fooled me for long—even when I was a little girl." Didn't he recognize her? Why did he look so frightened? "Aren't you happy to see me?"

"Should I be? You steal my hiding place, then peel my deception away . . . happy? Who are you anyway?"

He truly didn't know her. Then she realized why. This was not the Guihen she knew. This was a much younger Guihen, who would not meet her . . . for centuries. With a rush, understanding came. She remembered how confused she had been, as a little girl, when the sprite said he had known her before, when she was a pretty woman, a sorceress with fire and lightning at her fingertips. . . . She had not been grown-up at all, not then. The situation had been much like this, but reversed: then Guihen had been the one who remembered, and she had not.

"Don't be afraid," she said softly, putting a hand on his skinny green-clad knee. His clothing was simpler than it would be centuries hence—plain wool, not linen and silver. His shoes were ordinary leather, not shiny stuff sewn with tiny silver bells. She knew why. The weight of people's beliefs was like a physical pressure that forced reality to conform to it. As the past receded, surviving memories made ambitious boys into heroes, and heroes into gods—and surviving relics like Guihen were force-fit to their new images. If Christianity became a universal creed, Guihen would become an altar boy who did only good deeds. If the*fantômes* triumphed . . . She shuddered at the thought. But that had not happened yet. "You may not know me now, but you will. Someday we'll be great friends. You will care for me when I'm a little girl, and you are old and wise."

Her words made no more sense to him than she should have expected, but he seemed to believe her. They were indeed a sorceress's words, or an oracle's—they meant more than was apparent, and there was hidden truth in their seeming nonsense. So this was why the great oracles' words always confused and misled. They made sense to her, because she had seen . . . the future. With that realization, a chill raced up and down her body, and goose bumps covered her arms. The future! Now, at last, she understood.

Divination spells failed miserably, because they could only look backward on the broken Wheel of Time. Before the Wheel had been broken, at the very dawn of remembered history, the future lay open to the seers, because it lay beyond the furthest past. This was how oracles broke the rules. They did not look into the future. They*were* in the past—their own past—and what others perceived as future was not, for the oracle.

"Why are you staring like that?" asked the young Guihen uneasily.

"I just figured something out. Something that I needed to know. How oracles do it. And I am not just a masc—a common witch. I am a sorceress. And I'm here to save you from . . ." From what? How could she explain, without again sounding as mysterious as an oracle? " . . . from the end of the world."

She sighed. This was not easy. "I know you don't understand. I'll try to explain, later—but now I have to get out of here. I have to get to Entremont."

He also sighed gustily. "Why didn't you say so? So must I. But if those soldiers see a chokevine walking through that gate . . ."

"Can't you just walk out?"

"They'll think I'm a spy. Only the whores can go in and out freely. Of course I am a spy, I suppose, but not for those crazy*dryadeae* up the hill."

"Never mind that now," she said. "Maybe we can help each other get out." Quickly, they sketched out a plan.

* * *

Boy and young woman strode confidently to the gate, as if they had every reason to be there, Pierrette clutching a stolen wooden bowl. The towers, she observed, were new, their bark freshly peeled. "Halt!" the sentry grated. "Where do you think you're going?"

"My brother has found a patch of raspberries," Pierrette said in a confidential tone. A berry patch in the vicinity of the camp—where everything had been heavily foraged—would indeed be a secret worth keeping. "Shall I pick a few for you?" She did not think that raspberries would be in season here, but would a Roman from Italia know that?

"Raspberries? I haven't tasted them since . . . but I don't recognize you."

"I'm Sequana, centurion Marcus Varro's woman." They had chosen two common names, and there were many centurions in an army the size of Calvinus's.

The sentry grinned. "Make sure you save me a bowlful of berries. I'm on duty until sunset. Be back before then." He waved them through the gate.

* * *

They headed eastward on the well-beaten, rutted track that led toward the besieged*oppidum* . "The Romans don't have Entremont locked up tight," Guihen said. "They would not allow a wagonload of grain to get past them, but we can evade them easily enough, if you can climb a bit. . . ." His eyes brushed her long skirt. She lifted the hem, revealing her calf-length trousers. "I'll manage," she said, grinning.

Like all the hills in that part of Provence, the heights upon which Entremont stood were cliffs on the south, and sloped gradually to the north. The cliff made an abrupt bend to the north at its westward end, diminishing in height as it went. In all, the*oppidum* was shaped like an east-pointing arrowhead, one edge the high south cliffs, the other a series of small escarpments bounding the north, and the base of the triangle the western cliff. The highest point was at the southwest, a roughly square enclosure, the old citadel. The west and most of the north were protected by thick stone walls with square towers. The half of the arrow nearest the east "point" was the low town, recent buildings housing mostly artisans, refugees, and foreign traders.

Much of the surrounding countryside was forest or abandoned fields gone to scrub. The Roman observation posts, Guihen explained, were concentrated in three groups opposite the town gates—the commercial east gate into the low town, the main portal on the west, and posterns or sally ports in the north wall and at the top of a steep path down the south cliff. That trail from the south portal, said Guihen, was sheltered by stretches of wall that protected a spring gushing near the cliff base, the town's only source of water besides cisterns for rainwater. "There the Romans stay well back, beyond the reach of arrows from the cliff top."

He led her through a dense copse where they had to crawl on all fours. Just downhill, Pierrette heard men's voices and the stamping of tethered horses. "Romans," Guihen whispered.

They reached a stone wall hardly high enough to keep sheep from straying. Crawling behind it, they ascended the rubble slope to the cliff. Everything was thickly overgrown, the rocks and wall covered with vines, saplings, and lichen. No one had used this route in some time—perhaps since the siege began. So soon after the winter rains, she supposed all the cisterns were full.

When they reached steps cut in the cliff, they halted. Below were the Romans. There were no signs of activity. Lazy smoke rose where a dozen men sprawled, helmets off. Some slept, and others played a game with dice.

"Why aren't they fighting—or at least ready to?" Pierrette whispered

"It's a siege, not a battle. When food runs low in the city, and the cisterns run dry, maybe there'll be a fight. Why should the Romans waste men against these cliffs, or the walls and towers above, when hunger will do their work for them?"

"You don't like them, do you?"

"Romans? Why would I? They're invaders, friends of the Greeks. When they conquer a place, they never let go of it. Everywhere, they've driven us Ligures into the hills, and they water their oxen at our sacred pools. Look what they did to the Boii when they overran the valley of the Padus.

"The Boii are Celts—Gauls like the Salluvii and the others up there in the town. Why do you care?"

"Celts have been around for centuries. We get along. But the Romans . . ."

"Don't you care*how* they beat the Romans then? Does victory justify any means at all?"

"What you mean?" The young Ligure would not meet her eyes.

"I think you know."

He shrugged. "Some kind of magic. Gaulish magic. I don't know much about it."

"I do. If they succeed, nothing will ever be the same."

"The end of the world? That's what you said before."

"I meant it too—the end of gods and goddesses, sacred pools and sunny skies, and of people like you, too."

"Like me? Ligures, you mean?"

"Is that all you are? Just another backwoods boy? Shall I tell you what you will become—unless the Gauls of Entremont succeed, of course."

He was hooked. She gestured for him to sit beside her. They would have to wait until dark anyway, to scale the stairway to the gate above, or risk being shot at by Romans and Gauls alike.

"Several centuries from now," Pierrette said portentously, "the name `Guihen' will be known by everyone in Provence. . . ."

Chapter 17 - Changing Magics

"I'm not sure I believe you," he said, "but when we're safely inside, I'll introduce you to Kraton, who favors the Roman cause. He used to be a big man among the Gauls, but the*dryadeae* have pretty much discredited him."

Kraton, he explained, didn't think the Gauls could win against Roma. For a century, ever since the Battle of Telemon, Celts of every tribe had been defeated by Roman arms and Roman discipline. Why should Entremont be different? Kraton believed they should give the Romans the trade and military corridor along the coast that they wanted—ally with them, and get rich selling them the amber, furs, tin, and wheat that came down River Rhodanus. If nothing else, a treaty would give the Gauls time to unite. The Salyen League that held Entremont, comprised of several tribes, was a start, but unless the hundreds of Gaulish tribes got together, an army under one leader, they could not defeat Roma.

"But the*dryadeaes* ' magic has given people hope," Guihen concluded. "Now Kraton and his family live in a hovel in the low town, in disgrace—so I don't know what he can do for you."

* * *

"Who comes?" growled an unseen guard at the gate above. Pierrette and Guihen were halfway up the rough staircase.

"Guihen, and a friend. Put your sword back in its sheath, Tomaros."

"Come out where I can see your ugly face, boy. Then I'll decide where to sheath what." Guihen laughed, as if at an old, familiar joke. Pierrette was disconcerted by what sounded like a sexual allusion—she thought she knew the Guihen of her day. Just how different was this Guihen? Different—or had the ages not yet passed all but obscured the early roots of the Guihen she knew?

The big, yellow-haired warrior passed them through into the southwesternmost corner of the low town. "Kraton won't be asleep yet," said Guihen. "Perhaps he'll let us rest on his floor."

"I'm not tired."

"I understand. But in this town, people don't go out after dark. I'm sure you know why."

"I think I know all too well. Will we be safe from whatever roams the night?"

"No one seems to notice me, unless I want them to. Perhaps I'm indeed learning some of the true

magical skills you say I'll have someday."

"Perhaps so. Does Kraton have any chickens—perhaps a white hen?"

"A white hen?"

"Never mind. That's another story I haven't told yet."

* * *

Kraton's house in the low town was not that rude—no more so than Pierrette's father's two-room stone house. Nor was it crowded—the houses of Entremont were mostly two stories, with several rooms off an upstairs hallway that was gained by a stairway from the street.

Kraton was not in when they arrived, but his wife, Chiomara, welcomed Guihen and his friend. She was small for a Celt, and dark-haired, though shot now with gray. "My husband will be happy to meet you," she told Pierrette, "though the name Veleda will not endear you to the*dryadeae* ."

Pierrette wondered why, and Chiomara seemed surprised she did not know. "A priestess of Veleda burned the*nemeton* of Heraclea ten years ago. The*dryadeae* say that if the Romans had attacked then, Heraclea would have fallen despite its new walls."

"Ten years ago?" Pierrette felt a sudden inner chill. Then this was not 127 B.C., but 124—and if Heraclea still stood, then history had already changed. What had gone wrong?

"You look pale. Here. Sit. I'll brew a restorative tea. Aurinia—bring the poor girl one of those honey cakes." Aurinia, Kraton's only unmarried daughter, was as golden as her name. Her unbound blond tresses swirled about her shoulders as she scurried to obey.

"Forgive me," Pierrette said. "Sometimes the burden of seeing ahead is confusing—when what is and what might have been swirl about in my head . . . I hope you won't think me mad if I ask you some strange questions. . . ."

* * *

Fulvius Flaccus had not, in this history, landed at the Rhodanus's mouth and captured Heraclea five years ago. He had come overland from the east instead, and had besieged Entremont. The pro-Roman faction led by Kraton reached an agreement with Flaccus short of abject surrender, and the legions departed, leaving only a garrison—and, of course, the usual flock of Roman, Phoenician, and Greek merchants who had followed in the legions' wake.

But the*vergobret* Teutomalos, the high magistrate of Entremont, gathered warriors and slew the garrison and many merchants. He formed a new council, composed entirely of his sycophants, acting upon the advice of a foreign*dryade* from the west country, who seemed to have him under a spell.

Then, less than a moon ago, the new consul, Calvinus, had fought his way up the Argentia and to Entremont . . . and so things stood.

How had she, Pierrette, arrived so much later than she had planned? She had passed through the fane, envisioning the Roman camp—a gridiron pattern of white tents. . . . Of course. She had not attempted to pass through to a specific time, but to a circumstance: a Roman camp new enough to have no permanent structures, only tents, a trench, and the wooden palisade. And that was now, not four years ago.

Pierrette tried to shrug off her despair when Aurinia brought small, heavy biscuits and tea that smelled of chamomile, lavender, and some vaguely familiar mint. She heard a baby crying, and Aurinia smiled. "Onomaris will be annoyed," she said. "The baby kept her up until moonset, and now he's waking at dawn." Onomaris was Kraton's eldest daughter. Overhead, Pierrette heard heavy, angry footsteps.

The door to the street swung open. "Aurinia! Go pacify your sister, will you?" A big man stood there. Then he saw Pierrette and Guihen. "What's this? How did such a skinny, big-eared fellow latch onto such a pretty girl?" His broad grin lifted the corners of his bushy gray mustache. Kraton. Despite his age, he was an imposing man, broad shouldered and with no trace of a bulge beneath his tightly belted tunic.

Chiomara patted the bench next to her. "Come, sit. Onomaris's breast has pacified the child already."

"And she's not my sister, father. The baby is my niece."

"I meant you to pacify Onomaris, not the baby," Kraton said. "I heard her stomping, all the way out in the street."

"How are things in the king's house?" his wife asked.

Kraton's jovial mood evaporated. He glanced from Pierrette to Guihen, who nodded. "The*dryadeae* tell him what he wants to hear—that we'll defeat the Romans; they will leave, and never come back, and he'll rule over a hundred united tribes. What can I offer him compared to that?"

"His soul!" Pierrette blurted.

Kraton eyed her speculatively. "What are you talking about?"

"I think you know. The*dryadeae* are playing with magics that far surpass what they have learned even in a Great Year of training. Who is teaching them—and why?"

"How can you know about this? Only Teutomalos and his cronies know what they're doing. They tell the rest of us only that it will insure our victory over the Romans."

"That you may," Pierrette agreed. "But all things have a price. If they have not told you how they will accomplish their end, I'll wager they haven't explained what it will cost, or how long it will take to be paid."

Kraton laughed, a humorless bark. "I'd not take that wager. But you are a stranger here—how do you know so much? How did you find out what they're doing up there?"

"This is the seeress Petra, a devotee of Veleda," said Guihen. "She was at Heraclea when the*nemeton* burned."

"I didn't tell you that. . . ."

"You didn't have to," Guihen said. "Now your expression confirms it. You are that seeress."

Kraton was dubious. "That was ten years ago, and you are no older than Aurinia. Perhaps we should begin at the beginning. . . . Aurinia—*now*please assist Onomaris with the baby." The blond girl looked as if she would protest, decided against it, and stalked out. "I haven't told the rest of the family what little I know, or have deduced," Kraton explained. "If we survive the Romans' siege, there'll be time enough for

terrible dreams. Now tell me, seeress—what don't I know about this present nightmare?"

Pierrette told him, not exactly what the*dryadeae* were doing—which she did not know, for sure—but what the cost would be, to Kraton's generation and so many to follow, right down to the end of time. Kraton impressed her as no one's fool. He was a political man, not a*dryade* , yet he seemed to accept her incredible tale at face value—she had been born in a far future time, and had come back—twice, now—to set the course of events back on its proper path. "I am no seer," Kraton mused, "but even I can see that Roma and Gaul together can do great things. Roman discipline and Celtic brilliance would be a formidable combination, but this present consortium of Salyens, Vocontii, and Ligures is only a rabble held together by fear of Roma and worse—by their mutual complicity in perversion, the creation of unnatural*fantômes* ."

So. He knew that much. But he had said*unnaturalfantômes* . Pierrette realized that Kraton saw no harm in preserving the heads of honored Gaulish dead, or even those of noble enemies fairly slain—but her depiction of the slaughtered innocents in the valley north of Sainte Baume had shaken him.

"For hundreds of years," he mused, "even since Thales of Miletus, Greek thinkers have postulated a world where all that could be known would be, where all phenomena were understood, and gods were unnecessary. That, I think, is your original Black Time—when soulless devices labor, and lovely mysticism is gone. Yet dry and unpleasant as that might be, it is less terrible than this alternative." He gestured in a direction Pierrette thought was toward the upper town and the*nemeton* .

He peered at her beneath bushy eyebrows. "Are you willing to surrender to your vision of that world of soulless*machines* "—he used the word for a device Greeks used in their theaters, to simulate the appearance of a god on the stage—"rather than submit to this new Black Time where the machines embody the captured souls of children?"

Pierrette was not, but if it really came down to a choice . . . "I can't consider that now. One doom at a time is more than enough. I must convince your*dryadeae* to abandon their mad designs—or subvert them. Will you help?"

"Tell me what you want me to do."

"Find me a place to stay," she asked Kraton, "here, in the low town. I need to find out . . . how my skills . . . can be applied here, in this era."

"I know just the place. Vlasso the Boeotian won't be back until this . . . confusion ends. There's no trade with Entremont now—and too much risk for Greeks to remain."

When Kraton led her to her new domicile, the morning light was sweet and pleasant, the streets were busy, the air filled with delicious aromas of breakfasts cooking, as if there were no siege at all. Her new home was a two-room house, clean and spacious, with whitewashed plaster walls. Its door—and a single wide, wooden-grilled window—opened onto the narrow street. A rear room faced a tiny courtyard, whose far wall was of heavier stones. "Is that the town wall?" Pierrette asked, wondering how it could be defended, except by soldiers entering through her house.

Kraton pointed at the triangular wooden ladder a fathom wide at the base, a hand's span at the top. "See for yourself." Tucking her skirts up in her cincture, Pierrette climbed until she could see over the wall. Her gasp of surprise was Kraton's reward.

"I can see everything from here! There is the Roman camp." Now, for the first time, she could really get

an impression of it—and of the kind of men who occupied it. From this height and distance, the moat, the earthworks, and the palisade atop it were a thin line. The two wooden towers were as if made of twigs. The fane, in the corner nearest her, was a sand-speck yearning to be a pebble.

The camp was almost perfectly square, judging by the scale of objects Pierrette had seen at close hand. It had to be . . . almost a half mile on a side! Only a central area, a stretch just over a third of the overall width, was occupied by tents—specks so tiny they blurred into hair-fine lines, regular, even, geometrically precise lines, separated by straight streets and avenues. Such precision! It was no accident, no whim of the consul who had ordered it; Pierrette knew that everything was precisely measured, the streets exactly fifty or one hundred feet wide, the encampments of each maniple of troops exactly one hundred feet square, and that such camps were built as often as every single night, when the legions were on the march.

From the number of those squares—sixty, plus twenty half-squares—she knew that two full legions—eighty-four hundred men—were camped there. And she knew that open areas two hundred feet wide normally separated the tents from the outer fortifications. But the separations were far too wide. The vacant quarter where the fane stood should have been crowded with the tents of auxiliary troops—Gallic allies from the Padus Valley, Iberian Celts, and Massilians—and the rest of the blocks with Numidian or Iberian horsemen.

Now she understood why Calvinus had not immediately assaulted Entremont. The two bare legions were only half the normal force. Without his full strength, the Roman consul had only enough men to defend his own wooden walls, built overlarge for the additional troops that had not—yet—arrived.

Farther east, the rising sun made a great gray shadow of the white Mountain of Victory—but it was not called that, not yet. Marius's battle against the Teutons would not be fought there for decades—if at all. Between camp and mountain, on the farthest horizon, she caught a glimpse of water—the sea. Citharista. Was it even a village, now?

She climbed higher, then looked down. It was not a dizzying height like Anselm's keep, but the rough scree would make for a difficult assault. She need not fear Romans flinging themselves over the wall in the night.

Vlasso the Boeotian had simple tastes—his bed and his servant's were identical low bronze-footed platforms with canvas ticks, well-filled with sweet hay scented with thyme. There were bronze and clay cooking pots on a shelf, and a simple hearth on the flat roof, accessible via a hewn-log stair opposite the town wall.

Kraton set her small bundle and a wooden box of materials she had requested, and a basket with cheese, bread, and apples, in the front room. When he had departed, Pierrette turned to Guihen. "Is there a place people gather to talk?" she asked. "I've heard what Kraton has to say, but . . ."

"The marketplace!" He reached for the basket of food, and emptied it. "Here. We'll go shopping."

"All the shops I saw were shuttered," she said.

"You've only seen part of the traders quarter. Most of the Greeks and other foreigners left the city when the siege began—or were slain by Teutomalos's thugs, during the revolt, but just down this very street is an ale brewers nook where you'll hear plenty of talk."

Entremont, Pierrette guessed, was smaller in extent than either Citharista in her day or Heraclea, but

while the former was spotted with ruins and crumbling, vacant edifices, and the latter's homes were one- and two-story, here almost every tight block was two, even three stories high, especially those whose roofs she could see beyond the old bastions that enclosed the high town. There must be thousands of people.

"Since Teutomalos declared the high town off-limits to anyone who doesn't live there, or have business there," said Guihen, "merchants who don't want their trade cut in half have relocated below the wall." The alemaker's establishment was one such place. At a spot where the street widened slightly, the brewer had set two great wooden-staved barrels on trestles, and had arranged benches alongside. "He has to move those barrels whenever someone with a wagon wants to come through," Guihen remarked, "but with this siege, that's not too often now. Here—sit. I'll fetch us something to drink."

Indeed, as he had promised, there were plenty of customers. Women sat freely conversing with men. Their clothing was enough like Pierrette's that she didn't stand out, and some had Ligurian features and dark hair, so hers went unnoticed. The men's attire was mostly simple workingman's garb—plain kilts and tunics, earth-dyed. Only one elderly man wore a brightly dyed*sagus* , to ward off a chill no younger folk perceived. Waiting, Pierrette let their conversations flow around her. . . .

" . . . saw some Romans once," a bulky fellow with dusty bare feet was saying. "They were squat as toads. They even looked like them—no mustaches, just bare skin under their ugly noses."

"They shave everything," another man piped in. "It's lice—they never bathe, you know. They don't use soap. They just roll in the mud, then scrape it off with their funny little swords."

"Those cowards' blades?" exclaimed another, who but for the white streaks in his reddish hair, and his workman's kilt, might have been a warrior. "When they line up shoulder to shoulder, like Greeks, there's no way to swing a real sword at them."

"They don't fight like men," said the first speaker, "because they are gelded at birth. That makes them docile enough to stand in lines. But even oxen are dangerous, and if they bring up those elephants . . . they're big as houses, and they build wooden forts on their backs, and fill them with archers."

"My great-grandfather saw elephants once," said the old soldier. "Hannibal had a hundred of them—they're trained to play big war horns when they go into battle."

"Those are their teeth, you old fool!"

"Grandpa said they are horns," the other insisted. "They're louder than any you ever heard."

"Didn't you hear Teutomalos's speech last week? They're not beasts at all. They're demons that breed in the sewers of Roma."

"Dung demons or not," said a hard-faced man who wore a mail vest and a sword, "we need not fear them overmuch."

Just then, Guihen returned with tall beechwood flagons, creamy tan foam spilling over their lips, and Pierrette missed what was said next.

"What is that?" she exclaimed uneasily.

"This? Oh—this is*cervisia* —new ale, still working in the cask. Push your lips through the foam, like this

. . ."

Pierrette did not have such mobile lips, but she tried, burying her nose in the lush stuff. "It's like sea foam!" she cried. "But not salty."

"Hush! People will think you've never sipped ale before."

"Oh, sorry. I haven't, you know." She resolved to be more cautious. How could she have known about new ale? Not one of the writers of her age wrote about that. Her next words were quiet ones: "Do they really believe that Roman soldiers are castrated and that elephants are demons, hatched from dung in the sewers?"

"What stupid things do you think the Romans say about us?" he rejoined. "Besides, if people didn't believe them monsters they might start listening to Kraton and . . ."

Pierrette made an effort to sip her ale without sucking foam up her nose, and did not reply. Was that all there was to it—that it was easier to get men to fight a hideous, castrated, dung-demon enemy than other men like themselves?

Another thread of conversation caught her ear—two middle-aged women behind her on the next bench. "Teutomalos says we'll have our own demons, but I'm still afraid of what they're doing at the*nemeton* ," one whispered.

"I know—you can feel it, at night. And when the wind is right, the stink of turpentine . . ." As close as they were, almost leaning against Pierrette, she felt the other woman shudder. "When father came back from the battle for Arelate—when we took it from the Greeks—he brought a*stratigos* 's head. A general. It smelled like that for months, whenever the sun warmed it."

Pierrette suppressed her own shudder. She too knew the reek of hot cedar oil, and knew also what it signified. But had there been more than just distaste for the odor of the*dryades* ' preservatives in the woman's voice? Had it been fear—perhaps not the kind or degree of horror that Pierrette felt, remembering Heraclea, but fear, nonetheless, of what her city's priests were doing there in the closed high town?

There seemed to be little fear of the Romans who were camped below their citadel—as if the presence of the foreign army was only an impediment to trade. Why was that? These Gauls were not ignorant savages, despite fierce mustaches and rough talk—and many of them had surely fought Flaccus on the Argentia. Those men had to know how deadly was Roman discipline, how effective their*gladii* , those "cowards' blades," could be. Pierrette remembered that the Roman camp had seemed almost deserted. Had it purposefully been built almost larger than Calvinus's force could defend, in the expectation of reinforcements? Was the large open area a*campus martius* —or a corral for elephants? And why had the hard-faced Gallic soldier been so sure they were nothing to be feared? Did he know something the others did not?

At first strange and bubbly in her mouth, by the time she drank the last of her ale, Pierrette had come to enjoy its smooth coolness, less cloying than wine. "Let's visit some shops," she said, lifting her basket, "before the sun gets too low." They did so, but Pierrette did not purchase anything. She did not know what these Gauls used for a medium of exchange. She had not seen coins, nor had she observed how people had paid for their ale. There was so much she did not know.

When they returned to her new house, she felt the need to be alone for a while, and sent Guihen away.

"Just come back before it gets too dark," she admonished him.

* * *

Yes, there was much she did not know. Magic was not the same everywhere. People's beliefs shaped it. Religions, rituals, and the scribblings of scholars constrained it until, in her own time, few spells worked well or at all. Here, before the onset of Christianity or Islam, the rules were sure to be different—but in what way? She had to find out.

As a small child, defiantly mourning her mother's death by secretly experimenting with the powders and potions she had left behind, Pierrette had made light appear in a clay bowl, and when it overflowed, had captured it in a blue glass bottle. The spell she had used was Greek, ancient even now, and she had modified it, in her own time, because the old Greek elements—earth, air, fire, and water—were no longer valid. Air, fire, light, and water were fluids, but earth was not. She had changed the spell's wording as one might change a postulate in an unworkable geometric theorem—to reflect a changed reality . . . and the spell worked. How would it work here and now?

She laid bowls and materials on the bare, scrubbed table: a blue sapphire hitherto sewn in the hem of her tunic, the color of the summer sky; a faded vellum scrap with a pinch of crumbled mica; a brass bowl brimming with clear water from Vlasso's stone cistern. Sunlight from the courtyard streamed across the table. The water's surface shimmered. She sprinkled mica flakes on it, and murmured phrases in a forgotten language: " . . . mica glittering from the earth . . . sapphire light of summer sky . . . fluid water, fluid light . . . a brazen bowl to hold it." She held the sapphire in the sunbeam and repeated the words. Mica reflected the scattered blue light . . . but that was all. The rewritten spell didn't work.

What of the original? She poured the water on the courtyard's hard-packed dirt, and refilled the bowl. She dribbled pale green olive oil from a clay bottle's narrow neck into the water, and floated a pinch of lint on the shimmery oil. She ignited the makeshift wick with whispered words and a flick of her fingers. It burned first with a puff of white smoke, then darker, as the oil ignited. She murmured the light spell's most ancient version—memorized from an Egyptian papyrus, copied from a Hittite inscription that recorded an even older spell, created when the world was new. " . . . Oil by olive tree begotten . . . topaz, sun-shield's light . . . precious water, Earth's kind gift . . . brazen shield that crosses over . . ."

As she spoke, she held a yellow topaz in the sunbeam, and light filled the corners of the room, eliminating shadows, creating its own, all of which pointed away from the warm, yellow glow from the bowl—the sunlight of the high Anatolian plateau where the spell had once been spoken.

Success—of a sort. But what exact premise of the oldest spell was slightly different? She scribbled with a charred vine on the tabletop.

—Mica, light out of earth.

—Sapphire, of earth, captures the sky's light.

—The equation of two fluids' natures.

—Bronze bowl—irrelevant?

Then:

—Oil lamp's light, created from sunlight falling on earth, then released from it.

—Water, vital to the olive tree, sprung from earth.

—Brass or bronze: magic metal, first metal, the sun-god's glowing shield.

There was the difference. Not light as a fluid, a substance as tangible as mica, but light as process, the flow from sky-shield sun, through the soil like water, with water into the olive tree's roots, to emerge again as . . . oil, which with lint from earth-grown flax fibers recapitulated the warm sun of the spell's land of origin.

Could she refine her understanding of the change—light as a shifting, dynamic, all-beneficent stuff, only incidentally a fluid . . . There were many spells, many hours left in the long day, and scores of tiny packets, sacks, and clay vials supplied by Kraton and his helpful wife and daughters, or brought by Pierrette from Belisama's cave.

* * *

Guihen the Ligure peered into the window. The warm glow of sunset splashed into the front room beyond. Then he looked more carefully—the sun's vermilion light was in the west, but this light . . . it crawled like viscous oil across the floor, pooling in low spots, seeming to soak in where the packed soil was less hard. . . .

Quickly, he reached in and drew the heavy curtain, then slipped inside through the door. Could the eerie light still be seen from outside? Would anyone notice? Hardly anyone had been about when he left Kraton's house—such was the town's fear of the darkness and what walked there. Would roving *fantômes* ' spirits bother with this small street, near the furthest end of the low town, the "point" of the arrow?

There was Pierrette—asleep, her hand on her arms, slumped across the table amid a clutter of vials, bowls, spilled powders, and charcoal scrawls that covered the entire wooden surface. "Lady—awaken." He squeezed her shoulder. "Wake up! You must quench this light, before . . . someone . . . sees it."

Pierrette looked up, wide-eyed and startled. "What?" Outside, the courtyard was steeped in gloom, but here in the room, it was still day. She whispered strange words in a language the Ligure had never heard before—and the light faded. All that was left of it was a single twist of flaxen lint burning at the edge of a brass bowl.

Indeed the girl was a sorceress, the skinny youth marvelled. Did that mean everything else she had told him was true also? He hardly dared hope it—and as well, he feared it, because she had not come from a happy time, and the life she depicted for him, however long it might be, was no bed of sweet thyme or goose feathers.

"Have you found out what you need to know?" he asked. "Is it enough? If anyone but Kraton and his kin were to see all this, they'd surely tell the*dryadeae* , and . . ."

"I doubt anyone else will call, this late," she said, "but help me clean this up anyway. I must copy these notes before I dare wipe the table. Did you bring that papyrus or vellum I requested?"

He reached to his belt, and withdrew a thin cylinder. "This is all Kraton could find."

She unrolled it. There were two sheets, recently scrubbed clean with abrasive sandstone. "They'll do, if I write small, and use both sides."

* * *

The room was again as neat as Pierrette had found it. "You can't leave now," she told Guihen. "It's fully dark, and the moon won't rise for hours." How did she know that? Was she so in tune with the rhythms of earth and sky that she just knew? She was pointing at one of the beds. " . . . There," she said. "I'll take the other one." Guihen looked from one bed to the other, then at his hostess. Sleep with her . . . in this room? His mind filled with enticing, adolescent possibilities.

Almost subliminally he heard her murmur words he didn't quite catch. Then: What had he been thinking of? An image of a tiny black-haired child crossed his mind, a child whose face was tear-streaked and smeared with ashes, whose tiny trousers were torn and snagged.

He looked again at Pierrette, and though the earlier image was now gone, he could not imagine approaching her bed in the darkness. . . . The sudden, fierce protectiveness he felt toward her made him ashamed at the thought, and he felt dirty. "I'll pull my bed over here, by the door," he said abruptly. "If anyone comes, I'll . . ."

"Thank you," she said, smiling softly. She brushed his cheek with her fingers. "You have always been . . . will be? . . . my loyal protector."

* * *

Pierrette slept soundly, her breathing the merest whisper. Guihen, though he lay supine all night, did not sleep at all.

Chapter 18 - Growing Old

At last Pierrette was getting some answers to her questions—her magic would indeed be stronger here, if she could figure out how to use it. It was Guihen who, in her own time, had observed that the difference between a masc—a country witch—and a sorceress was the way they used spells. A masc knew one, or a few, and used them precisely as she'd learned them, each one like a simple refrain played on a bone flute.

A sorceress used spells like a Gallic band played music—drums a rhythmic background for pipes, harps, and voices, each incantation only a part of the whole. The sorceress created her magical symphonies as she needed them, from the volumes of simpler spells, incantations, potions, and rituals she knew.

In this age, the*dryades* had the advantage: they knew what applications of power worked, and how. Pierrette might be a stronger, more intuitive practitioner, but intuition needed sound understanding to work on. The spells she had examined and tested yesterday gave her a feel for the magic of this age and place, but they were small spells. She did not dare try greater ones here. The*dryades* would surely sense them, and would catch her unprepared. She had to avoid a direct confrontation. There had to be another way.

There was much she had to find out. How far along were the*dryades* in their creation of*fantômes* ? With ten years to have recovered from the destruction at Heraclea, she would have thought everything would have been done and over by now. . . . "I have to talk to Kraton," she told Guihen.

* * *

Heraclea, Kraton told her, had been a greater blow to Teutomalos's designs than Pierrette could have hoped. When the*nemeton* burned, the*dryades* lost much prestige, and the Greek contingent in the town gained proportionately. The Herakleon, the Greek masons' temple, still stood, and the god of the Greeks had gained many converts within the great city walls Herakles's adherents had built.

With the burning of the preserved heads, an unrealized pall had been lifted from Heraclea, said Kraton. The sunlight seemed to shine more brightly now, the air to be fresher, without the taint no one had consciously noticed before. The winter rains tasted purer, even after months in the cisterns, and no green scum grew on the water. Several wondrous harvests had followed, and though the*dryades* Ortagion, Sinatros, and Ambioros had tried to take credit for those, they had had little success.

Cunotar had not returned, and without his malign influence, his travels between the towns of the Salyen league promoting Teutomalos's hideous plan, those efforts had foundered—until recently.

None of that, Pierrette suspected, was part of the history she had learned, but she did not think it had any place in the Gallic history that underlay the "future" she had walked into, while trying to get to Aquae Sextiae that first time, either. Had her intervention at Heraclea created yet another potential sequence of events, a third "future"?

Pierrette's head swam with confused, conflicting possibilities—one history where Roma had laid the foundations for its empire by defeating the Salyens in 127 B.C.; another in which the decisive battles were postponed until 124 B.C., and which Roma lost; and a third, in which the destruction of Heraclea's *nemeton* and the burning of the*fantômes* had set back the Gauls' timetable by some critical degree, so that now, in this "now," the future was undecided, the battle yet unfought. . . .

"Tell me more," she demanded of Kraton. "I need to know the exact sequence of events of the last decade."

Kraton sighed, and began. "The Roman Scipio, called `Aemilianus,' took Numantia, the last Carthaginian stronghold in Iberia, in 619, I believe."—Pierette mentally translated the Roman date into a more familiar format: 133 years before the beginning of the Christian age—"With Carthage defeated for once and for all, Roma had time and resources to pay attention to her friends elsewhere—like Massilia.

"At that time, our soldiers—Salyens—had surrounded Massilia, but its natural defenses—the ridges and rough terrain—were not suitable for fighting from horseback Celtic fashion, or for chariots. And Massilia was still able to supply itself from the sea, which the Romans have controlled for thirty years, since Quintus Opimus destroyed our port at Aegytna.

"The Massiliotes sent an embassy to Rome last year, and the Romans responded by dispatching the consul Flavius Flaccus with legions from Placentia. At Genova they took ship for Nicaea, near the mouth of the Argentia River. They could not defeat the Salyen forces holding this city, but neither could we prevail, so we treated with them.

"But late last year, a strange unknown*dryade* from the west visited Teutomalos, and urged rebellion. Now this year, the Roman Calvinus and his legions surround us. What else can I tell you?"

"It's enough," said Pierrette. Now it was clear. In her history, Massilia had asked Roma for help in 133 B.C., and Fulvius Flaccus had landed his troops along the Rhodanus, not the Argentia. He had taken Heraclea, then Arelate. But she had changed that: Heraclea was no immediate threat to Massilia in the new, third history, and Salyen pressure on Massilia thus did not become critical until 125 B.C. Not only

was Massilia's petition delayed, and thus Roma's military response, but that response was entirely different. Only their siege of Entremont remained, because the city was the key to all Gaul.

Now Calvinus was encamped before Entremont, three years late, and the outcome of the divided futures still hung in the balance.

"I have to find out what the*dryadeae* are doing," she told Kraton and Guihen. "They must have a plan to defeat the Romans." She did not know who had the advantage, or which way the battle—when it came—would go.

"They have brought the heads of many men here," Kraton said. "Their intention must be the same as you told me it was before, at Heraclea."

"I can't help but suspect there's more to it than that," she replied uneasily. "At Heraclea, the*fantômes* were mostly for defense. They were to stay, when the warriors went forth against the Massilians, and keep the town safe. The conquest of Massilia itself would have been fought by the living. But that isn't enough, now. The Romans have a foothold here in Transalpine Gaul, and merely surviving this siege isn't enough of a victory. The*dryadeae* must have a better plan than that."

"They haven't confided it to me," Kraton said bitterly. Once, he had practically ruled this town. Now he merely existed here, on sufferance.

"You must show me everything you can," Pierrette said. "Or, perhaps, Aurinia can do it. If I dress as an old, blind woman, could she lead me through the streets? Through the high city?"

"On what pretense? You'd have to get past soldiers at the Old City walls. And if they see that you're not an old woman . . ."

"Let me worry about that part," Pierrette said. "Just think of a way to get me in."

Aurinia spoke. "I have a . . . friend . . . in the high city," she said. The way she said "friend" caused her father to raise an eyebrow. Gallic women were entirely emancipated, equals of their men in everything but sheer physical bulk and strength, but still, fathers felt protective of daughters. "Bellagos," Aurinia said. "He's*kentor* of the Winter Horse." Pierrette could not conceal her surprise.

"Do you know him,*veleda* ?" Aurinia asked. "How can that be?"

"In my era," Pierrette replied, "he's a legend." Belugorix, the tale went, was chief among the centaurs, those half-man, half-horse creatures who had taught mankind the skills of logic and discourse—and the use of horses in battle. Belugorix, who with his human lover on his back, fled the death of his adopted nation, in search of the Blessed Isle and eternal peace. Some say they found it. Pierrette's head swirled. Here, again, the stuff of myth and reality entwined.*Kentor* , centaur, and centurion. "*Kentor*. Does he command a hundred horsemen, then?"

"One hundred twenty, now," Aurinia said—proudly, it seemed. Indeed, Kraton might want to speak more intimately with his daughter. "Fifty warriors and their mounts arrived from Arelate last week, and twenty chose to put themselves under his command."

The exact numbers, Pierrette reflected, didn't matter. A centurion of Roma no longer commanded a hundred men, any more than a "hunno" of Attila's horde had—or would. But was Aurinia's Bellagos the source of the legend? And if so, what did that portend? How would the legend play out in the present

reality—if it was not only a meaningless scrap of memory from her own lost history, already out of joint with this one?

"What is your idea?" she demanded of Aurinia. Now she knew she had to meet this*kentor* , this incipient legend.

"Everyone knows he sent for his family to join him within the safety of these walls—but they never came. Because his father's land was directly in the Romans' path of march here, he's sure they were all killed. But if one of them were to show up—his sister, perhaps, since I can't imagine you as old or blind . . ."

"Don't be too sure of that," Pierrette said softly. "But go on . . ."

"I can speak with him. He spends each morning with the horses, which are corralled just inside the north portal, ready for sallies against the Romans."

* * *

They walked Aurinia home, then Pierrette and Guihen returned to her small house. The Ligure carried a bundle of clothing that Aurinia's mother had produced—under protest. "I only kept these for rags," she had said. "They're moth-eaten, and hopelessly old-fashioned. My mother stopped wearing them years ago."

"They'll be perfect," Pierrette assured her. "Just the thing for an old farm wife, a refugee who arrived with nothing." She only smiled at their skepticism that she, young and vibrant, could successfully masquerade as an old woman, even with the traditional veil across her face. But they, she reflected, had not spent timeless hours and days beside the sacred pool, with the oldest woman of all. . . .

* * ** * *

Pierrette cinched the gray woolen skirt with a belt whose leather was dry and cracked, whose bronze belt-hooks had turned green. She drew the ancient mantle—once red-and-yellow plaid, but faded to brown-and-tan—about her shoulders.

Aurinia had promised to bring her sweetheart to Kraton's house before dawn, still hours away, but Pierrette had not been able to sleep. Now the sounds of her movement in the rear room had awakened Guihen. Not wishing to disturb her, he kept to his bed, and watched her through the connecting doorway.

Her plan would never work, he decided. Even in old clothes, she was young, pretty, black-haired, and far too graceful. He watched as she glided out into the courtyard. What was she saying? The words she intoned were in no language he had ever heard before. She reached toward the night sky, and from Guihen's perspective, her fingers seemed to pluck a wisp of silvery cloud from the moon's veil. She lowered her hand, and trailed slender fingers through her ebon tresses . . . and the silvery light stayed behind, clinging to the strands. Again and again she combed through her hair, until most of it sparkled with moonglow, and little black remained.

She reentered the room, and peered down into a bowl of water on the table. "Oh, that won't do," the Ligure heard her murmur—in Latin, which he almost understood. Then: "Silver jingles, music fades, like clouds across the moon's face . . ." They were pretty nonsense words that made no sense to him, until he saw the moonlight fade from her hair, leaving it leaden gray, dull as any crone's. When she dipped her fingers in olive oil and again drew them through her hair, it clung and straggled with all the ugliness of uncaring, unkindly age.

Again, she leaned over the bowl of water. Guihen, now overcome by curiosity, quietly slipped from his

bed and stood behind her wordlessly, and peered over her shoulder. She gave no sign that she even noticed him. Her next words were in yet another tongue—Old Ligurian, or something enough like it that he thought of his own great-grandmother, the last person he had heard speaking it. Pierrette was saying something about holy pools and bowls of water, and as her breath rippled the liquid's surface, Guihen saw her reflection shimmer and break into uncountable tiny ripples, tiny wrinkles, like the skin of . . .

He gasped, as the face now peering up from the bowl looked out at him, blue eyes faded to slaty gray, graceful arched nose now a sharpened beak, a tiny mole become a fat carbuncle astride one thinned, flaring nostril. He staggered back. Pierrette lifted her head and turned toward him. "Now will you lie awake thinking of me?" she asked him, in tones that might have been girlish and flirtatious—if her voice had not been harsh as a bronze spoon clanking against a cracked clay pot. She was old. No, not just old . . . ancient. Even the scent of her was musty, with a sick tang of stale urine and . . .

She staggered slightly, wincing and clutching the edge of the table. "The pain!" she hissed. "I didn't know how much pain the old really endure . . . help me to the bed, boy." Automatically, unthinkingly, Guihen took her arm—her skinny, fragile arm, all fleshless bones—and guided her through the doorway to her bed. He eased her down, until she was seated, holding herself upright with elbows on bony jutting knees. "Oh, Guihen!" she murmured, tears running down her raddled, creviced cheeks. "I never understood when my father complained of his backaches, of twinges in his joints, and of cramps in his bowels. I thought him just crotchety, and looking for sympathy. But now—not just one ache,*here* "—she patted the jagged corner of her jaw—"but*here* , and*here* "—she touched one shoulder, and then the back of her neck.

"Are you truly old, Lady?" he asked. "I don't think you are—because the old have time to enure themselves to such pain. My great-grandmother said that each new ache became an old friend, that as long as something hurt, she knew that part of her had not yet died."

"My stepmother, Granna, said something like that too," Pierrette said. "She said that as long as the new pains did not arrive too fast on the heels of the ones before, so she had time to come to love them, life remained worth living . . ." She sighed—a wheeze, really. "I won't have to pretend, when I hobble up the street to the*nemeton.* . . ."

"The sanctuary? You're going*there* ?"

"Where else? I must find out what the*dryadeae* are doing."

"I don't know what Bellagos will think about that, even if Aurinia can sweet-talk him into taking you through the high town gate with him."

"He'll have reason enough to do what I wish," Pierrette said—confidently, Guihen thought, though the quaver in her old voice made him unsure of it.

Chapter 19 - The Nemeton

Did the goddess herself, when she wore the aspect of an ancient crone, feel this miserable? Did her bladder leak and her knees tremble? Pierrette was grateful that she had decided—or had the face in the mirroring bowl convinced her?—that it was unnecessary for her to be blind as well as old. Her eyesight,

though everything seemed dull and colorless now, was still sharp. Young Bellagos's features were perfectly clear.

He was a handsome man, tall and blond, obviously more Celtic than Ligurian, and he would have impressed Pierrette even without his Greek-style breastplate, his mail, his long sword, and bronze-appliqued iron helmet, though he would have been more handsome without that suspicious scowl.

His expression intensified when Kraton pushed in after him. "I told Aurinia I would listen—but I will still turn you all over to the*dryadeae* if you are considering treason," he said.

"You know where I stand," Kraton said. "If peace with the Greeks and Romans, and profitable trade, is treason, then you'd best go. Say hello to the*dryadeae* for me."

"It's too late for peace now," Bellagos growled. "The Romans are already here."

"It's never too late," Kraton replied. "But I'm not here to argue with you—about that. Listen to what the *veleda* has to say . . . and then decide."

Bellagos raised an eyebrow at Pierrette. "I'm listening."

"When was the last time you sallied in force against Calvinus's troops?" she asked abruptly. "Yesterday? The day before?"

"If you're asking . . . you already know. A month. Even more than that."

"That makes you angry, doesn't it? What do the*dryadeae* say about the delay? Or Teutomalos?"

"They say `wait.' They say we're not ready yet—but it's not so. The Romans are mostly infantry, with half our strength, and their horsemen are pitiful. We could ride them down and trample them without even drawing our swords."

"I believe you," Pierrette responded. "So why don't you do it? What's holding you back?"

"I told you. Teutomalos and . . ."

"That's*who* . I meant*why* ."

His shoulders sagged. "I don't know. If we wait, the Romans may bring up reinforcements. Even elephants. Our horses won't stand against those."

"Don't you want to know?"

"Of course I do."

"Fine then," she said in her best grandmotherly manner. "It's settled. Now take me to the*nemeton* . I'll explain what I need from you on the way."

His scowl deepened. "I never said . . ."

"Come now. You want to know. They won't tell you, but I can find out—and then you can decide what you think is right."

He nodded reluctantly. Whenever the legends about "centaurs" said, she reflected, dryly amused, they couldn't all have been witty. Bellagos surely wasn't. He couldn't fight his way out of a—verbal—broken pot. "Take my arm," she commanded. "Aurinia—did you find me a walking stick?" With an apologetic grimace, Aurinia handed her a twisted root. Decent wood was hard to come by. The Romans weren't letting wagons of supplies in and out of Entremont.

"You must pretend I'm your grandmother," she told Bellagos as they walked slowly westward on the Traders Way, through the almost-empty foreign quarter. "My husband died fighting the Roman Flaccus last year, and I am convinced that his head was retrieved, and is in the sanctuary. I have given you no peace about it, and now you're taking me there, to find out for myself. Maybe while we're there, we can find you some answers, too."

* * *

"Hey Bela—is that your new girlfriend? Whose nursery did you rob?"

"Shut up, Seganos. She's my grandmother. We're going to the holy place."

"Pray for Teutomalos to send a sally against the Romans, will you? I can't stand much more sitting around."

"I always pray for that. Grandma just wants to see if Grandpa's up there . . . among the others."

The guard Seganos looked around himself uncomfortably, and motioned Bellagos closer. "Look,*kentor* , you watch your step—and you too, old one. There are far too many strangers up there, you know?"

"Strange priests, you mean?" Pierrette's voice sounded as old she looked.

"That too," Seganos said. "But I mean . . . if your husband is there, I hope he can find a friend among all the . . . new faces." He turned away, as if he had never spoken.

"You know what he means, Bellagos?" Pierrette asked as they pressed on into the precinct of the high city locals called*akropoli* . Just within the walls of the original fortified settlement, the road widened into a triangular forum or agora, the main marketplace. They turned left to avoid it, even though there was little activity. With a siege on, however desultory it was, people tended to keep what they had against future needs.

Bellagos had not answered her. Pierrette persevered: "He meant the heads, didn't he? The*dryadeae* are collecting strangers' heads, not just our own, or Romans'?"

"That's only a rumor. What would they want with those?"

"Whatever it is, it won't be good for us, I fear. Are we almost there? These old feet . . ." Indeed, Pierrette's feet hurt. And her back. Even her head ached. Back home, a spell like the one she had used would have made people assume she was old, if they didn't look too closely. Here and now, though, she only hoped the spell wouldn't get any more real—she didn't want to die of old age and exhaustion before they reached their immediate goal.

"It's right ahead . . . Grandma. Turn left now. It's the tallest three-story building. There." The*nemeton* towered above the other edifices along the street. Its two upper levels were timber infilled with mud bricks. They were supported on square stone columns in front, so the entire ground floor was open to the

street. Pierrette was dismayed. Where, then, were they hiding the heads she had been so sure were there?

There were several big, blocky sculptures of armed warriors standing in the shaded recesses of the sanctuary. At the rear was a block of stone made to look like four human heads stacked on top of each other. Pierrette—having grown used to seeing the lifelike Imperial Roman statues that were still around in her day . . . that wouldn't be carved for many centuries, in this one . . . thought them all stiff and crude.

"Do you see . . . ah . . . anyone you know?" Bellagos asked as they approached the portal, whose carved niches held at least a few heads. Pierrette shuddered inwardly. No, these were honored dead, men of Entremont. She could feel it—though strangely, their emanations were pale and weak, as if their bond here were attenuated, almost gone. She forced herself to examine them closely, as if one might be her imaginary husband. They were all black with age, desiccated. If she touched one, it might crumble—and the*fantôme* linked to it, already straining against its weakening bonds, would go free.

"No," she said, turning away, resisting the temptation to help the*fantôme* along. . . . "He's not here. Find a priest. I'll ask him."

"There don't seem to be any here."

Just then they heard a moan, like someone dying. Bellagos jerked, startled. Then: "Up there. Someone opened a door." He pointed to a wooden staircase at the back of the*nemeton* , in the deepest shadow. A white-robed man was descending, like a ghost in the gloom—except for the incongruous empty basket swinging from one hand.

"What do you want?" the new arrival asked, throwing back his hood. Like Ambioros at Heraclea, his physique and bearing made him seem more like a warrior than a priest—and he was very young.

"Velocatos!" exclaimed Pierrette's companion. "I'm Bellagos, now*kentor* of the Winter Horse. You know who I am. I lived right down the street, until we were about ten. Remember?"

"I didn't ask who you were. I ask what you're doing here. You . . . and her." He eyed Pierrette with open distaste. Did she really look that ugly, as well as old?

"Grandma's looking for . . . her husband. She thinks he's here."

"She can't have him, if he is," the*dryade* Velocatos snapped. "We need every . . ." Then he caught himself—but not in time. "We need every head we can get," he had been about to say. Pierrette was now sure she was on the right track.

"I don't want to take . . . his*fantôme* ," she said, trying to look bereaved. "I just have to know. Is he here? Cambo. His name is Cambo."

"How can I tell? I never knew him." And*fantômes* , his cynical expression implied, have no lungs; they have no breath to speak or identify themselves.

"He's here! I know he is. I can feel it! Let me see him!"

"Impossible! No one is allowed upstairs." Again, Pierrette spotted his slip. This was no*dryade* who had passed a Great Year in study, who had learned restraint. He was young, callow, and had not yet learned to hedge everything with cryptic words. So the*fantômes* ' heads were . . . up those stairs.

Again, the upstairs door's wooden hinges creaked noisily. "Velocatos—what's keeping you? We need that water now, not tomorrow . . . but who's this?"

Velocatos explained. The portly newcomer eyed Pierrette—who kept her eyes down—not to seem humble before this older*dryade* , but because she recognized him. Sabinos, from Heraclea. She had thought him burned to death in the cedar-oil conflagration there. When he stepped fully into the light from outside, she saw the pink, tight-stretched skin of the left side of his face, and the hideous, toothless grimace that the flames had left him—the burns he had suffered when she swept the lamp from the table.

She took a deep, rasping breath, and forced herself to speak. "Don't tell me I can't see him! I'm not too old to climb stairs—or the youngsters can carry me! Cambo is my husband. He belongs here now, but he's still my . . ."

"You can look!" Sabinos spat, to shut her up. "But no word of what you see must escape your lips—ever. Will you swear to that? And you too, warrior?"

"I don't want to see anything," Bellagos muttered, totally intimidated by the mutilated*dryade* . "I'll just help her up the stairs, and wait."

Before, Pierrette had thought Sabinos the weakest and least effective of Heraclea's priests, but now . . . the fires that had scarred him had burned away not only flesh, but his humanity. He was hardly a man, more a cold, soulless*fantôme* , a walking corpse animated by no human compassion. "My fault," she murmured under her breath. "I made him what he is. . . ."

"Come," he said, jerking his head toward the stair. Then, to Bellagos: "You'll see things anyway. There are two upper floors, two staircases to help her up." He shrugged. "You're a soldier. It won't hurt you to . . . to meet some of your future companions in arms."

It was not hard for Pierrette to make a job of getting up that initial flight: the treads were not deep enough for her feet and her flimsy walking stick together, or wide enough for Bellagos to climb beside her. Ascending, the scent of cedar oil became a cloying reek. Pierrette had not smelled it before—it rose with the warm air, but by the time she finished the climb, and passed through the door, the air was almost overwhelmingly pungent.

The entire floor was one room, dimly lit by three small, high windows on the street side. The walls were entirely obscured by shelves, shelves packed with dark, ovate objects, featureless in the gloom. They could have been clay pots . . . but they were not. They were heads. Not a hundred, or even five hundred, but . . . even with mathematical skills hundreds of years advanced beyond this age, even able to multiply quickly using Arabic numerals instead of clumsy Roman ones, Pierrette was hard-pressed to estimate their number—the room was about sixty Roman feet by not quite twenty, and there were eight shelves, each a foot or so high . . . a thousand, maybe fifteen hundred human heads!

Pierrette's horror grew as she began to sort out details. These heads, unlike Heraclea's, did not stare down at her with eyes painted on their sewn-shut lids. These, Pierrette realized in a burst of understanding, were not ritual objects, or revered ones. No one cared whether they were able to "see," or whether they looked lifelike. This was no temple—it was . . . a warehouse, and its grisly contents were treated like merchandise.

No, she thought, not even that. The space behind her eyes filled with a vision from the Black Time, when vast rooms hummed with the spurious life of soulless machines—this was like that: the preserved heads

were . . . utilitarian. They were components, no more revered than the individual stones in a wall. But what great, hideous edifice were the*dryade* architects planning to build? What nightmarish project was under way here?

"Well, old woman?" Sabinos asked impatiently. "Are you not going to look for your husband?" His hands swept around, his gesture encompassing all the shelves.

"There are so many! I don't know where to begin!"

"Begin here," Sabinos snapped, thumping the nearest shelf. "You'd best waste no time. There are hundreds more upstairs, in the workshop."

Pierrette's head spun, and not just from the fumes. She didn't need to examine each head. There was no husband to find, and she had seen what she had come for—only she didn't know what it meant.

"Workshop?" She grasped Sabinos's arm and peered up at him with rheumy eyes. "More heads? New ones?"

"Yes," he replied. "Perhaps . . . you should see them first. Was your husband . . . has he been missing long?"

"He went to keep the marching Romans from trampling our grain. He never came back."

"A few weeks, then. He might still be . . . soaking. Yes. Soldier"—he addressed Bellagos—"help her up the stairs. You both must be out of here before dusk. No lamps are permitted here." Pierrette knew why: the*dryades* weren't taking any chances of another Heraclea.

As Bellagos helped her up the second flight of stairs, she considered the possibility the*dryades* ' precaution brought to mind: she could start a fire here. She did not need a burning oil lamp wick. The tips of her fingers tingled as she considered that . . . but no: even were she an agile girl, she could not move quickly enough to get away, if a fire started. And even if there were windows on the third floor, the risk of injury would be great if she jumped.

There were no windows. Light poured in through three large openings in the roof. A ladder extended through one of them. The air here was clear: the fumes could escape. There were no ranked shelves, only row after row of pots brimming with cedary-smelling oil.

"So many!" she wailed. "I'll never find him here!"

"You'd better try. As I said, at dusk . . ."

"He's not here! I'd feel him if he were. Bellagos! Help me down. I want to go home."

"Are you sure, Grandma?"

"Yes—be sure," Sabinos echoed. "You won't be allowed back in again. This time, I made an exception for your age and bereavement, but . . ."

"I won't come back—Cambo isn't here. He's somewhere else. The Romans must have taken him. I'll have to ask them. Bellagos—take me to the Romans' camp."

"Grandma, we're at war with them! You can't go there."

"Surely if you ask nicely . . ."

"Come! You're overtired. This cedar oil is not allowing you to think clearly."

"Perhaps you're right," she said with a sigh. "Help me down those horrid stairs. I saw a wine shop on the way here. Yes. A cup of cool wine will set my poor old head to rights. Do you have a coin or two for the tavern master?"

"I do."

Pierrette had less trouble descending the stairs. Was the spell wearing off? Anxiously, she drew her shawl over her hair. If Sabinos recognized her . . .

* * *

"Now what game are you playing, `Grandma?' " Bellagos snarled. "Your head is no more addled than mine. `Take me to the Romans,' indeed!"

"The*dryade* Sabinos won't give a befuddled old hag another thought. But here—the wine shop, remember? I*am* thirsty." She drew him to a bench against the wall, in a welcoming shadow. "I wonder if there's any of the Massilians' red wine left?"

"I'll ask."

"Well-watered, mind you. Being old is miserable enough, without being drunk also."

He peered curiously at her. "You're strange. Sometimes you don't sound old at all. . . ."

"When Aurinia's gold hair turns white, there will still be a young girl somewhere inside, behind the wrinkles of age. Never forget that—and your marriage will prosper."

"Marriage?" He drew back. "I haven't even asked her . . ."

"I am a*veleda* , remember? And when you return with the wine, I'll have a prophecy for you—and for Aurinia."

"I'll be right back."

* * *

"Now . . . the prophecy." He sat, then turned toward her on the bench.

Pierrette sipped her wine. It was deliciously cool, with just the slightest fruity hint of fresh grapes. "Do you understand," she asked, "what we saw in the*nemeton* ? Did you sense something terribly wrong, there?"

"The heads. They aren't our own heroes, or even enemy dead. Some had white hair, and I'm sure at least a few were women. Whatever the*dryadeae* are doing isn't right. And there are so many heads . . ."

"Exactly. I think that is why they're stalling. Their plans call for even more*fantômes*. . . ." She paused, as if pondering a fresh insight, then turned and locked eyes with him. "Have there been any . . .

disappearances? People who went to market, and never returned home?"

"You're crazy! They would not . . ." But his eyes were bleak. "People sometimes get distressed, cooped up like this. They sneak out past the Roman cordon . . . but surely you can't think the*dryadeae* . . ."

"You yourself said there were*women's* heads there. Think it through. How many notable women-warriors do you know—personally? And how many have disappeared?"

"I've only known . . . known of . . . a few. Most women are dangerous when their homes and families are threatened, but few become warriors. Defense, not offense. And as for taking their heads, that would be . . . would be . . ."

"Untraditional? Wrong?"

"It would be very wrong."

"Even if their purpose was purely defensive?"

"I can't imagine it."

"Nor can I. I think we can safely assume that the*fantômes* those heads bind are not defenders, but . . . something else. I wonder what the gods think, with their sanctuary full of strangers? They must be angry."

"Does that have something to do with your prophecy?"

She sighed. "A*kentor* named Bellagos will flee this city even as the Romans burn it," she said. "Behind him on his horse will be his golden-haired lover. All the other survivors will be enslaved."

"Me flee? I would never flee a battle!"

"But if the battle is already lost? Would you want to see Aurinia a slave in Rome, drawing water for some senator's herb garden—then going to his bed?"

"No! That can't be!"

"Then you must spirit her away. Wait until you know the battle is lost, and the Romans are in the streets, if you must, but then you must flee."

"Who will have us? The Allobroges?"

"You must go further. All the way up the Rhodanus, then westward to the farthest end of the land, in the country of the Venetii. There, on the horizon, beyond where the tides rise as high as city walls and rush so fast that they destroy every ship that braves them, lies the isle of the Gallicenae."

"The Isle of the Dead? No! Are you saying . . ."

"Hear me now. Just north of Land's End lie the ruins of Phoenician Ys, at the head of a wide bay. You must find a boat there, and put to sea just before the end of a spring tide. It will carry you beyond the reach of the goddesses of the dead, into a sea of mists and confusion . . ."

Pierrette's mind retreated to that far place, to those mists, whence she had flown on a blanket made of

clouds, wrapped in a shawl of silvery moonbeams . . . but that had been a vision, or only a dream. Was there really an island out there, beyond the known lands, beyond even Sein Island, where the*dryades* buried their own dead?

Was it fair to send Bellagos—and Aurinia—chasing a dream not even their own? Again, she retreated into her memories. There, seated on a high seat next to Minho, the sorcerer-king, she had looked over the throngs who gathered to see her. Was there a golden head among all the dark Minoan ones?

In her visions, those Fortunate Isles were the ancient seat of a lost empire that later men called Atlantis, islands plucked from a volcanic eruption that had shaken the ancient Mediterranean world. King Minho had saved his people, the best and kindest, the artists, artisans, singers, and dancers, the mapmakers and workers in gold. When the belching flames cleared, the poisonous smoke blew away, and the molten rocks hardened, all that was left of Thera Island was a desolate, semicircular crag.

Guided by the volcano's pillar of smoke by day, of fire by night, the Hebrews had departed Egypt, and had begun their sojourn in the Sinai wilderness.

Forty years later, when again the earth trembled and Thera's writhing set the sea into turmoil, the Hebrew Joshua commanded his trumpeters to blow their horns, and the shaken walls of Jericho fell.

Theseus's Athenians rose up in arms against the last Minos, king of Atlantean Crete, and burned his labyrinthine palace, destroying the great golden bull mask he wore, and slaying the man who wore it.

But Minho, that king's great-uncle, long departed with all his chosen people, felt none of the shaking and breathed none of the deadly fumes, for Minho was gone, borne away by the greatest spell ever uttered by mortal lips and tongue.

For a while, the Fortunate Isles were seen off the coast of Iberia, where a great city rose in the delta of River Baetis—Tartessos, that the Hebrew books called Tarshish, and thought lay at the end of the world. Tartessos, where Herakles stole the red cattle of Geryon. But, at last, the Isles drifted away, borne off by Minho's spell, and now they lay (or so Pierrette believed) where she commanded Bellagos to seek them.

* * *

"*Veleda*? Are you not well?" Bellagos had watched with horror as the old woman's eyes rolled up until only the whites showed. Her hands had trembled like poplar leaves in the*Mistral* wind, and her ancient knees knocked as if she were having a fit.

"A vision," she said. "Did I frighten you?" She smiled. "I saw what I wanted to see, and now I am sure. You must find the Fortunate Isles, and when you do, you must tell King Minho . . . to save a seat for me, beside him."

Yes, there had been a golden-haired girl there, and a strong young*kentor* for her to lean on and . . . and a blond-haired boy child, clinging to his father's leg. "Your son will be as golden as his mother," she said. "And you must name him . . . Kraton, for I have spoken with him, and he told me his name."

Bellagos stared wide-eyed. Pierrette clutched her cup, and downed the rest of her watered wine in one gulp. "Now," she sighed, "we have work to do. Is your dwelling nearby?"

"It's only a short walk, if you're able."

"Good. We'll wait there until dark. But—is there a street behind the*nemeton* ?" He nodded. "Show it to

me."

Four houses joined by common walls backed up against the sanctuary. "Convenient," Pierrette murmured.

"What is?"

"These outside staircases. See? Someone could walk up that one, by the first house, climb that ladder to the second one, and pull the ladder up to use it to get on the roof of the*nemeton* ."

"You want me to go up there?" Looking at Pierrette as if she were mad was becoming a habit.

"No. I'll go. Perhaps I can overhear something useful, tonight."

"You?" Bellagos snorted. "You are mad. Those stairs . . . that ladder?"

Pierrette shrugged off his incredulity. "Let's go to your house. Seeing me climb a ladder will be the least of your surprises."

Chapter 20 - A Talking Head

Pierrette's Journal

One of the first principles of magic that I discovered was that the relationship between belief and perception was like a street—it went in two directions. A strange old man, Breb, taught me that "seeing is believing," and that seeing the wrong thing could destroy a cherished belief—and the reality it assumes. Now I see that the opposite is also true: belief can influence perception. Bellagos and Sabinos saw an old woman, and their belief altered not only their perception of my ability to climb stairs, but my own as well. In this credulous age, where few doubt that magic is as real as sunlight or stone, the perception of age was enough to render me incapable of ascending the*nemeton* 's staircase unaided. Was I physically unable to do so? I cannot say, because I could not at the same time perceive of myself as old, and act otherwise. I have no doubt that had I been able to mount the staircase like a girl, my entire illusion of age would have melted away, and Sabinos would have recognized me.

* * *

Bellagos's quarters were small, one room of a two-story building, but at least that room opened onto the street, so they would be able to leave without passing through occupied rooms. There was a single pallet on the floor, a single pine chest, a fat jug, unglazed and almost full of water, and a table with one plate and one bowl. A few clothes hung from pegs near the door

Pierrette dipped water into the bowl, and peered into it. Her eyes were definitely blue—she could see colors again. She turned away from Bellagos and murmured soft words.

"What?" he asked.

"Nothing."

"Your voice sounds funny. Are you sure you're not ill?"

"If anything, I'm getting better every minute," she said impishly. "Are you ready for that surprise I promised you?" She turned around, and let her shawl fall to her shoulders. She did not have to look into the bowl to know that she was again herself. Bellagos's wide-eyed stare was all she needed.

"Magic!" he exclaimed. "Why are you doing this?" He backed toward the door.

"Wait.*This* is not magic. This is who I am. The old woman you saw before was the deception."

"No. I can't believe it. You are a succubus, a witch . . ."

"I am a sorceress—but if you stay here five more minutes, and talk with me, you'll see that I have no designs upon you, except to see you and your future wife safely away in time." She laughed. "I thought I was frightening before. But from your expression . . ."

"You surprised me."

She grinned. "I keep my promises. And I can climb ladders, too."

"I'll bet you can."

She was pleased with his resilience. It would have been awkward at best, if he had run away. A succubus? A backhanded compliment—but at least he considered her pretty enough to seduce him.

"What do we do now?"

"We wait for darkness," she replied, picking at her shawl. "Help me unravel this. I need to make a long cord."

It was not engaging work, but unraveling the woolen yarns and twisting them into a thin rope passed the time. Outside, shadows lengthened, until the street was murky and indistinct.

"Now," she said, rolling the last of the cord onto her fist-sized ball. "If we can make it down the block without anyone seeing us . . ." The houses behind the*nemeton* were not far—right, then twenty paces to the end of the street, then right again a similar distance. The air coming in under the door was cold, so it was unlikely that anyone else's door would be open. Pierrette removed her sandals. Bellagos did not. "Shouldn't you leave your shield and armor here?" Pierrette asked. "That chain mail jingles."

"Not if I walk smoothly," he countered. "Besides, if anyone hears me, they'll only be reassured. Warriors in the streets mean all is quiet and well." Bellagos peered outside, then motioned her to follow. The cobbles were cold underfoot, because the street had been in shade for several hours. They crept past doorways where yellow light spilled out in thin lines from underneath. If anyone looked, there was nowhere to hide.

Just as when she had crept through the streets of Heraclea, and again on the road to Aquae Sextiae with ibn Saul, she felt presences in the deep shadows, ghostly lurkers that brushed against the fringes of her mind, creating nameless dread. That was what kept the people of Entremont inside, when the sun went down—for they were the spirits of strangers, not ancestors, siblings, or friends.

But unlike the bodiless watchers on Heraclea's walls, and the spirits lurking in old trees and stones, these

fantômes were blind, because the*dryades* had not bothered to paint eyes on their sewn-shut lids. Their destiny was not to watch and defend—but then, what was it?

At the corner, Bellagos again peeked—squatting low, because a watcher would be more inclined to notice movement at his own eye level. That was a stalker's trick. Bellagos was more versatile than impressions would have indicated. Good, she thought. He'll have to be clever to find Minho's Isles—and to survive getting there. She wondered if Aurinia would be pregnant by then, or—judging by the way she looked at Bellagos, if she were already so.

The four houses were ahead now, with the staircase on the right of the endmost one. Next to it was a split wood fence—a pigpen, by the odor that drifted their way. When they had passed it before, Pierrette had heard no grunting or scuffling, and guessed that it was empty. "You can hide in there," she whispered.

"It stinks!" he hissed.

"You don't have to wallow in it—just hunch down and keep watch through the slats. If you see or hear anything at all, tug on the end of this cord. I'll have the other end."

"More likely you'll be the one who needs a diversion," he mused. "Let's work out some signals, so I know what to do."

There were, Pierrette admitted, advantages to the military mindset. The Romans and Greeks wrote treatises on strategy and tactics, on the use of terrain, surprise, and diversions. Now, despite the obvious scorn of the old warrior in the market for troops who fought in formation, she understood that not all Gauls were ignorant of such things. "So if I tug twice on the cord, you'll tug back twice—and then do something noisy to draw attention here, at the rear of the*nemeton* . And if I tug three times . . ."

"I'll go round to the front." It was all settled, then.

As she mounted the staircase, she wished for her boy's clothing, more suited to climbing, but at least her dingy rags were dark. She pulled her long skirt up while she ascended the ladder to the second-story roof. There would be no moon for a while, she realized—which thought only slightly slowed her pounding heart.

The ladder was heavier than it looked, and even after pulling it up behind her, she had to drag it across the roof. Finally, she got it raised into position against the roof of the sanctum, without yet having raised an alarm. She scrambled upward and peered over the parapet, keeping her head low, even though she did not expect anyone to be on the upper floors of the*nemeton* at night, because of the prohibition against lamps. She saw nothing on the roof except the ladder projecting upward from the room where the *dryades* ' grisly trophies were prepared.

She crept to the edge of the skylight. The air rising from inside made her eyes water, so strong were the fumes. She had to force herself to remain there, listening—and hearing a quiet murmur from below. Who could it be, down there in the dark?

"Am I going mad?" she heard. "Am I blind? What has happened to me?"

"We're all blind," said another voice, a strange, eerie whisper that seemed to originate inside Pierrette's head. "The sacrifice is necessary, for the cause."

"Necessary? For whom? For what? I'm going mad. I can't feel my arms and legs. I can't even feel my

cock!"

"What cock? Don't you know where you are? You don't have a . . ."

Fantômes! The voices were not*dryades* lurking below, they were . . . the heads. She was not hearing spoken words at all. But how did she dare climb down into . . . that?

She had not spoken aloud, but when another disembodied voice spoke, it addressed her directly: "They won't see you, girl, or even notice. And I won't tell." It was a familiar voice . . . but who? "It was ten years ago," the voice continued. "I was . . . Ambioros. Don't you remember me? In Heraclea?"

"Ambioros! Of course I remember you. But . . . are you a*fantôme* ? What has happened to you?"

A disembodied sigh rewarded her. "Do you remember what you told us, what we discussed? After you burned the*nemeton* , I had no more stomach for headhunting, for the slaughter necessary to replace what you destroyed. And as King Teutomalos's ambitions became even more grandiose, I became sick at heart. When my reticence became obvious to everyone . . ." He did not have to explain further.

"But how can you speak with me, though the others can't?"

"Even the least of the*dryadeae* can cast their spirits forth from their bodies. Can't you do that?"

Pierrette could—and had. And until she got back to ibn Saul, in the Roman baths, she could not be absolutely sure she was not doing that even now.

"Oh, you're here, all right," said Ambioros with a disembodied chuckle. "Your magic is better than theirs—if you can use it properly."

"What do you mean? What should I do?"

"You could start by getting that Roman—Calvinus, is it?—off his shapely buttocks, that's what. It would be nice if you did before it's too late. Before this hideous creation of Teutomalos's consumes us all."

"What are you talking about? I don't understand. How could his plans be more grandiose than they already were?"

"The god!" the voice hissed. "The new god. It is almost here. I can feel it creeping into my mind. You must save me! Make Calvinus attack, before he no longer can!"

A new god? What was Ambioros talking about? But just then, Pierrette saw a light flare below. "Careful with that!" someone exclaimed harshly. It was a living voice, not a*fantôme* .

"It wasn't my idea to come up here," said another. "I didn't hear anything. Except maybe Ambioros, complaining again."

"I heard a real voice. A living one. Ambioros! You traitor! Who have you been speaking with?"

"Toss that lamp into the pot that holds my head," came Ambioros's murmuring reply. "Then you'll have enough light to see for yourself."

Pierrette backed slowly away from the skylight as the flickering orange glow approached the ladder.

How was she going to get away? How was she going to be able to move the other ladder back where she had found it, without being heard? Then she remembered the cord. Where was it? Had she dropped it? There! She had crawled right over it, and now it was pressed beneath her knee. She tugged on it—and the end came loose in her hand. Broken!

But no! That was the wrong end. The rest of the cord still led back the way she had come. She gave it three quick tugs, then felt three corresponding ones from Bellagos. She continued to back toward the parapet, until she felt its rough mud plaster against her feet. Was Bellagos going to do something to distract the*dryades* ? How long should she wait? She slithered down the ladder, then poised to move it back where it belonged as soon as she heard something that was out of the ordinary. She did not have long to wait.

"Romans!" shouted Bellagos, banging his sword on his shield. "Romans at the west gate!" His voice came from Pierrette's left, at the front of the sanctum. Would the*dryades* in the room below hear it? "To arms!" he yelled, still banging. In a house somewhere below Pierrette, a light flared as someone lit a lamp from a glowing hearth-coal. She leaped up and clambered over the parapet onto the ladder.

Then, just as her head was about to drop below the wall and out of sight of the roof, she glimpsed movement near the skylight. "I saw something!" someone cried out.

"The Romans are below, not on the roof," another voice protested. "Come down quickly."

"But someone was here. Ambioros was lying!"

"It can wait. Come!"

Pierrette dropped to the lower roof. If the*dryade* —the younger one, she thought—disobeyed, he would see the ladder. But if she lingered to put it back . . . She waited, trying to keep her breath from gusting noisily. The voice was now silent. Had the*dryade* seen the ladder? Was he even now peering down into the shadows where she huddled? She took one strained breath, then another, then a third . . . and there was still no outcry from above. If she could move the ladder back, no one could be sure anyone had been on the nemeton roof. . . . Below, but out of sight, perhaps around the corner from where Bellagos had hidden, she heard a babble of raised voices. She pulled on the ladder's lower rungs, and it began to slide down the wall. . . .

* * *

"Where did you see them?" growled the chief of the guard. "My men saw nothing." He glared at Bellagos as if personally insulted. The two men had walked several short blocks from the*nemeton* , and now stood atop the western wall.

"They were there, in the brush below," said Bellagos. "And over there, near the gate. I saw a glow, as if someone was blowing a coal to life."

"There's no one now there now—and if they had intended to fire the gate, there'd be brush piled against it. Are you sure you've not been drinking too much?"

"I saw what I saw. Perhaps your men were dozing . . ."

"Not a chance! I made my rounds only moments ago. There's something strange about this. I'll speak with your captain about it. What's your name?"

"My captain is Bellagos, of the Winter Horse. Be sure to tell him about my drinking. Of course he'll want to know that."

"A horseman! I should have known." The chief turned away angrily. The Winter Horse were elite warriors, and many of them were not even from Entremont. He knew of their leader only by reputation—an arrogant fellow who would stand up for his men. He would not call upon Bellagos. "False alarm!" he shouted. "Back to your posts." He strode angrily away

Bellagos's shoulders slumped as the tension ran from him. If the chief of sentries ever saw the Winter Horse's leader without his helmet, he was in for a surprise.

He glanced about. The townsfolk who had gathered—even the women were armed with knives, spears, and firewood cudgels—began to disperse. Where was the girl . . . or would she again be an old woman? Goose bumps formed all up and down his ribs and arms when he considered that. Battle held no terror for him, but this long siege had become a different kind of war, with uncanny weapons, and considering everything he had seen this day past—the vast collection of heads he did not recognize, all stored in an unseemly, methodical yet irreverent manner, the uncanny*veleda* who seemed to live in past, present, and future all at once, and who was familiar one minute, a stranger the next—he was no longer sure what side he was on.

He trudged wearily back toward his house. She would be there, or she would not. Either way, he intended to catch up on some sleep. It was still several hours to dawn—though considering all he had seen, he was not sure he would sleep well, if at all.

Chapter 21 - Irreconcilable Differences

The first gray light of oncoming dawn had to fight past gathering storm clouds and a thick blanket of fog, but it still awakened magpies and hoopoes in their hidden nighttime refuges. Pierrette awakened, and poured water into Bellagos's large bowl. She murmured quiet words, and observed as her appearance changed.

Bellagos awakened at the sound of her soft voice, but he did not stir. Beneath drooping, concealing eyelids he watched as the pretty girl of the night before aged before his very eyes. Her smooth, olive skin loosened and shrivelled like an apple too long in the sun. Her eyebrows, graceful dark arcs, thickened, turning steely, dirty gray. "Illusion," he told himself. "She said it's not real." But how could that be? He could see that she was old, now. If he touched her face, would his fingers ripple across the sags and wrinkles he saw, or glide over young, virgin skin beneath the deception? Brave as he was, he was not about to try that.

"You can get up, if you want," Pierrette said. "I heard your breathing change when you awakened. I am sure your view of my . . . metamorphosis . . . was better than my own, seen in this bowl of water. What did you think of it?"

Incredibly, surprising him, tears sprang to his eyes, for he had seen a lifetime pass across that ruined

face. He had seen there the fate of all lovely young girls, if they survived war and childbirth and drunken husbands . . . but he could not shape his concepts into words.

"Never mind," she said gently. "Weep for Aurinia, if you will, but not for me, because I have already lived a long lifetime as a girl, in a magic place where time is stopped, but she must live those years to become as I seem now. And those years will be as sweet or as bitter as you make them—you and that young Kraton you have not yet seen." She sighed. "Now take me back to the low town. I must ponder what I have learned, and decide what to do about it." It was starting to rain, and her rags were not proof against the cold, clammy gusts that buffeted her. Bellagos was so amazed, so shaken by what he had just seen, that he forgot entirely to ask her just what she had learned. . . .

* * *

They exited the high city without incident. At her own door at last, she bade Bellagos send for Kraton and any others of like mind whom he trusted. "Tell them to come in the afternoon," she said, "when there's a lull in this storm." He nodded, and took his leave.

So what had she learned? "The new god," Ambioros's*fantôme* had said. Consuming the*fantômes* . In another place and time, she had confronted a demon who consumed the ancient deities of springs, pools, trees, and crossroads. Christians like Father Otho called him "Satan"—or did not, for the priest said it was dangerous to utter his name.

In that world, the demon had once been a petulant spirit that plagued advocates at law in Old Testament times. Some ancient writers said he was Lucifer, an angel fallen upon hard times, but he was not. He was the Eater of Gods, and every time priests drove some ancient spirit from the fold of goodness and wrote down its name in their pandemonic list, that evil one waxed stronger.

From Moloch, when that god was consumed, he gained breath like fire, that stank of yellow brimstone and hot iron. From old Sylvanus he gained a prong of immense proportions, always erect, yet without seed—for he was unable to create anything at all. From Cernunnos, the forest god of the Gauls, he took deer's horns, from Pan those of a goat, either of which he wore as occasion and mood demanded.

Had the Eater of Gods gotten his way then and there, the Black Time would have come, when all that was good was locked in a tiny box that men called the Church, because everything else was named evil, and thus belonged to him. Was this "new god" the same uncreated one? Was Teutomalos his tool in this time and place, and was his objective to bring about that other history where even the tiny ghosts of infants were harnessed to do his work? Instead of old roadside spirits, was he consuming the ghosts of men wrongly slain, their heads now stacked like cordwood or soaking in redolent oil?

Even as she considered it, Pierrette knew she was right. That was what the*dryades* were waiting for—there was some critical number of captive spirits, and they had not yet obtained it. When they did . . . no Roman legions, no elephants with fortresses on their backs, no great Roman engines of war designed by Archimedes's students could withstand his might. And the Romans below were waiting complacently for reinforcements, and for this well-supplied*oppidum* to starve and surrender.

"I wish Anselm were here," she said to Guihen, momentarily forgetting he had not, in this time, met the old sorcerer. The mage always saw through the murk of circumstance and conflicting desires to the heart of the matter at hand. Even Father Otho, who had taught her to read—if only to distract her from following her mother's path and becoming a masc, a country witch—would have been a welcome sounding board for her churning ideas. Above all, she wished she could spend an hour or an afternoon in the sun-dappled beech grove by the old sacred pool, with the goddess*Ma* , who had set her upon this mad mission.

Perhaps Kraton, and his friends, confronted with what she had discovered, would have something to suggest. How should she appear before them? Would they have more respect for an old*veleda* than a young one? But no, they would have to take her for what she was. She was not*Ma* , whose semblance shifted with mood and circumstance. The dissenters would have to decide according to their consciences alone.

Kraton arrived first. "Though Teutomalos scorns us and does not fear us at all, we try not to be obvious when we meet." Thus the others came one by one after him, until Kraton decided no others were on the way. It was, Pierrette reflected, a pitifully small gathering, that only half filled the courtyard against the city's wall. (Though great thunderheads in the west mumbled ominously, it was not raining, and the odor of wet, oily wool was less oppressive outside than in.) She was glad to see Bellagos, standing at the rear, next to Guihen.

Kraton introduced her as the seeress Petra, who had warned the*dryades* of Heraclea of their flawed intentions. Because the disaster there was a decade in the past, and because she seemed so young, they took it as a credential, and did not seem to discredit her for her appearance.

Without preamble, she told them how Teutomalos would assemble enough*fantômes* to create a new god who would destroy the Romans not only here, but everywhere their legions marched—even on the far side of the Alps, in the valley of the Padus, where Gallic tribesmen now worked Roman fields and swept Roman houses.

"I see nothing wrong with that," said elderly Segoboros, who had been a mercenary for the Carthaginians in Iberia, and who had once laid eyes on Scipio Africanus Aemilianus himself, though only briefly, and in the heat of battle. "Our objection has been that we didn't think Teutomalos could win, and that a few concessions—a coastal highway, for instance—would be a cheap price to pay for uninterrupted trade. . . ."

"Don't you care how that victory is gained?"

"I don't see how someone can make a god," he grumbled. "That's just a figure of speech. We have been taking the heads of our enemies for centuries, forever. And what's wrong with keeping a memento of one's father or grandfather? The Greeks and Romans, who consider themselves more civilized than us, make paintings and sculptures, but that's effete and indirect. Our way is better."

"Keeping the head of someone killed in battle is one thing, or having relatives' relics in your household shrine, to advise you about family matters, but this is different. Bellagos—tell them. Did you see a single familiar face in the*nemeton* ? No, these are strangers' heads. Not enemies, not beloved kinfolk. Even at Heraclea, where they only wanted a hundred*fantômes* , some of the heads they took were not Gauls—several were Greek merchants, not even warriors."

"Greek merchants spy for Massilia. That makes them enemies, doesn't it?"

"That's Brendannos," Kraton whispered. "He used to be on the city's council before he fell into disfavor. Even then, he would contest anything, just to hear himself speak."

"Are you a Sophist, counselor?" asked Pierrette. "You sound like you studied Greek obfuscation. Does that make you an enemy too?" When several others laughed, Pierrette thought she had gained a point. "The danger," she continued, "is not just in quibbles over the identity of one*fantôme* or another. Teutomalos's plan is qualitatively different from your tradition. Family or enemy, the head you hang from

your ridgepole is a . . . a personal thing. Someone you loved or hated, someone deserving respect. The heads in the*nemeton* are no more personal than that mattock leaning against the wall. Once you start using sacred things as mere tools . . ."

"You're a*veleda,* " said Brendannos. "Prophesy for us—will we win? After all, what else matters?" Several men voiced agreement. If their choices were as black as she painted them—Roman victory here at Entremont, and eventually a Roman Gaul, or else some far future horror that might not happen at all, now that they were warned . . ." Just this once, let's let Teutomalos have his way. Once the Romans are defeated, we'll insist that he cease collecting heads."

Too many others agreed. Pierrette saw that she had failed. None of them had seen the Gaulish empire that would arise, as she had. They had not felt the evil that would someday lurk in every ancient tree, the spirits in every well, every pool. They could not understand—and they did not want to.

The thunderheads then fulfilled their promise, and fat raindrops began to fall in ever-increasing numbers. The wind picked up, gusting one way then another. "I'm sorry," Kraton said as his compatriots departed, one by one. "I misjudged them. They only protested when they thought we couldn't win."

"And fool that I am, I told them they could. I should have lied to them."

"Could you? You, a seeress?"

"I don't know."

"If any means justify a good end, you'd be in good company. Teutomalos . . ."

"I know," she said with a sad sigh.

* * ** * *

"What will you do now?" Kraton asked, raising his voice to be heard over the drumming rain and the booming roar that almost immediately followed each burst of angry lightning. She heard the expectation in his voice. What did he expect her to do? With each lightning flash, her resentment also flared. Was he just like the goddess*Ma* , expecting her to plunge in unprepared, to engage the*dryades* in sorcerous combat?

"I can't tell you that. You must not count on me further. But this one thing I can say: do not let Aurinia stray far from your house. And whatever Bellagos tells you to do, do it, for the life of your grandson, your namesake, depends on it."

"My grandson? Onomaris's child?"

"No. Aurinia's child, not yet conceived. Perhaps never to be conceived—the future is never clear, because men make choices, and what I have seen will come to pass, or will not. But this much is certain: if the Romans are victorious here, and if Bellagos heeds the words I have spoken to him, then you will have a grandson and his name will be Kraton, and he will live in a fanciful place where all men are good, because evil was banished from it thousands of years ago and cannot return."

She turned away from him, still angry, and he took that as dismissal. "I don't understand, but your requirements seem simple enough, and I will heed them." He sighed, bent as if the weight of the*nemeton* 's square stone pillars was on his back, and he could not bear them up. "Good fortune,*veleda* . And thank you for trying." He departed, leaving Pierrette gazing fixedly at the rain-drenched courtyard

bounded by the city's wall.

Chapter 22 - The Consul

"What will you do now?" asked Guihen, who found her sitting disconsolately in the courtyard, her cheeks streaked with drying tears.

"Everyone expects me to do something! Even you!"

"Me? I have no expectations. I was thinking only of your own. You can't tell me you aren't the one driving yourself. Why, from the time you were this tall you . . ."

"Guihen! Is that you? Are you remembering?"

An expression of dazed confusion washed across his mobile face. "Why . . . what do you mean? For a moment there, I thought I knew you when . . . but it's gone now. What was I saying before?"

He had remembered. For a fleeting moment he had been her Guihen—her friend and mentor. Now he was only . . . Guihen. She shook her head sadly. "I'm going back to the Roman camp. I can't fight Teutomalos and the*dryadeae* all by myself. If I could convince that Calvinus to do what he was sent here to do . . ."

"Ah!" Guihen brightened. "You'll need my help sneaking out of here. Well? What are we waiting for? There is the wall, and there too is a ladder. We should be able to climb down to the spring, and then retrace our steps—though I greatly fear we've been gone far too long to walk right into the Roman camp with a basket of early raspberries. . . ."

"Why don't we leave the way we came?"

"You think they'll let you out just like that? After what you said about a Roman victory? Even Kraton will suspect you've been a spy all along."

"Then I'd better change into something better for climbing."

"Change into . . . oh. You mean clothing. I wish I'd seen when you changed into an old woman. If you changed into a big bird—a crane—you could carry me in your bill, and we could fly down."

"I don't know a spell for that. And besides, you're too heavy."

"So make one up—and become a really big crane, or an eagle." Then he saw that her tears were flowing again. "Don't cry! What did I say? I didn't mean . . ."

"It's not your fault. You just reminded me of somebody—a boy named Cletus." A boy who would not be born for centuries, if ever, yet who seemed so very far in her own past, as if in a different life altogether. And Guihen, saying "Just make one up," as if she could. As if he were really her Guihen, goading a little girl to extend herself beyond what she believed possible.

She rolled her meager belongings into a tidy bundle, keeping separate her sky blue dress, her white mantle, the crystalline "serpent's egg" on its cord, and Doreta's fine gold fibulae. She planned to approach the Roman camp in style.

Guihen peered upward. "You must be feeling better now," he said. "I think I saw a star peering through the clouds."

"What does that have to do with me?"

"When you are angry, lightning flashes. When you were sad, rain fell like tears. And now you've picked yourself up again, I saw a star, which means the sky is clearing."

"That's silly! The sky is not a brass mirror, reflecting my moods."

"Are you sure? When you visited Minho, and sat on an ivory throne, you called out to Taranis, and he sent a storm."

"That was only a dream . . . and I . . . I never told you that! How did you know?"

"Are you sure yourself? I seem to remember it." Again, his eyes had that glazed look.

"If you remember other things, let me know at once. This is very strange—though not unwelcome. There is no magical theorem that would account for it." Guihen agreed to tell her. She went inside, put on *bracae* and tunic, then threw her old woman's ragged*sagus* over her shoulders.

They climbed the ladder. Even through the rain, Pierrette could see some distance, though the Roman camp was obscured. They pulled the ladder up, and then let it down on the far side of the wall. There was just enough room: a narrow, rocky ledge, and then the ground sloping steeply away.

Guihen hid the ladder by laying it horizontally, close against the wall's base. No one would be likely to spot it unless they looked directly down.

No one challenged them as they picked their way down among the rocks, then zigzagged along the switchbacks below the postern gate. When they reached the spring, Pierrette quickly changed into her fine clothing. Raindrops beaded on her white*sagus* but did not soak in. "Wasn't the Roman outpost right over there?" she whispered. "I hope we can get their attention without getting speared."

"How?"

"We must let them know we're coming." She tore a rag from her old cloak, and wrapped it around a green stick plucked from a small oak. She sprinkled the rag with liquid from a tiny clay vial.

"What kind of potion is that?"

She giggled nervously. "It's scented oil from the Greek merchant's stock. If the scent doesn't bemuse the Roman sentries, the light will at least let them know we're not sneaking up on them." She ignited the oily rag with a flick of her fingers.

Guihen's eyes widened. "I saw you do that before!" Pierrette tried to remember when she had last used the small spell. It was such a habit it was easier to remember when she had lit fires or lamps without it. "It wasn't . . . here," said Guihen. "I think it was a long time ago, or . . . I'm sorry. Maybe it was a dream."

Someone shouted hoarsely—in Latin. "I think we've been seen," Pierrette whispered. "Stay in the middle of this clearing so they'll see we are alone." It was not hard to tell where the Romans were, from their noisy approach. Tough, dedicated citizen-soldiers they might be, but they were not woodsmen. Pierrette pulled her cloak over her head like a hood, then raised the torch high, holding it away so its light illuminated her—but she kept her cloak over her head, and her face in shadow.

"Who in all the hells are you?" demanded the first soldier to push through the brush, a weighted*pilum* in each hand.

"We are unarmed," Pierrette said gently. "You won't need those spears."

"This is Petra, a seeress," said Guihen. "She bears a message for your general. We have just come from the city."

A centurion pushed forward, just strapping on his helmet, with its sideways-mounted blue horsehair crest. "A message? Are they ready to surrender?"

"My words are for Caius Sextius Calvinus, centurion. Please take me to him."

"I'll take you as far as the gate. Someone else will have to rouse the consul, not me."

"Ow!" shrieked Guihen. "Keep that thing away from me." A spear-wielding soldier guffawed—until the centurion turned, tapping his scabbarded short sword against his calf. They proceeded down the rough trail, with soldiers behind and ahead of them. When Guihen got ahead of her, Pierrette saw a spreading bloodstain on his kilt, over his left buttock. It did not seem to impede his walking.

At the gate, the centurion shouted, "Horatius, open that damned fence! I'm getting soaked."

"That's not the password. What are you supposed to say?"

"I've forgotten it. Damn, man, this rain is cold. Stop playing games. You know who I am."

"I've seen the little fellow with the big ears before, but who is the woman?"

"She says she's an envoy from the Gauls. Is the consul awake?" Pierrette had said no such thing, but she did not attempt to correct the centurion.

"I'll send someone to alert him."

They waited. The Romans grumbled as the drizzling rain worked its way to their skin, and cursed the unpredictable gusts that flayed their bare legs and arms. Pierrette hardly noticed rain or wind; runnels worked their way down her impervious cloak and puddled on the ground unnoticed. She saw that the gate was a lash-up of the same poles that comprised the camp's walls. The rain made its bindings stretch, and it took two soldiers to lift and drag it aside, cursing as they slipped in the mud.

"Come with me,*veleda* ," said the centurion, using her Gaulish title. He led her down a wide way, between rows of tents, to one larger than the rest. He stuck his head in. "The*veleda* is outside, consul."

"Bid her enter." The voice Pierrette heard was a smooth tenor. The centurion pushed the flap aside. A light within flared, then died. Pierrette slipped past the soldier, and reached toward the smoldering wick.

"Here," she said . . . and a small, brilliant flame danced at her fingertips, then stretched toward the lamp. Again, the warm glow of burning oil washed the tent's sodden walls.

"How did you do that?" Despite his surprise, Pierrette heard no awe in the consul's voice—as if she had performed a charlatan's trick, not a genuine spell, however small. This man, she decided, would not be easily impressed—but she had to try.

"How?" she asked, trying to force herself to sound arrogant, even annoyed. "Do you have a Great Year to learn my trade? You have no time at all." With studied casualness, she tossed her cloak aside. She saw his eyes widen. He himself was no gruff old soldier, a male equivalent of the ancient hag he had surely expected her to be. His hair was dark as her own, but curly. His eyes were blue, as were hers, but lighter, as if reflecting the clear light of an Italian sky. He smiled. "Will you sit?"

For once, she reflected, being pretty was an asset, not a hindrance. At least he was going to listen. She sensed that a barrier had dropped. She sat, self-consciously, then realized she might have made a mistake. "Pretty" was not the impression she wanted to convey to this man.

"Centurion Varro said you have a message from the Gauls' chief," he said gruffly—as if he, too, had let himself slip, and was annoyed because of it. "What is it?"

"Your centurion misunderstood. King Teutomalos has nothing to say to you. He intends to outwait you, then send your headless body to Roma. Your head he'll hold for ransom—its weight in gold." Ah! That had gotten a reaction. He had been holding a goose-quill pen, and had just broken it. "Or he'll drive a bronze spike through it, from ear to ear, to hold it in a niche by his door." Perhaps now he would take her more seriously.

"Then . . . whom do you speak for?" Yes. He would heed her words now, not just her eyes and their long, dark lashes.

"For myself—and for a hundred Roman generations to come, whose fate hinges upon the outcome of this siege. You must not wait. Attack now, before it's too late."

She could see the puzzlement in his eyes, and from it could read his thoughts: why was this woman, this enemy, pressing him to attack her people? It could only be because the effects of his siege were being felt up there, in the fortified*oppidum* . His next words dripped scorn. "Another legion is even now marching up the Argentum. The Massilians are gathering a force of thousands, too. I can afford to wait, while Teutomalos grows weak with hunger. His poor walls will fall to my machines in short order."

This was not going as Pierrette had hoped—but at least Calvinus was talking, and had not ordered her chained outside in the rain, like a dog. She forced herself not to be angry at his obtuse suspiciousness. "There is much you do not know. Before summer has come, Teutomalos will have such power that all your legions, even led by Scipio himself, could not prevail. Besides"—she did not know where her next words came from, but she somehow knew they were true ones—"your reinforcements are still in Italia, waiting for the spring winds that have not yet come. Did you think this storm outside was a fluke? No, this winter lingers long. You have had a false taste of spring. And your Massilian rabble is merchants' sons, not soldiers, and they'll be of little use to you. Either attack now and prevail, or Roma itself will be only a crumbling memory in a hundred years. Your actions alone will determine it."

He was still handsome when he gritted his teeth and glared at her. "Who are you? What filthy druid magic is this? Does some mad Gaulish god whisper such things in your ear?"

"I ask you only to listen. I greatly fear you'll think me mad, but if I can't make you understand, all will be as I have said."

He seemed to soften just a bit. Perhaps he had seen the tears of frustration that glittered in the corners of her eyes. He called out for the centurion, and asked if someone—Polybius, she thought he said—was still awake. "There is someone I want to meet you, to listen to your tale. He'll cut through the smoke of your predictions."

Chapter 23 - The Historian

Calvinus's comfortable refuge from the storm had perhaps been a farmhouse, or the residence of the *dryade* keepers of the nearby fane. It was the only permanent structure within the camp's palisade. Its walls were thick stone, recently plastered, and it was heavily thatched with new reeds. A single window's heavy shutter was now closed. It was snug and warm, and coals glowed in a bronze fire pot in the center of its single room. A white-haired man held his hands out over the heat. At first Pierrette thought he was a Gaul, because all the Romans she had seen dressed the same, in military fashion. But at a second glance, she realized she did not know at all what kind of man he was. He had a beard, while most Gauls cultivated only their mustaches.

"Honored sir," said Calvinus, "this woman claims to be a seeress, and she has spoken ominous words to me. I have told her you will help me ferret the truth from her utterings."

The old man's smile was young and mischievous, though it crackled his face in a hundred wrinkles. "My experience with oracles is strictly limited," he said, "but I'm quite willing to extend it, with someone as attractive as you. What have you been telling my friend the consul?"

"The Gallic chieftain Teutomalos, and his*dryades* —that is, druids—have been dabbling in a new, very powerful kind of magic. They have not yet achieved their goal, but when they do, and it will be soon, the forces they will bring to bear will be invincible."

"You haven't spent much time among Romans, have you, child? They honor their gods, but they are not superstitious folk like Gauls. Their magic is more worldly, and expresses itself as ballistae and catapults."

"Even Romans should be concerned, because what Teutomalos intends is to create a god, from the captive spirits of uncountable dead men. I have walked in the realm where that god will rule, even centuries from now. In that future, Roma is a minor tributary to his vast empire, and holds only Latium and Tuscany. Only one event divides that future from another, in which the Roman realm encompasses Alexander's kingdom in the East, the rivers Danu and Rhenus to the north, all of Africa to the very verge of the great desert, and the furthest islands of the Western Ocean."

"I've often pondered the role of fate in charting the course of history," said the white-haired man. "But battles are won by the actions and decisions of great men, like Hannibal, crossing this land and the mountains beyond to wage war in Italia—or like Fabius, whose avoidance of decisive battles was genius in its own right, wearing the Carthaginian down. Now you come, and postulate another crux, where one man's decision may echo down the long corridors of the unseen future." He shook his head, not in negation, but as if to clear it of cobwebs. "If what you say is true—though I see no way to verify it—my friend the consul holds not just one battle, but the entire future of Roma in his hands. But—is there still a

place for fate, in all this?"

Pierrette smiled at him. Her heart was pounding with excitement as well as tension, because the elderly fellow's words, his very thoughts, were not unfamiliar to her. She knew who this man was! "I am here," she said. "What great man commanded my presence?"

"Exactly!" he crowed. "Are you Fortuna herself—Tyche, an embodiment of that internal voice that says to the consul `Do this, and thus will events transpire, or do that and . . . ?' I don't believe in that goddess, you know."

Pierrette made a show of pinching her arm, as if to verify she was not dreaming. "I am no disembodied voice in the general's head. What I have seen is not mere speculation."

"But how can we confirm it? I am almost eighty years old. I won't see another decade, let alone a century or two."

Pierrette's mind raced, trying to remember something she had read. . . . "Have you found the headwaters of the river Padus here, just north of Massilia?"

The abrupt change of subject disconcerted him. "What? The Padus's source is on the other side of the Alps."

"That's not what you wrote in your second book. `The river Padus, which poets have celebrated as the Eridanus, rises in the Alps near the apex of the triangle'—the triangle, that is, that is formed by the Alps, the Appenines, and the Tyrrhenian sea—`and begins by flowing south toward the plain.' How many future historians will scoff at your ignorance of geography, and cite that passage to denigrate everything else you've written?"

"Unfair! When I wrote that, I knew no one who had followed the river to its source. Flaccus's foray, last year, was the first time the actual distances were measured with chains. And anyway, I was only generalizing, because most of my readers are Greeks, and know nothing at all of the area. But how do you know what I wrote . . . ?"

"I've read all thirty-nine of your books, master Polybius. I've even perused the fortieth, the index volume."

"How do you know of that?" He turned to Calvinus. "What have you told her?"

"Nothing," the Roman said. "Perhaps she heard me say your name, but nothing else." The old man, Polybius, withdrew his hands from the brazier's heat, and shuffled over to a brass-bound trunk along the wall. Opening it, he withdrew a sheaf of vellums, and proffered it to Pierrette. "Is this what you . . . perused?"

She thumbed through the sheets. Only the first two had been written on. "There is hardly anything here," she said.

Polybius turned to Calvinus. "The*veleda* has established her bona fides, I think. This is my fortieth volume, the index to all the rest, and it is yet unwritten, only begun since we arrived here, as a sop to the boredom of this camp, and because there has been nothing else for me to record. No one but you knew of it, or even of my intention to write an index. How could she have read it?"

Polybius sighed. "Open the door. It's stuffy in here." Indeed, though the fumes of charcoal ordinarily seeped out of thatched roofs, the rain had swelled the reeds, and the atmosphere was close and breathless. Calvinus pushed the wooden door open. Fumes ebbed out near the lintel, and a rush of cool freshness swept in over the sill, making the brazier's coals flare up.

Though the trampled soil outside was puddled, the water was smooth, unruffled. The rain had ceased to fall. Pierrette saw the glimmer of moonlight reflected in the still water. She sighed. Was Guihen right? Her mood of gloom and disaster looming ahead had dissipated.

The historian Polybius was a wise man. Though a Greek, he had been a friend of Scipio Aemilianus, Roma's final victor over Carthage. He had held high office in the eastern provinces, and the express purpose of his forty-volume history of Roma had been to explain to his Greek readership the Romans' success—their superior military organization, forged in the several Punic Wars, and their superior constitution, which pitted noble consuls (elected by the Senate) against plebeian tribunes (elected by the commons) against each other, and placed priests and judges in opposition to both.

When she considered that, the stakes of her success were raised still further. The Roman constitution was an exquisite system of checks and balances, according to Polybius, that had evolved from the conflict of classes in a city beset on all sides by Sabines, Oscans, Etruscans, Celts, and Greeks, who attacked Roma every time its internal conflicts rose to the fore. If Roma flourished, that system, however adulterated by autocratic emperors not yet born, however undermined by the decay that Polybius postulated was inherent in all political entities, would serve as example throughout the centuries, long after Roma itself was a fading memory.

Polybius's presence here, in Gaul, unrecorded in any history or biography, was perhaps the best thing that could have happened. Once Scipio's friend and advisor, now he was Calvinus's. If she could convince him of her mission, she would not have to convince the consul. Polybius would do it for her. No wonder the puddles were smooth and shiny, and no wonder the clouds no longer muffled the moon and stars. Pierrette decided that the day soon dawning would be a bright and sunny one, whether or not she had anything at all to do with it.

Chapter 24 - Fortuna's Legions

Thus ended an eventful day, and thus began a chain of placid ones, because—as Pierrette had suspected—Polybius was a perspicacious questioner. As well, he was a prodigious talker, with a wealth of anecdotes. He was, after all, a longtime companion of famous men, and had himself ruled a territory larger than the Athenian empire had been. Now in his last years he had become reflective, and Pierrette, with her own fund of histories read and remembered, was an ideal mirror.

Guihen—soon freed from the soldiers who had guarded him, and given the run of the camp—often sat silently, absorbing the rough outlines of their conversations. "He's testing you, isn't he?" the sprightly one said, one evening as they walked back to the tent they shared. "He's trying to catch you out."

"He will surely find errors, because my memory isn't perfect. And he will surely disagree with me,

because I've read books that aren't even in the great library at Alexandria, so our viewpoints differ greatly. But he'll catch me in no lies, because I tell none."

"This is taking a lot of time. Aren't you worried?"

"If Polybius vouches for me, and Calvinus acts, the time is well spent. If I rush things, and fail, then it's all wasted time."

"I suppose. I wonder how they're doing there." He gestured in the direction of Entremont.

"I try not to."

* * ** * *

They took one meal each day with the consul and his advisor, in the small house. That was when Pierrette got her first inkling of a new difficulty. Calvinus had begun to act . . . chivalrous . . . toward her. Unlike many of his officers, he did not have a woman. When Polybius pointedly ushered Guihen away after a sumptuous meal of early lamb seasoned with fresh rosemary, crusty Gaulish-style loaves from the newly built ovens, and steamed fern shoots with wild onions, Calvinus refilled Pierrette's wine cup with a fine golden Tuscan vintage. "I saved this for a special occasion,*veleda* ."

"What might that be, consul? Is today a feast day for a Roman god?"

"Every day is Fortuna's holiday. May she smile on me tonight." He sat down on the same low, hand-built couch she occupied.

Pierrette had few skills as a coquette. Her upbringing had been as a boy, not a girl, because of her father's disputed inheritance, and even her dalliances—as with Alkides—had been transparent and open, her enthusiasms direct and her reticence unfeigned. As soon as she discerned his intent, she spoke out.

"You are an attractive man," she said. "Were I like other women, I would likely spend this night in your bed."

Her open assessment threw him off guard. "It was not my intent to . . ."

"But isn't it your desire—and thus quite like my own? Have I embarrassed you? I suppose a Roman woman might bat her eyelashes and simper, then veil her `yes' or `no' with shy pretense."

"I don't remember any Roman women. You have wiped them all from my mind."

She sighed, and edged away even as he shifted closer to her. "You make me regret my profession, consul. Need you taunt me further with what I cannot have? I must remain virgin, or lose the skills I have spent so many years attaining. I know, because a goddess told me."

"So many years? How many is that? Fifteen? Seventeen?" He was condescending to her. But she was not quite the child she seemed. She drew back and turned so she faced him, and her eyes locked to his.

"Look well, Caius Sextius Calvinus. Are these the eyes of a giddy girl? What do you see in them?"

He backed away, his expression unreadable. What had he seen? Pierrette did not know, but it must have been enough. "I apologize,*veleda* . You are indeed no precocious child. But you are no less beautiful for that, and I have fallen no less in love with you."

"I am . . . infatuated . . . with you also. You are good-looking, powerful, and sometimes charming too. But just as you would not willingly lose a battle for the sake of a pretty face, I won't abandon my cause for a handsome one."

He grinned. "Your facile tongue amazes me. In one breath, you bring me down to callow boyhood, and raise yourself to equal status with a consul of Roma."

"Only regarding this single issue. I am not a commander of warriors, and I know nothing of ballistae, catapults, siege towers, or . . . turtles." A "turtle,"*testudo* , was a close formation of men with shields raised overhead like a roof, to protect rammers or sappers.

"See? You're doing it again. I'd wager you do know what each of those is. You've vanquished me—for now. But Hannibal fought Roma for more than a decade, and there were many battles won and lost on each side. This was only our first."

"We'll fight them in their proper time," she said. "Have you been considering the proper time for your assault on Entremont? I saw a company of your men bring in several great logs today. Are those for the siege machines?"

"Will Fortuna smile on me if I say they are?"

Pierrette concealed her dismay. She had not intended to imply anything like that, but the way one subject had followed so swiftly upon the other, Calvinus had made a connection between them. But was that all bad? If he thought that pressing toward honest battle with the Gauls advanced his cause with her . . . but how far did she dare let that proceed, and once started, how could she stop it?

"I'll walk you to your tent," he said, rising. "Tomorrow, I'll introduce you to my engineers, who will show you anything you want to know about ballistae and the rest."

* * *

That night it rained again, and the next day hardly dawned at all. The gradual transition from black night to gray day crept over the camp unnoticed even by the birds, which forgot to announce the new day at all. When at last the guard captain could distinguish a black thread from a white one, he ordered a horn blown, and sodden men emerged from their tents, then struggled to light fires under water-soaked faggots, to break their fasts.

True to his promise, Calvinus introduced Pierrette to his chief engineer, but as there was little to show her but unhewn logs, she did not spend much time with him, in the drizzling rain. She soon sought out Polybius, who had sensibly stayed in the snug stone house, and had lit several lamps to ward off the gloom.

"I've been giving your ideas a good going-over," he said, as they sipped hot barley-and-bean soup. "When I consider my own books again, one flaw that rises up and beats me is the nature of fate, and its proper relationship with history. If my successors find aught to criticize but my inconsistencies regarding Tyche's role—or Fortuna's, to use her Roman name—they will have plenty to say."

"Calvinus believes in the goddess," Pierrette reflected, remembering the light in his pale blue eyes.

"All soldiers worship her," Polybius responded, "because no one has bothered to define just what is meant by luck, chance, fate, and caprice. That, too, is my own failure. When a great general

succeeds—as did Hannibal, bringing his men and thirty-seven elephants all the way from Iberia to the outskirts of Roma, we say Fortuna aided him—but was the goddess even consulted?"

"I think that careful planning, like researching his possible routes, and the alliances he made in advance with the Gallic tribes whose territory he had to cross, were more important," Pierrette stated.

"Exactly! His `good fortune' was his own doing, and Roma's subsequent `bad luck' resulted from that. But some `lucky' events are less subject to analysis—the flash flood that delays an army, for instance, and changes the outcome of a battle. Must we attribute such to the goddess's hand at work?"

The discussion of fate occupied them for much of the gloomy day, and resulted in a short list of examples. Polybius praised Pierrette's fine handwriting, which was much neater than his cramped, elderly style, "Though you have an odd way of making your `sigmas,' when they occur at the end of a word." Pierrette's Greek was the cursive style, used for manuscripts, not the rectilinear capitals seen on monuments, and it had been learned from documents recopied and "updated" many times since they were first written.

At last the old man pleaded fatigue, and Pierrette did not regret it—she had not really convinced him of anything, or persuaded him to throw the weight of his opinion behind her demand that Calvinus engage the Gauls without delay, but she was sure Polybius now considered her a mind worth reckoning with, and when the time was right, she would test his own mind's flexibility, but hopefully not beyond its limits.

* * *

With Guihen, she ate yesterday's bread, dipped in a stew of dried beans and lentils, flavored (ever so slightly) with salted pork. The elfin one, slipping in and out of the camp with almost-supernatural ease, had found an entire ham in the smoky rafters of a Gaulish farmstead not a mile from the Roman gate. Gaulish hams had been famous for centuries, even in Roma. It would keep indefinitely, even though it would begin to mold in the rainy weather. The mold would not penetrate, and could be scraped off. So it made sense to ration it.

"Well?" he demanded, his interrogative erupting mushily around his mouthful of bread and beans. "What have you told the old Greek?"

"Not much, yet. I need more time, to get him to trust me. The truth is not exactly self-evident, you know. I'd never be able to convince the consul of any of it—especially that I need to remain . . . intact."

"Is that going to be a problem? It is, isn't it?" His large, luminous violet eyes did not miss a thing, even the slight turning-away of her head. "What are you going to do about that?"

"I'll have to wait and see."

* * *

For a change, the day was clear and sunny, though still unseasonably chill. Pierrette dubiously observed the progress of the engineers. Several siege engines were under construction—but they did not look like much, mostly unassembled parts that bore little relationship with what they might someday become. When the chief engineer told her they had to be assembled, tested, then taken apart to be dragged up the hillsides and defiles, then reassembled before they could be brought to bear against Entremont's walls, she became even more discouraged. There would not be enough time.

"Come," Calvinus said, attempting to lighten her mood. "The legions are being mustered this morning. I want you to see the might of Roma at its best."

The muster took place in the two-hundred-foot-wide space between tents and the south wall, and Calvinus, offering his arm, led Pierrette in front of the foremost rank. Centurions and signifers, the latter holding their gleaming standards, were bright red-plumed accents among the masses, who were mostly dun and dirty beige, their helmets a variety of shapes, some iron, some bronze. This, she reminded herself, was not the army of the Roman Empire, professional soldiers, but a citizens' army, troops levied for a season or a year. But each man had an identical black plume atop his helm that made him seem much taller.

The soldiers were grouped in maniples of two "centuries," each "century" ten men wide and six deep. "But that's only sixty men," Pierrette protested. "Doesn't a `century' mean a hundred?"

"It used to be so," her escort said. "A legion originally had forty-two centuries. It still has forty-two hundred men, but the way it's organized has changed. Now there are ten maniples of*hastati* —those foremost troops—and ten of*principes* , the ranks behind—you can see them through the intervals in the *hastati* maniples.*Principes* are, as a rule, older and more experienced—and better armored."

"Why are the less experienced men in front? Is it that way in battle, too?"

"Elegant speeches can energize young men, and they'll fight for honor and patriotism—so we put them in front, where their fires burn hotly." He chuckled.

"What's funny?"

"By the time they're smart enough not to pay much attention to speeches, those who survive are made *principes* . They are often ordered up when the*hastati* have borne the brunt of the initial conflict. The third ranks—*triarii*—are mostly older still, and sometimes see no fighting at all. They are held in reserve, but when they do fight—let the foe beware! Their centuries are only thirty men each, but are worth sixty of the others."

Pierrette observed that the*hastati* and*principe* maniples were each backed up by two rows of men who wore no chain mail or breastplates, and who had the skins of wolves, foxes, and other creatures on their helmets instead of plumes. Only their swords and shields were like the rest. "Those are*velites* , young men who have never soldiered before. Traditionally, they fought with the mature men to gain experience—which they still do, of course, but we've recently been using them to good effect by having them out front at the onset of battle, to throw javelins, then retreat behind the others. In camp, they serve the older soldiers and maintain their equipment, and often their betters become quite protective of them, and thus see to their further training on their own."

"Are the spears the front ranks carry*hastae* ? I thought*hastae* were long lances."

Calvinus eyed her curiously. "You have an odd fund of knowledge, especially being so young. No, *hastati* used to carry long spears, but now all they have is*pili* , throwing spears, and the*triarii* carry *hastae* —it's something like `centuries' no longer having a hundred men."

On both ends of the ranked maniples of*hastati* ,*principes* , and*triarii* were the cavalry, in ten squadrons of thirty men and horses, called*turmae* , each man armed with a long, heavy lance with a spike on its butt end. The men wore short breastplates, and mail armor. Their swords were longer and slimmer than the*gladii* the infantry carried. "They require a greater reach, from their horses," said Calvinus.

By the time the consul expressed his approval of the troops' condition, and left the field with Pierrette, she had a bewildering amount of information. Each maniple had two centurions, and the one commanding the rightmost centuries was senior. Each officer—a tribune—commanded three maniples, usually one each of the three age groups, with their assigned*velites* . Together, they formed a cohort. The two remaining tribunes (there were twelve) served the consul as staff, and as replacements for casualties.

Consuls, Pierrette had learned, were elected by the Senate from among the nobility, and tribunes by the plebeians, the Roman commoners, from among their own. Tribunes divided the levied soldiers into centuries, and the*principes* ,*triarii* , and*hastati* maniples each elected first a senior and then a junior centurion from their numbers. Most often, these were proven men. The centurions then appointed others as*optiones* —clerks, supply officers, and paymasters—and chose signifers, standard-bearers. "Of course things aren't entirely rigid," Calvinus said. "In fact, the election of tribunes has gone the way of hundred-man centuries—but the principle remains."

Despite such caveats, Pierrette was profoundly impressed—more so even than with the ferocious Gauls. For all their élan and warlike spirits, how could they—individual warriors, who fought in whatever manner they wished, with any weapons they chose—stand up against the Romans' stolid, organized might? She had a silly thought: the Gauls were like thick, solid oxcart-wheels loosed down a hill, bouncing and rolling wildly, smashing everything they struck, while the Roman legions were a war-chariot, a smoothly functioning construct of different parts—axles, hubs, naves, spokes, felloes, and tires, springs, frames, linchpins, harnesses, reins, and horses—that worked together for a purpose, as directed by the consul, the charioteer.

"With just the men you have," she said, "you can defeat the Gauls. You don't need more."

He shook his head. "Only if the battle site is perfectly chosen, with a hill, cliff, or unfordable stream on each flank of our force, never so far apart that I have to spread the maniples thinly, or reduce the depth of their ranks. My Massilian allies were to have as many infantry as I already possess, and more importantly still, nine hundred more horsemen to anchor our flanks if no natural obstacles were available. That is critically important, because if the flank is turned—if the foe gets behind us—all advantage is lost. Even disciplined soldiers are then no better than a mob. If they have to fight enemies behind themselves as well as in front, they are unable to protect their fellows, shoulder to shoulder, as they are trained to do."

"But I know just the place!" Pierrette said. "Beyond the north rampart of Entremont, there is a forest of tall pines and upland oaks, the preserve of the goddess Nematona. Though not impassable, the trees are close enough to break up an enemy charge. Then, no more than three hundred paces distant, across flat ground that rises like a ramp to the city wall, is a dense copse of scrub oaks and young pines far too dense to swing even a short sword in. Those will . . . anchor your flanks . . . perfectly, I think."

His eyes were wide. "You amaze me again. Can you show me that place?" Pierrette pondered it. She had seen it from atop the rightmost bastion of Entremont's north wall, at the juncture of the low and high towns. Was there a place where Calvinus could see it—without himself being seen, or captured by the enemy?

"Let me ask Guihen. If anyone can find such a place, and guide you there with great stealth, it is he."

* * *

"Tomorrow night," said Guihen emphatically, glancing at the sky, where thick, puffy cumulus clouds alternated with patches of brilliant sapphire blue. "I know just the place Pierrette's thinking of."

"Why not tonight?" asked the consul. "Have you sought an omen about it?" His tone was sarcastic.

"There is your omen," Guihen said, brightly oblivious, pointing at an eastward-marching cloud. "Tonight's sky will be like today's—mostly clouds. Tomorrow will be clearer, but there will still be a few clouds, and the moon will rise soon after sunset, and will be almost full—we will have long moments of darkness, to skulk amid the rocks and trees, and equally long ones of bright moonlight, to see what we can see."

Calvinus nodded. "Tomorrow night, then."

"Wear something dark," Guihen said. "And if you must carry all that iron"—Calvinus was still dressed in his shiny parade armor, and wore both sword and dagger—"blacken it with soot, and wrap your clanking ornaments in leather or soft cloth, or we'll end up explaining ourselves to Teutomalos in the high city . . . or you will, at least."

"I know how to skulk, little man. When I was a boy, I stalked rabbits, and caught them by their ears."

"Hmm," Guihen mused, as if taking that boast completely seriously. "Can you do that with a squirrel?"

The consul chose to accept that as a joke, and only smiled. "Be ready at tomorrow's sunset."

Guihen looked himself up and down—he was already clad in dark and light green, and wore soft shoes, not hard-soled*caligae* like the Romans. "I am ready now."

Pierrette guessed that Calvinus, at that moment, decided he would never have the last word with the diminutive Ligure—and was not going to try. He turned to go.

"May I come with you tomorrow night?" Pierrette asked.

"No," said Calvinus.

"No!" said Guihen.

Then each man looked at the other, and broke into laughter. "One person can be a feeding mouse," said Guihen, "and the next, he can be a slippery stoat, or a perched owl. Two men dare not make a single sound, crushing a twig or turning a pebble. Three together . . ."

"Never mind," said Pierrette, resignedly. "I understand."

The next evening she saw them to the gate, and when she retired to the tent and her bed, she fully intended to remain awake until they returned.

Chapter 25 - New Gods and Old

The leaders of the Gaulish cavalry and infantry converged on the high town, bearing torches made from bundles of oily pine wood. They converged on the Sacred Way, but passed by the*nemeton* and turned right, gathering in front of a large building with a columned portico in the Greek style. One of the men was Bellagos.

Three others joined them: an ancient woman, who hobbled with the aid of her companions, one a girl of perhaps thirteen years, and the other a matron holding a nursling in the crook of her free arm. None spoke. There was no need—they had come with one intent: to lay their demand before Teutomalos. "I count nineteen and three," said a half-Greek clerk who monitored the doorway, even at night. "I will summon the*vergobret* ."

Vergobret: the word "king" had no exact equivalent in the Gaulish tongue. "Rix," cognate to the Latin "Rex," denoted a war chief only. A*vergobret* was something between a mayor and a supreme magistrate, elected from among the noble families every two years. But Teutomalos had continued in office years beyond his term, and as yet no one had mentioned holding an election, which required a quorum of nineteen heads of clans or military leaders (often the same thing), and three others. Nineteen and three were both sacred numbers; the nineteen years of the calendar and the three aspects of the most ancient deity: virgin, mother with flowing breasts, and crone.

Their primary intent was not to reject the leadership of Teutomalos, though his authority had grown well beyond its traditional limits over six consecutive terms in office, but to raise the issue of an election with one objective: to bring a false war to a real conclusion—battle with the Romans.

"Enter," said the clerk moments later. "Follow me." The*vergobreon* was not huge, as palaces went—perhaps sixty feet long and wide—but it was all one room, divided into thirds by two rows of fluted columns. The middle was a wide aisle with clerestory arches over the colonnades. By day, diffuse bright sunlight poured across the central aisle, but oil lamps between columns, and even the flaring torches at the far end of the room, did little to relieve the nighttime gloom.

The three women led, and the warriors following at the pace of the eldest. As they approached, Bellagos distinguished a shadowy form ahead, a man-shape drawn huge, seated on a throne black as night, that shimmered like polished marble. Teutomalos was a big man—anyone who had seen him speak, standing a full head above his tallest*dryades* , knew that. But the figure on the throne seemed larger still.

Bellagos's eyes went wider than the gloom could account for. Teutomalos's muscles rippled like writhing snakes, like independent creatures beneath his skin. The big hands that gripped his onyx seat's arms were white-knuckled, as if he struggled to keep his body under control, as if those massive muscles were all at war, each one with the others. But it was his face that made the hardened warrior cringe: had the *vergobret* 's eyes always been so wide, the whites showing all around? Had the graven lines furrowing his cheeks always been deep as sword slashes?

"You want war, do you?" His voice was as harsh as iron-shod hooves on sharp gravel. "You shall have war. And I will lead you forth. But not yet. I am almost . . . ready." What, Bellagos wondered uneasily, had he almost said? "I am almost . . . what?"

He remembered the*veleda* 's words: Teutomalos was creating . . . a new god. A god compounded of the captive spirits of a thousand dead. Old Segoboros had called that a figure of speech—but was it? There was Teutomalos, struggling as if he fought a war within his own body, against . . . himself? Or against those thousand*fantômes* ?

Bellagos had seen the salt lagoons at the mouth of the Rhodanus. When the brine was sufficiently concentrated by sunlight, crystals formed at the pond edges. The salt dissolved in the water then formed new crystals that grew ever outward from the first ones. Teutomalos was that first crystal, Bellagos realized, the core of the growing god. But the*fantômes* , blind and mute as they were, did not simply surrender. They fought against Teutomalos's domination, and that was the source of his hideous struggling.

Junior member of the delegation, Bellagos was not required to speak, which was just as well. Around him, ahead of him, other voices droned, and Teutomalos responded in rasping tones. But who was the shadowy figure behind the*vergobret* ? Whose face was hidden within that dark cowl? Bellagos edged closer.

The mysterious one gripped Teutomalos's massive shoulder as if to hold him in his seat by main force. A trick of acoustics made his whisper as clear as if uttered in Bellagos's ear: "Subdue them, king. Bend them to your will."

"They tear me apart!" hissed Teutomalos. "They will not be still! They fight for command of my hands, my eyes!"

"Shut your eyes, and you deny them sight. Master them. Win this battle, and become the god, and you will be ever victorious."

"I shall! I shall be Teutatis, god of the people." Then he moaned aloud as a particularly vicious spasm twisted him, and the shadowy one stepped away, and flung back his cowl.

"You see how the king suffers, to master the god within," said the*dryade* —an evil, hatchet-faced fellow, Bellagos thought, and no one he had seen before. He would have remembered those cruel, burning eyes. "He does this for you, the Salluvii," the*dryade* said. "Go now, and say nothing of what you have seen. When the time is right—a day, a week—his power will be as a thousand men, and he will lead you against the Romans, to victory."

Disconcerted, disoriented, the twenty-two retreated. Bellagos needed to speak with the aged crone. Surely a priestess of the Mother would have something to say about this new "god." He could not accept that what was happening was right. Surely the priestesses of the Mother would not accept this new "god."

But when they passed out into the street, the night was thick with humidity, the sky black as the inside of a sack, without moon or stars—an unnatural night. Unspeakable things seemed to lurk in the darkness that their rekindled torches could not dispel. "Tomorrow," they said to one another. "Tomorrow, we'll speak of this." The two younger women hustled the elderly one away.

Inside the king's chamber, someone screamed—a hoarse, baritone bellow without words. The thick air damped the sound—or the greedy, hovering spirits consumed it.

* * *

Pierrette awakened suddenly in the stygian darkness of her tent, her bedclothes twisted and tangled, hair plastered to her head with sweat. She crawled to the foot of her pallet and thrust her head outside, just as the moon's face emerged from thick cloud. The camp was silent, and nothing seemed amiss.

But something was. The dream had been too real. She had been there, in the*oppidum* , her spirit peering from Bellagos's eyes. Was the old one a priestess of the goddess, as Bellagos believed? Were all three

women? But there was no sacred spring or pool within Entremont's walls.*Ma* did not appear often within the stone walls of a city.

Shifting moonlight made shadow and silvery light dance, outlining the red-tiled roof of the fane, only a short distance away. The fane was here, within the Romans' palisade, inaccessible to the Gaul women . . . but not to her.

She threw her*sagus* over her shoulders as she stepped from the tent. Thinking of her pouch with its powders and herbs, she hesitated, but did not go back for them. She did not intend to go anywhere but into the fane itself.

The moon and clouds made a path between lesser pools where women washed clothing by day. It painted the weathered wood of the fane's door with argent glitters. She pushed inside. There were no benches in the Gallic fane. She remembered benches, in her own time, when she had undressed and lowered herself into the water, but remembered none when she had awakened, in her warm bath.

A cricket chirped lethargically in a corner, but he was the only occupant besides herself. Where was the goddess—the woman in the crimson dress? Would she have to undress, and bathe in the pool, and fall asleep, for the goddess to visit her here? She was no longer the least bit sleepy, after her terrifying dream, but she was chilled from her moonlit walk. She wrapped herself in her mantle, then sat, leaning against the stone of the wall. She had no intention of falling asleep. . . .

* * *

A cool breeze brushed her forehead as the door of the fane swung open, letting the night air inside. The goddess—or the Ligure woman?—shrugged her heavy red, ocher, and green plaid*sagus* from her shoulders, then sat on it, next to Pierrette. "I thought you'd be here sooner," she said, "but when you didn't come, I stopped watching for you. Have you been here long?"

The woman was unquestionably the same one who had greeted her here before—with the same crimson scarf and dress, the same ornate golden torque resting on her collarbones—but she had come from outside the fane. Would a goddess just walk in through the door? Was this the goddess—or just a camp follower, a woman who shared some centurion's tent, now dressed in her feast-day best, for some reason that eluded Pierrette?

"Did you expect me to emerge from the pool itself?" the woman asked, smiling. "I saw the way you looked at me. You walked in here, didn't you? You didn't just appear from nowhere at all, like the last time. Why should I do differently?"

"Are you the goddess?"

"Some might say so. But what does it matter? You came here to speak with me, didn't you? Now here I am."

Pierrette surrendered to her logic, such as it was. Whore, priestess, or goddess, the Mother was all of those, and more. Did one girl's doubts change that? "Do you know why I came?" Pierrette asked.

"You want me to play guessing games? Why don't you just tell me?"

Pierrette sighed. Things were never easy, nor often completely clear. "I had a dream . . ." she began. As she recounted it, the other woman toyed with a ringlet of dark hair that had escaped from her scarf. She nodded knowingly from time to time, but did not interrupt until Pierrette had finished.

"I knew something was terribly wrong, up there on the hill," she mused, "but no one has told me more—when the Romans built their palisade, I stayed here. And of course, the Three in Entremont haven't been able to speak with me. So what do you want me to do about it?"

"Tell me what I should do."

"Me? You know what you have to do: what you came for."

"What about Calvinus? What if I . . . surrender to him?"

"Use your head. He didn't come all the way from Roma to bed you. He hasn't tried to force you. Do what you must, to get him to move against the*oppidum* ."

That was not the advice Pierrette wanted—it was not even a promise that she would succeed, or that Calvinus would. Was it always up to her, alone? If the woman was not the goddess, she sounded just like her, and Pierrette felt just as angry with her.

"Why don't you go back to your tent, and get some sleep. You'll need to be bright-eyed tomorrow."

Was that, Pierrette wondered, a prophecy? "Thank you," she said, rather coldly, as she got to her feet. The woman did not rise.

"You're welcome. If all goes well for you, then it is you I will thank."

Pierrette stepped outside, and took several steps from the door. Then as she whirled her heavy cloak over her shoulders, she turned and looked back. The pool glittered with fragmented moonbeams, but nothing cast shadows across the floor, because nothing—and no one—was there. She resisted the urge to run to the far end of the fane, to check the other door.

Back in her tent, she straightened the tangled bedclothes and lay down, doubtful that she could fall asleep again—but when she awakened, even the late-rising birds were in full chant, and Guihen lay sleeping, each breath making faint whistling noises like tiny sparrows as it passed among the hairs in his nose.

* * *

The bath attendant, with his heavy basket, eyed the scholar ibn Saul disdainfully. The crazy old man and his surly boy were exactly as he had left them, one at each end of the old structure. They had rigged brass pots and cords from the two doors so that if anyone opened them, it would make a clatter—but no one had been in or out since they had arrived and taken up their positions. He wished he had made a mark on the wall for every day they had been there. How long had it been? There had been two Sabbath masses, but he could not remember how long before the first one they had arrived, or how many days since the second. . . . His understanding of mathematics was minuscule. They had been there, he concluded, more than a week, and less than three.

Despite the old scholar's grumbling if the bread he brought was not still warm from the oven, the wine cool from the cellar, the cheese scraped clean of mold, they paid well for his attendance upon them, in tiny silver coins with a face on one side, an animal on the other. The scholar's purse must be bottomless, he reflected, because he already had more coins than fingers.

"What kept you?" ibn Saul snapped. The attendant shrugged, set his basket down, and waited for his

coin.

"This is the same old stuff," the boy Lovi whined. "Didn't I tell you I wanted meat? Crispy lamb?"

Ibn Saul snorted. "Heavy food will make you sleep too soundly. I want you alert. When we finish here, we'll feast at the hostelry by the south gate on our way out of town. But now . . ."

"I know. I know. We have to be sure no one comes out or goes in."

"Exactly," said his master. "The experiment, to be valid, must be rigorous."

"But if Piers is still in there, he's starved to death by now!"

"But if he isn't? If indeed he has gone . . . somewhere else?"

"If he has, I'll wager he's not living on old bread and sour wine, and cheese that smells like my feet!"

* * *

"It's a perfect spot," the consul said at mid-morning, when Pierrette visited him. Guihen could not say what the consul had thought, and she could not wait longer to find out. "We'll be able to advance within bowshot of the walls, with our flanks secure all the while. We'll never have to spread our line of advance thinly, and the ground is even enough that the maniples won't get out of step with each other."

She smiled brightly. "I told you it was a good spot."

His next words dashed her risen hopes. "Of course none of that may matter, you know. In fact, if Teutomalos has any sense at all, it won't."

"What do you mean?"

"If I were at home, and I wished perhaps to honor a god with a feast, and I invited half the Senate to attend, how would I feel if no one showed up to dine? If the setting is perfect for the Roman legions, Teutomalos will surely see that, and will refuse battle. And after all my efforts to provide a feast for him . . ."

"You must make him want to sample your fine fare," she said softly, thinking of the hideous, arrogant face of the Gaulish king.

Chapter 26 - Love and War

"Are you ill, Master Polybius? I can come back tomorrow."

"No, no, child. Come in. It's merely this weather. The consul and I were discussing politics. You may find it interesting."

"Politics?" she asked as she found a seat—the only place was on the bench next to Calvinus. She hoped he would not assume anything from that. If there had been another stool like Polybius's . . .

"Everything Roman is political," the historian said. "For example, this expedition has its real roots not in Massilia's plea for aid, but in Roma's ongoing dispute over land reform. The consul and I have been on opposite sides of the issue until recently. Are you familiar with the names Gracchus and Flaccus?"

"Of course. The two Gracchi brothers, Tiberius and Gaius, wanted to divide the land captured in the Punic wars among the Roman poor. Fulvius Flaccus, last year's consul, sided with them not out of idealism but because even poor landowners incurred the obligation to serve in the legions, if called—and Flaccus was a military man."

"Ah—you really do know. And my good friend Scipio—where did he fit in?"

"He opposed them. The lands in question, though still in the public trust, were actually in the hands of the socii, Roma's Latin and Italian allies. Scipio Aemilianus's loyalties lay with those men, many of whom had fought with him against the Carthaginians."

"And I agreed with him," said Polybius. "Land for the poor—and troops for the legions—are good causes, but not at the cost of betraying one's allies. Gaius Gracchus and Fulvius Flaccus came up with a fresh alternative: our agreement with Massilia calls for us to have use only of a stretch of land across coastal Gaul, for a road—but Massilia has no claim upon the hinterlands. If, in the course of supporting our Greek allies here, we acquire more land—vast tracts of it, especially in the fertile Rhodanus valley . . ."

"You'll divide that land—the Gauls' land—among the Roman poor, and call it*Provincia Transalpina*—the province beyond the Alps. And Tiberius Gracchus will be its first governor."

Both men looked at her strangely. "That's . . . that would be quite difficult," said Polybius. "Unless, of course, this province you prophesy is to be governed by . . . a*fantôme* ."

"What do you mean?" A chill ran up Pierrette's ribs.

"Tiberius Gracchus was murdered by angry senators five years ago, when he tried for a third consecutive term as Tribune, which was against tradition, and perhaps the law."

"Murdered? But no, he was . . . is . . ." He might have been governor of Gaul, she realized, had history not been changed. Was his death a result of the change—or was it perhaps the cause? It would have taken so very little effort for a malignant god to tip the scale slightly with such great effect: one angry senator or senator's loyal client in that crowd, to delay Tiberius Gracchus's escape for a few seconds, and thus forever, when the clubs began to strike him.

"We have a problem, don't we?" mused Calvinus. "If indeed you have seen a future time, it is not our future, because the elder Gracchus is dead, and will not govern Gaul—if indeed there is to be a Roman Gaul. Your prophecies are tainted. How can we know anything will be as you say?"

"With or without Tiberius Gracchus, if there is no province, there will be no defense against the Teutons, a Germanic tribe, when they invade. You must take Entremont, or all will be as I have foreseen." Was Gracchus's death indeed only a temporary ripple in time's current? If the Salyen Gauls, the Salluvii, were defeated here, would some other Roman step up to fill the void Gracchus's murder had left, or was it already too late? Had history already been changed too much, the stream diverted into a new channel, and Roma doomed?

Polybius stood up, swaying slightly. "I must be sicker than I thought," he said, weakly. "I am going to lie down." Calvinus took his arm, and led him to his bed, like a dutiful son. He pulled a curtain across the room, then returned to his seat—ignoring the stool Polybius had vacated.

"You care for him, don't you?" Pierrette asked.

"I have a certain affection for him—and he served my predecessor, Scipio, well. His advice is not to be taken lightly." The consul placed his hand on Pierrette's knee. "And I have taken his advice. I am making preparations to storm the*oppidum* even if no reinforcements arrive."

The brazier's embers gave Calvinus's face a warm glow and enhanced lines of character and harsh weathering as a Gallic sculptor of bronze ornaments incised a casting into sharp relief. He was handsome, well-built, and surely not many days past his fortieth year. So why did she feel so . . . so wrong about being alone with him? And why did the sense of wrongness increase as he moved closer, and put his arm around her?

"I've given my word," he murmured. "The tribunes assure me the troops are ready, their weapons honed. Tomorrow, many of them will die." The implication was clear to Pierrette: "They will die for you" was what he meant. And now the consul expected . . . "Now what of your word?"

She placed her small hand over the large one resting on her knee. "I hear thunder," she said, "and I saw Taran's dark clouds in the west, at dusk, but it is not raining."

"The storm will come," he replied, his strong fingers kneading the inside of her thighs, causing not-entirely-unwelcome tingles that spread outward in waves. "Listen—I hear raindrops on the roof tiles." Even nature, she decided, was conspiring against her. She had certainly had nothing to do with the rain that now dripped over the eaves outside of the single window.

If this was wrong, why did she so enjoy his hand's pressure, and so anticipate his next advance, as inexorable as the march of*hastati* ,*principes* , and*triarii* in their precise maniples, standard bearers and centurions at the fore,*pili* at the ready? "I can't give you what you want," she whispered desperately, turning her face from his kiss. "Not until the battle is won, and the citadel taken. My . . . my skills . . . might yet be needed, and I dare not throw them away."

"Kiss me. Give me a taste of your promise, as I've given you mine."

A taste? Her whole body was responding to his nearness. Did she dare toy with him further? This man was no simple hunter, to shrug when, after long stalking, he threw his flint-tipped spear, and missed his prey. He was no Alkides, who laughed at his own arousal, and was satisfied with a compromise. This Roman would not declare a victory until her last bastion had fallen, and his troops swarmed through the streets and into the*nemeton* of her being. A small voice inside her cried out for something that was not there, some vital missing element that made this dalliance seem empty and wrong.

But the assault had begun, and there was no stopping it. As his tongue sought hers, his broad hand at the back of her neck prevented her retreat.

Her own hand sought beneath the bronze-weighted leather strips of his*pteruges* , beneath the linen kilt they covered, and she had no difficulty finding what she sought there. . . .

* * *

She untangled herself from Calvinus's arms, which lay heavy on her, all their rigor drained away. The last

moans of the wounded had faded in the streets of her citadel, the last red-clad soldiers had retreated . . . and the*nemeton,* her virginity, still stood, untaken.

The lamp guttered low, barely bright enough for her to pour water and wine into her cup, to wash away the taste of the invader as rain washed blood from the streets and out the tiled drains beneath the city wall.

She felt his eyes on her as she drank. Despite his languor, she knew he had not gotten enough of her, and she regretted that her clothing lay heaped on the floor by his feet; the naked city walls had been stormed and beswarmed, but were ultimately unconquered. He would not long be content for them to remain so.

The sense of wrongness remained. Was it only that he had been satisfied, and she not? She had felt the spears of Teutatis, war god of the tribe, and had retreated before their goading, and there had been no victory for her, only an enemy withdrawn from the walls, but still camped undefeated on the fields below.

"When this is over, will you return to Roma with me?"

His words startled her, confused her. Had she made that much of an impression, with her tactical, defensive victory? Or did he mean something else? "You'll have prisoners enough to parade through Roma's streets—even Teutomalos himself in chains, at the head of your procession, wearing his golden helmet. What would the people of Roma care about me?"

"I do not mean for you to be my prisoner, but my wife."

Her head spun, as if he had hit her hard, and sent her sprawling. "Your wife? Me? A poor Ligure girl without an estate? Me—with only one name, and no noble ancestry? I am Pier . . . Petra. I am not Cleopatra to your Caesar."

Too late she remembered—Julius Caesar was not yet born, nor was his doomed Egyptian queen. But Calvinus did not question her about it. His mind was on other things. "I don't know who they are. Your estate will be Gallia Transalpina, from the Rhodanus to the Alps, and your name will be . . . will be . . ."

"See? You're stumbling. I'd never be accepted in Roma."

"I have a villa in Campania, with olive groves and orchards, and a lovely view of the sea. Marry me."

She reached for her skirt, deftly avoiding his reaching hands, and quickly covered herself. "Tomorrow you'll fight the Saluvii on the heights. At dusk tomorrow, ask me again."

He stood, and straightened his disarrayed garments. There would be no more skirmishes this night. And later? If the Romans prevailed, would her continuing virginity be of no further consequence? Would their victory be hers also—her last confrontation with the Eater of Gods? She did not think so.

Her thoughts turned to a place further away in time than in miles—to the crumbly red rocks of the Eagle's Beak where, a hundred-odd years from now, her master Anselm might build his keep, and stock his library with books in twenty languages, with maps drawn a thousand years before by the Sea People, Minho's ancestors, who had explored the world and knew it to be round as an apple. . . . She felt again a wave of sadness, of strange nostalgia not for something lost, but something never found. Then, as quickly as it had come, it was gone.

No, her destiny would not—could not—be fulfilled until she had studied the last axioms that underlay the last ancient spell, until she was truly a sorceress, not a girl dabbling in mysteries. But if Calvinus lost tomorrow, then the world would be so changed that Anselm would never raise black-and-vermilion Minoan pillars outside his portal, and she herself might be born in a Gaulish Citharista where*fantôme* soldiers guarded the walls. . . .

"I'll begrudge every minute until the sun sets," he said, now standing by the door as if to see her out. She finished dressing, leaving off her sandals because, though she heard no more rain dripping from the eaves, the camp would surely be a sea of mud, and the tent she shared with Guihen was some distance away.

Hesitantly, she tilted her head, and he kissed her gently, without passion, but with great tenderness. "You are unique," he murmured. "Never have I felt so odd—as if I have both won and lost the same battle."

"You have," she replied. "And so have I."

* * *

Pierrette pondered the wrongness she had felt. Was it that—unlike Alkides—Calvinus had only taken, not given, and her own arousal remained unreleased? But such release was only a bonus, wasn't it? It wasn't a requisite for contentment. But twice now (that she remembered) she had felt that strange, momentary sense of something missing. Now, alone, aimlessly wandering among the seeps and hot springs that welled up near the old fane, she allowed herself to sink back into one of those moments. . . .

* * *

"I've loved you for a thousand years," said the sorcerer-king, brushing back his oiled black locks. Next to him on the bench lay his golden helmet, in the shape of a great bull's head inlaid with blue lapis and garnet. His forehead was still moist with sweat from having worn it, and she had surprised him, she thought, appearing from nowhere within his chambers. "I loved you in the cave of the animals, where we hunted a doe, and you slayed her. I loved you again on the Plain of Stones. When will you come to stay here with me, in this land that time has forgotten?"

But the Stone Age hunter she had loved—and rejected—in the cave had been Aam, the Golden Man of her childhood fantasies, and her time with him had not been real, only a projection of her spirit via the spell*Mondradd in Mon* , before she had learned to bring her body along, as well . . . if indeed she had.

She shied from that uncomfortable idea, and turned to thoughts of her lover on the Plain of Stones, who had been Alkides, the big, auburn-haired Greek, not slender Minho, with his dark Minoan hair and eyes. But was that indeed so? Why the rightness she had felt then, the wrongness now? Was it that, those other times, there had been a ghostly presence—the sorcerer-king, her counterpart, her equal, with whom she would, or might, or had once, shared a dais with two ivory thrones?

Was that why her tryst with Calvinus had felt like a battle, a siege and the storming of walls—because Minho had not been there, and she was being . . . unfaithful to him? But that was madness, and she was not mad—was she?

Part Four - Vinci

One ancient principle a studious god might find useful is that of consistency: an immutable rule is everywhere the same. If an event or a phenomenon seems to disobey a rule, then either the observer is deceived, or he has not delved deeply enough and the falsified rule is not fundamental.

Otho, Bishop of Nemausus

The Sorceress's Tale

Chapter 27 - Battle

Dawn was still hours away, but the entire camp was awake. Yet it was a silent wakefulness, without the horns the Romans used to denote every activity. No breathy wooden*litui* moaned, no*buccinae* blatted, no copper*tubae* shrilled.

No cooking fires burned, but the big ovens were already hot. Soon the embers would be swept from them, and raw, risen loaves slid in. The fine, golden, Gaulish-style bread, when baked, would be delivered to the troops even now filing by maniples to the front of the camp, assembling in muster order to each side of the Porta Praetoria.

Pierrette was puzzled. "You told me only the first legion would be sent into battle against the city," she said to the consul. "Both legions are mustering."

"Legio II has a separate task to perform. Their*hastati* and*principes* will march out, as a distraction. Their*triarii* will remain to guard the camp—and if our Massilian allies arrive, to advise them of my plan, and guide them."

By that time all the troops were formed up—over a thousand men, their ranks bristling with*pili* —short weighted spears with iron shafts half their length—and*hastae* , the longer wood-shafted spears of the heavily armed*triarii* veterans. Every man's shield was marked with his name and the number of his unit: I.IX, Legio I, ninth maniple. Some of the names were amusing, short epithets:*Temerus* , The Brave, or *Trepidus* , Fearful—or perhaps merely "Cautious."

"I must address my men," Calvinus said at last. "I won't see you until all is done. Perhaps then your heart will warm to this old soldier."

"You're not old, and it's not my heart that resists you, consul," she replied softly. "My head is full of doubts, and fear for my future."

"I know," he said with an exaggerated sigh. "But it is I, not you, who must face the Salluvii's mad, naked

charge." He whirled away, his purple-edged cloak streaming out. Pierrette thought his dramatic exit was boyishly charming. Never mind that Gauls didn't, to the best of her knowledge, charge naked into battle any more.

* * *

The first*ala* of cavalry filed out the Porta Praetoria at the very first gray light in the east. Even two abreast, Pierrette guessed that a quarter hour passed by the time the last three men of the next unit—the first maniple of Legio I, in three files with*hastati* to the right,*triarii* to the left, had put the gate behind them.

"This*agmen* —marching order—is for movement through hostile country," Polybius explained. "The *speculatores* , who have scouted out the route and locations of Gallic camps outside the*oppidum* itself, have indicated that the column might be attacked from the north or west, so Calvinus has placed the *hastati* at the left. The maniples can form up quickly in battle order, facing the enemy."

By sunrise, only three maniples had passed out the gate. "It's so slow," Pierrette said.

Polybius, a sandglass in hand, raised his eyes. "It may seem so," he said, "but you will see how it works. The road to Entremont is only so wide, and two horses—or three files of troops—are all it will bear. Though the*equites* could race to the*oppidum* 's walls in no time at all, they would be alone and unsupported, and any element of surprise would be lost. Besides, the siege engines can move only two miles in an hour, and all must move at the pace of the slowest unit."

Pierrette estimated that each maniple stretched almost a thousand feet as it marched. "The legion will be strung out all the way to Entremont," she said.

"You're right! When Calvinus chose the site for this camp, he had that in mind.*Ala* I will arrive before Entremont one and one-quarter hours after it left—five turns of this glass—just as the second*ala* is passing out the gate. No stretch of road will lie unused between the leading and the following*alae* of horsemen—and thus no one is undefended, far from his fellows. The last*ala* of cavalry, bringing up the rear, will arrive in battle order exactly ten turns of the glass after the first one departed."

Pierrette was duly impressed. This was truly a relentless force, its progress as inexorable as the great siege engines even then departing, their timbers stacked and bound between pairs of huge spoked wheels as high as a man, straddling the entire roadway, drawn by ten yokes of oxen strung out over a hundred feet. How could anything stand against such a force? But then she considered Entremont's walls, fifteen feet thick and twice that high, their projecting bastions' corners rounded to deflect battering rams. A vision of Teutomalos arose, as tall as the walls themselves, an enormous sword in one hand, unnatural muscles writhing with the combined strength stolen from a thousand*fantômes* . . . she shuddered.

"Are you cold?" asked Polybius. "Let's go back to the praetorium."

"I want to see everything."

He chuckled. "No one can do that. Even Calvinus, who will have a good vantage on the highest available ground, will not see the whole battle."

"Then you go, Master Polybius. I'll stay here until the last maniples have departed." Until that moment, she hadn't even noticed Guihen, but when she turned from Polybius back to the Porta Praetoria, there he was, beside her, just when she wanted him to be. "Can you get me out of this camp, unnoticed?"

"The consul expects you to stay here."

"Can you?"

"Could anyone stop me?" He grinned toothily. "Where do you want to go?"

"Polybius says no one can see a whole battle at once, but I want to try."

"That's a tall order . . . and I know just the tall tree for it. Come on . . . but you can't go dressed like that."

It was her turn to grin, as she lifted a corner of her*sagus* and revealed not a long skirt, but her old, travel-worn chiton and*bracae* . "Let me find somewhere to leave my mantle."

"Wait until we're outside the palisade," Guihen suggested. "Unless the consul has ordered someone to stop you . . . in that case it will take magic to get you outside."

There was no magic about their escape—they simply walked out in the slight interval between the seventh and eighth maniples, then edged along the palisade and ditch to the southwest corner of the camp.

Guihen led her through a copse and over great heaps of rough, white limestone tangled with scrub oaks, their leaves the size of her thumbnail. Then, to her surprise, they emerged on a smooth, gravelly road. "This is the road to Iberia," he said. "It's why Entremont is so important—whoever controls the citadel controls the most important road in Gaul."

"The Via Tiberia," she said. But no, Tiberius Gracchus was dead, and anyway, the future Roman road was miles south, and would go through Aquae Sextiae, now only a Roman camp—if there were to be a Roman road, by any name at all.

The road led past the abandoned camp where the two of them had first encountered Romans after leaving Entremont. There it branched, one part going north, the other west. "We must leave the road here," Guihen said. "To the right is Entremont, and leftward leads to Iberia . . . though not right away, of course." They worked their way across rough, scrubby terrain dotted with stands of forest, skirting cleared fields not yet turned or planted with crops.

"There," Guihen said, pointing. "That is where we'll hide." Tall, straight pines pushed up from among fat-trunked oaks. One in particular towered above the rest. Its upper branches all swept eastward, and some looked thick enough to stand on.

They heard distant shouting, and the clash of metal on metal. "What's that?" Pierrette asked.

"A fight—it sounds like the consul has lost the advantage of surprise already."

"I have to see it. Help me up."

"Not that way. Over here—we'll climb this oak, then crawl out that big limb to the pine, whose lower branches are dead, and might snap."

Pierrette scrambled into the branches of the oak and, such was her eagerness, she had no time for fear until she found herself clinging to the pine's bole so high up that she could almost encircle it with her

hands.

"What's going on?" Guihen was just below her, working his way up the opposite side of the trunk.

*Ala*I of the first legion was in disarray. The clash of Roman weapons against Gallic long swords was what they had heard. "It looks like Gaulish horseman slipped up on them through the trees. The cohorts are forming up behind the Roman horse."

"Bellagos?" asked Guihen.

"No. I think they are Gauls from outside the*oppidum* ."

Pierrette didn't think the milling, shouting Gauls had much of a chance. The Romans outnumbered them, and could always fall back on the prickly line of infantryman. Moments later, she was proven right when the Gauls broke off the fight and retreated into the forest, leaving one dead horse and its living rider on the field. The Roman knights made short work of the Gaulish horseman.

How strange to be watching a man killed, from on high. It was as if the greening pastures below were a chessboard, and the long line of Roman troops winding from the far side of the field merely game pieces not yet set in their places. Pierrette then suspected another advantage of Roman discipline—a consul, standing aside from the battle like this, in a high place, must feel somewhat this same dispassion, directing his troops less in the hot blood of combat than with cold intellect. Just as Cohors III formed up, with IV right behind, then beside it, a ripple of sound spread from far away, along Entremont's bastioned walls . . .

* * *

For Bellagos, astride a galloping mare, that same ripple was like thunder—four hundred and eighty iron-shod hooves pounding the gravelly turf. For Bellagos, at the front of his six score, it was as if Taranis, wielding his lightning, rode just behind, urging him on toward the Roman horsemen. Any moment now, the*equites* would ride out to meet them . . .

But they did not. They stood, and on their left, in a line that diminished into distant haze, the Roman foot also stood firm. If he completed the charge, Bellagos saw, those same foot soldiers could flank his horsemen, even surround them, before they could break clear. At the last possible moment, he pulled his mount's head around to the east, and the Winter Horse followed, riding along the Roman front just out of range of their spears. On they rode, and on—the line of Roman red and brown seemed endless. Some small part of Bellagos's mind noted that the troops furthest along were still in line of march, not in the tight blocks of men the Romans favored over the Massilian-style solid phalanx.

* * *

"Look!" Pierrette exclaimed. "Cohors IV is moving forward." She had recognized Bellagos by some combination of details—his armor, helm, or posture. "Bellagos will be caught between them and the copse." But at the last moment, the*kentor* pulled his horse around, and his men followed, in a tight, irregular arc that curved back westward along the line of scrub, to the sally port in the city wall.

* * *

Bellagos handed his reins to a warrior afoot even as he slid down from the mare. He pulled his helmet off, and shook his hair from its sweaty coif. "Where is Teutomalos?" he demanded.

"Atop the bastion, there." The soldier pointed. Bellagos strode off, his two lances in one hand, helmet under the other arm. His tread on the wooden stairway was itself like thunder.

Teutomalos turned at the sound. Was he even taller today, even more massive? "Report!" the*vergobret* . . . the king . . demanded. "How many are they?"

"It's hard to say," Bellagos said, still somewhat breathless. "Over a thousand, maybe two, formed up in groups. I had no time to count ranks and files. There are perhaps half as many again in three files, stretching out of sight around the curve of the hill and the copses."

Teutomalos's face contorted in an ugly grimace that Bellagos first took for rage at his news—but no, the *kentor* was not the object of his anger, his struggle. Bellagos drew back. Surrounding the king was a black-flecked haze, like smoke from burning fat, that darkened, coalesced, and then . . . Teutomalos sucked in an enormous breath, and the apparitions vanished as if consumed.

"*Fantômes*!" Bellagos struggled to maintain his warrior's mask, to conceal the horror behind it. He sucks in the newly dead like heady smoke, and he grows larger, stronger . . . Was this what Bellagos was fighting for? This unnatural, monstrous thing? But no—he fought for Aurinia, for golden hair set ablaze by the springtime sunlight, for the sweet fields they had walked together, the cobbled streets they had trod. . . . He fought for his*teuta* , his people, not for this hideous creature who bore their name: Teutomalos, Hammer of the Tribe.

"Can we attack their line of march?" asked a white-robed*dryade* .

"We have no forces east of the city," said a grizzled chief with huge, bristling red mustaches. "The Roman Calvinus knows this.*Kentor* —describe what you saw of their march. Were the most heavily armored in one file?"

"The rightmost," said Bellagos.

"You see?" The chief addressed Teutomalos, ignoring the spasms that seemed to occupy the king's attention. "I fought Romans last year at the Silver River, and it was like that. The strongest take the rear, not the front—even marching, the*triarii* column marches furthest from the likely point of attack. He shows how good his spies are—and that they have found our outside camps."

"We must wait," Teutomalos growled. "We must not close with them."

* * *

"What's happening?" Guihen demanded—a feathery bough blocked his view of the Roman left.

"Gaul warriors—horse and foot—are coming out the sally gate—and something is happening in the woods, too."

"They're coming out the main gate also," Guihen said. "Hundreds of them."

Pierrette saw a line of unarmored Romans run from behind Cohors I, among the*equites* . They threw spears into the shadows of the trees, then grasped fresh ones from bundles carried in their left hands. "*Velites*," she said. "They are attacking someone in the forest."

The spearmen withdrew, and a*turma* of horse—thirty mounted men—rode across the front of the trees, wheeled, and rode back. Pierrette described that for Guihen. "It's what Calvinus feared," he said. "The trees will break a concerted charge, but if the Gauls continue to sneak up, to distract the entire left wing, that will be the Romans' weakest spot."

"What can he do?"

"I don't know. He's a consul. He'll think of something." Pierrette hoped Guihen was right.

* * *

Three hours after the first Romans had left their camp, Legio I was in battle order, a scant quarter mile from the walls of Entremont, and most of the male population of the*oppidum* was formed up facing them. The Gaulish exodus via the north and west portals had been neither the rush of an untrained mob nor the choreographed movement of the Romans. It was uniquely Celtic, with the fire and élan of warriors born, with a precision that stemmed not from discipline but from personal pride.

Caius Sextius Calvinus leaned toward his staff prefect. "Are there any horsemen on the Gaulish left? I estimate nine hundred on the right." He was uneasy, puzzled. Good generalship demanded a balancing of forces, but the Gaulish line was definitely weak on its left, with only foot soldiers. Was that a ruse to lure the Romans toward their own right, exposing their left to a Gaulish cavalry charge? Or was it because the trees concealed a force the*speculatores* had missed, that would make up for the line's weakness?

The prefect shrugged. "Our outriders report that the woods are empty, and if there are horsemen on the Gaul left, they have been trained to lie down and hide behind the troops, or they are in trenches—but you saw none when you reconnoitered the walls."

Calvinus nodded. "I did not." The commander's position was a slight rise just west of the line's center, ahead of the engineers who were busily assembling massive catapults and vicious ballistae. He tapped his sandglass against his palm as if to make the grains run faster, and the time as well. Thirteen turns since they had left the camp. Three and one-quarter hours. "How much longer?"

The prefect crossed the open grass and spoke with the chief engineer. "Any time now," he told the consul.

* * *

Pierrette swung her head to the right so quickly she almost lost her grip on the tree. There, far down the slope past the main gate, almost opposite the Romans on the south side of the*oppidum* were . . . more Romans! "Legio II," she breathed. "That is the rest of Calvinus's army." The new Roman force was compact: rank upon rank of shields and spears, all squeezed without intervals between the steep embankment crowned by the*oppidum* wall on their right and the edge of the forest on their left. A much smaller Gaulish force, all afoot, as were the Romans (Pierrette saw the Roman horses all herded together at the rear, riderless), was being pressed inexorably back toward the main gate. Then, with shrill cries, a disorganized mass of men emerged from the*oppidum* , and rushed forward to strengthen the resistance.

Several scores of warriors broke from the line opposing Calvinus and Legio I, and added to the confusion when their mass impacted those still sortiing from the gate. Somewhere in the Roman rear, the deep tones of a great wooden horn moaned, and though the soldiers of the second legion still outnumbered the Gauls three to one, they began slowly falling back. Watching them, suddenly despairing, Pierrette missed what was happening among the main Roman forces to the north . . .

* * *

"Now!" Calvinus shouted even before the last low moan of the distant*lituus* died. "Order the advance!"

The prefect nodded to the waiting trumpeters, who lifted their copper*tubae* to their lips. The high wails were repeated down the lines in both directions, and almost as one, the*hastati* began to move forward at

a trot, quick time, their centurions shouting to keep them in line abreast.

A trickle of smoke from the rear became a billow. The*thump-thump-thump* of the catapults was followed by arcs of black smoke over the troops, then bursts of flame on the field between the armies, among the Gauls, and even on the walls of Entremont.

The*principes* moved out at an even more brutal double time, and at last the*triarii* stepped ahead, half the number of either of the others, but like great armored beetles, with breastplates of bronze and leather, greaves over their calves, their long, sturdy*hastae* like insect antennae probing the air ahead and overhead. Unarmored*velites* , burdened only with*pili* , ran out in front to throw their projectiles, then dashed back between the files. The field between the opposing armies narrowed as the Gauls at last (or so it seemed) advanced.

The catapults found the range after the first few volleys, and the fireballs—oil-soaked rags wrapped around thick, round clay pots filled with oil and spirits—fell consistently among the Gauls. The spatters and bursts of flame might have disrupted a Roman cohort, but the Gauls, in no discernible order, just flowed around the temporary obstacles. The distance between opposing forces narrowed. . . .

* * *

"Telamon!" Pierrette hissed.

"What?"

"The battle that broke the Gauls in Italia—caught between two Roman armies, under Regulus and . . . somebody. Their greatest defeat . . . until now! The only difference is that here they have Entremont to fall back to." She fell silent, unable to watch and talk, or to talk while grinding her teeth.

The intervals between the Roman maniples were like chutes for the low-trajectory bolts from the ballistae, which plunged into the Gauls' front and impaled two, three, half a dozen men at a time. Fireballs arced overhead, and stone balls bounced and ricocheted from patches of rocky ground, taking out more Gaulish warriors, but not slowing the advance.

*Velites*darted out across the Roman front, and threw their*pili* . Most of the spears fell to ground. Some Gauls (those who had never fought Romans before, Pierrette guessed) picked them up to throw them back, but even the impact with the ground had bent the soft iron shafts. The two lines,*hastati* and Gauls, met, and a great roar arose, and the clash and thump of weapons.*Principes* from behind pressed into the *hastati* intervals, forming a solid front. The*triarii* still lagged back, their pace almost leisurely but for its precision, its determination.

Gauls tried to shake loose the*pili* that lodged in their shields, but the soft iron shafts, bent by impact and shaking, refused to come loose, and exasperated warriors threw down the encumbered shields and pressed on with bare arms and naked blades.

On the far end of the battle, from Pierrette's vantage, Gaulish and Roman horse wheeled past each other, then clashed in a melee of spears and long swords. There was no way to spot Bellagos in the milling mass. The Roman right pressed forward, and the Gauls seemed to bend back—weakened by the loss of men who had turned to fight Legio II at their rear. "They're going to be cut off!" Pierrette shrieked, pounding a fist against the rough pine bark.

"Who?" cried Guihen.

"The Salyens!" The Romans had bent the Gaulish left like a fishhook, and if the impetus continued, would turn it short of retreat to the main gate. Then, if Legio II continued to press forward, the Roman forces would unite in one great line. Pierrette's eyes strained to see the cavalry fight at the east end of the conflict. If the Romans pressed forward there, they might cut off the sally port, and even surround the entire Gaulish army outside their own walls. Victory lay just ahead!

* * *

"What's that?" Calvinus demanded. A terrible bellowing erupted far to his right, out of sight around the northwest corner of the city wall. "Send someone to find out!" he commanded. A decurion of the*turma* assigned as couriers shouted an order, and a cavalryman broke away from his fellows and immediately galloped off. . . .

* * *

"Oh no!" Pierrette gasped. Guihen, who now clung to the skinny trunk just opposite her, his neck twisted at an almost impossible angle so he could see the battle below, moaned softly.

From the main gate emerged a giant man, towering heads above any others, the flaming orange crest of his golden helmet brushing the lintel. His sword looked as long as an infantryman's spear, and his bellow was as loud as the battle-horns that announced him. "It's Teutomalos!" Pierrette explained. "It's the Gauls' new god!"

The monstrous warrior brushed aside his own men and plunged into the fray south of the gate. His huge sword cut a swath through Legio II's front rank. Men fell, their shields cut in half, their bodies severed at waist or thigh wherever Teutomalos struck. Where he did not, the Salyen warriors, no longer driven back, took heart and pressed the Romans away from the gate. . . .

Teutomalos howled commands unintelligible over the din that beat at Pierrette's ears from two sides, and he wheeled about. Freshly inspired warriors filled the breach he left. The giant Gaul now headed toward the northerly battle for the gate. With a shriek that sounded like agony, he plunged into the Roman line.

* * ** * *

The courier reined his lathered horse in front of the consul. "A giant!" he shouted. "A giant Gaul tall as two men is slaughtering the second cohort."

"What of the first? And of the cavalry?"

"Gaulish horsemen made a break for the trees, to cut off the gate. They're fighting with the first maniple, which the monster has separated from the legion."

"Have they broken our line?"

"Not yet. Not when I . . ."

Calvinus had already turned away. "Decurion! Another rider! Order the*triarii* up—maniples two through five to hold the flank, maniple one into the trees, to secure*Ala* I's retreat. Now!"

The rider turned his mount brutally, his legs flapping against its flanks. He clung desperately to its mane and neck. In minutes, the farthest horns sounded, and . . .

* * *

"The*triarii* advance!" Pierrette cried out. The armored men of the second, third, fourth, and fifth maniples

moved forward as one, each maniple in perfect order, rank and file, shifting rightward a step for every pace forward. The gap between them and the swaying, breaking Roman line lessened, then disappeared. Some*hastati* and*principe* survivors of Cohors I broke formation and faded into the woods at the side, and shortly later, Pierrette saw some of them emerge alongside the beleaguered cavalry. Then the Roman presence near the gate seemed to evaporate as the horsemen pulled back to the woods. The*triarii* of Maniple I slowly backed away after them.

Pierrette watch a few Gauls pursue them into the trees. But most were—with the giant Teutomalos—completing the slaughter of the*principes* and*hastati* now surrounded before the open gate.

Pierrette wept as each man fell, skewered on a Salyen lance or hacked through by the king's never-blunting sword, and trampled beneath his feet—poor, pathetic bundles of rags and shattered shields. She hardly heard the Roman horns that sounded all along the third-of-a-mile battle line. She hardly saw the effect of their blaring calls, but their purpose soon became evident. Everywhere it had advanced before, the Roman army stopped.*Triarii* moved up on the Roman left, and*velites* dragged away the bodies of the dead and wounded. On the right, the reinforced line held, then slowly retreated, fighting still.

Nowhere did the Gauls advance against them—as if they, too, had been commanded to hold. Pierrette glanced toward the main gate. Where was Teutomalos? There was no sign of the giant warrior, except the Roman dead that strewed the approach to the town. She saw Gauls filing back through the gate, into the*oppidum* . All along the line it was the same: Romans backed away—those who could—and*velites* carried or dragged those who could not. Gauls sidled sideways toward either the main gate or the sally port, and surprisingly soon, the Romans were again almost a quarter mile from the walls of Entremont, back where they had first formed their line of battle, and the last living Gauls had retreated into the town.

Behind the Roman lines seethed many scores of men, swarming like ants. What were they doing? Leftward, Pierrette saw no sign of Legio II, which had retreated out of sight beyond the corner of the city wall.

"We have to get to the consul!" Pierrette said. "We can't let him retreat to the camp! He'll never come forth again, if he does!"

Painfully, quickly, they slid, climbed, half-fell down the height of the tree, then leaped from its lowermost branches to the ground. They made their way, not by the route they had come, but northward among the big, widely spaced forest trees toward the place they had last seen Legio I.

* * *

The Romans of Legio I were digging in. It was not as big a camp as the one by the hot springs, only a hundred paces on a side, but it would have a ditch and a berm, and even a light palisade of poles cut from the copses along the day's line of march.

Pierrette wrapped herself in a blue-and-yellow horse blanket from a Gaulish mount slain on the battlefield. A centurion supervising the digging recognized her and Guihen. They were pointed toward the new praetorium, where a tent had already been set up. Calvinus sat on a folding stool of Egyptian design, elbows on knees, chin on fists. Deep in thought, he hardly noticed the newcomers, and when he did, he failed to remonstrate about Pierrette's presence on the field of battle, instead of in the main camp.

"Where were you?" he snapped. "Did you see the monster Gaul?"

"Teutomalos? We saw him." Pierrette shuddered. "He has grown even in the last few days."

"How do you know that?" Calvinus eyed her suspiciously. "Have you been in contact with someone . . . among the Gauls?"

"Not in any manner you would accept as true," she replied. "But I saw him, in a dream that was not false. Believe me. Every death, every head whose lips and eyes are sewn shut to capture its spirit, enhances his power. You must press ahead, or it will be too late."

"I didn't see him with my own eyes," the consul mused, "but . . . I am now inclined to believe you. Can he continue to grow like that? How many of those heads . . ." He abruptly sprang to his feet. "Varro! Summon a*turma* immediately. And thirty torches." The centurion leaped to obey.

"The*velites* have recovered our own dead from the field," he explained as he mounted his horse. "But even now, Gauls are out there . . ."

Without asking, Pierrette tossed her cloak aside and reached out a hand to the consul. He grasped it, and she swung up behind him. The thirty horsemen, torches and spears in hand, assembled in the newly established Via Praetoria. Calvinus waved them ahead, and followed them out the unfinished Porta Praetoria, the camp's south gate, facing the enemy.

Beyond, where the lines had met, torches flickered like angry fireflies—Gauls, recovering their own dead. Calvinus spurred his mount alongside that of the first decurion of the squad. "Can we drive them off?" he asked.

"They're afoot, and unarmored. The tribune Marcus Caepio has ordered the*triarii* of the seventh maniple to back us up."

Calvinus nodded. "See to it, then."

When thirty shouting, torch-wielding*equites* bore down on them, the Gauls quickly abandoned their tasks, and took up spears and shields. Pierrette, behind the consul, caught only glimpses of the skirmish that ensued. The Salyen warriors gathered in line abreast, and made no attempt to flee—but behind them, a horse-drawn wooden sledge made a quick retreat toward the sally port.

"Stop them!" Pierrette cried. "Don't let them reach the portal!" Her words came too late. The Roman horsemen were already engaged with the Gauls, and none could extricate themselves from the fight. The sledge drew up to the portal. The light of torches flooded its approach as the wooden gate opened.

Thirty horsemen and sixty tough, heavily armored*triarii* made short work of the lesser number of Gauls, and chased down several who tried to make a run for the gate. When the last Gaul was slain, Pierrette slid from the horse, and Calvinus dismounted after her, to examine the Gauls' handiwork.

Pierrette tasted sharp, sour bile when she saw what she had known she would see: the Salyens had not used the de facto truce of night to gather their honored dead. The field of war was as littered with Gaulish corpses as it had been when the action had been halted, with one grisly difference: the bodies that sprawled in the awkward postures of death had no heads. Those had been roughly hacked off and piled on the horse-drawn sledge, and were now safely within the walls of Entremont.

* * *

Bellagos heard the commotion by the sally port. He dropped the rag he had been using to rub down his horse, and sprinted for the wall. The sledge drivers had already crossed the corner of the*campus*

martius , and were almost to the high town gate when he overtook them. "Stand aside,*kentor* ," said one. "We're taking these to the*nemeton* ."

" `These?' you say? As if you carry broken pots or a load of vegetables?" He angrily yanked the canvas cover from the sledge. . . .

Like a heap of melons they lay, in bloody disarray. Some heads faced up, their dull eyes staring at the night sky. Others showed only the tufts of lime-stiffened hair, or the ragged stumps of necks. Bellagos reached into the heap and grasped white-blond hair. He pulled. Several heads fell to the ground with sodden thumps as he withdrew the one. "This one goes with me," he said. "He was of the Winter Horse."

"You can't do that!" protested one sledge driver. "Teutomalos wants all of them."

"What kind of man are you? What of this man's wife? What of his orphaned children? Better he be hung from their ridgepole, with painted eyes, where he can protect his home, than eyeless in the sacred place."

"We won't fight you for one head," the driver said. He turned away and coaxed the horses through the high-town gate. Bellagos turned the head around and stared into its sightless eyes. Then he sat down, and he wept.

* * *

Like silent black flies they swarmed around the hulking giant Gaul. Now grown too large to fit through the doorway of the*vergobreon* , Teutomalos squatted in the street in front of it. When the swarming, elusive black motes were thick enough, he raised his tormented face, opened his gaping maw, and sucked them from the air. With every breath, he swelled. His abandoned helmet would no longer fit: a copper washtub would be none too large for his enormous head. His great sword would now serve to pick his teeth. Even squatting, his haunted eyes looked over the heads of the fawning*dryades* surrounding him—though none too closely; the king was not particular whose*fantômes* he consumed, and none of the priests wanted to be crushed beneath his elephantine feet.

At a distance huge charcoal fires roared as twenty men worked the multiple bellows of an impromptu forge. Four smiths hammered at once, reshaping a dozen swords into one enormous blade as long as a Greek*sarissa* , a twenty-foot spear. It was clearly an impossible task; no bellows could pump fast enough, no heap of glowing coals was hot enough, to raise that great mass of metal to the white heat required to hammer-weld those blades into one . . . but under Teutomalos's intense gaze, red iron became yellow, and yellow white. The impossible sword took form. The king, the almost-god, had not yet grown tall enough to wield it, but when the eyes of the newly dead were sewn shut, when their ghosts bumbled blindly with no hope of sight but through his eyes, he would do so. By morning, the new sword's barrel-like haft would fit his hand.

* * ** * *

"Be ready," Bellagos commanded his betrothed. "If the*vergobret* commands the Winter Horse onto the field at dawn, I must go, but . . . just be ready."

"Will you fight the Romans again tomorrow?" asked Aurinia.

"I don't know what I will do."

* * *

"Now you see why you must not wait?" The consul had been silent since leaving the grisly field, after commanding his cavalrymen to drag the headless Gauls away. He had not said to bury them, but the

senior decurion found a ravine deep enough, and ordered rocks and dirt pushed down atop the bodies.

"We were winning today," Calvinus said, "but when the monster entered the fray, we could not hold. Why will tomorrow be different?"

"You must win! Or else march back to your camp by the hot springs, and from there to your ships on the Argentia, and home to Roma—you may have several years, even a lifetime, before your children see the face of Teutomalos there, towering over your seven hills."

"I will fight," Calvinus said softly, grimly. "But know this—I cannot win. You need have no further concern for your maidenhood, because I will not be alive at the end of the day to exercise our bargain."

Pierrette knew then what she must do. There was no other course. She wrapped her borrowed cloak about her shoulders. She leaned down and kissed the top of the consul's head. "Where are you going?" he asked, seeing her gesture to her elfin-eared familiar, the Ligure, Guihen.

"As you said, you were winning the natural battle. Only the advent of unnatural forces stopped your advance. I have no choice but to fight a supernatural battle of my own. I am going back to the citadel, to do what I should have, before. I only regret that my chance for success is less now, because I waited so long."

"What will you do?"

"I will confront the god Teutomalos with what poor magic I have learned. What choice is there? And at dawn, you too must do battle, whatever happens to me. Promise me that you will not retreat."

"Many of my men have seen Teutomalos, and by now all have heard of him. When I address them at muster, I will speak of their mothers and fathers, their sisters, brothers, and children. They will willingly die to spare them the sight of Teutomalos's face."

Pierrette and Guihen departed.

* * *

"How can we get in?" Pierrette asked.

"The way we left, I think. Sentries will be alert for Roman activity in the camps, but not for moon-shadows creeping up the wall. If the ladder is still there . . ."

The skirted the dense copses east of the battlefield. The eastern road was alive with couriers and mounted sentries keeping the line of communication with Legio II open. The second legion's camp was at the first branching of the road to Iberia, where they had departed from the common line of march to Entremont. Pierrette and Guihen saw the torches and fires of that camp, a quarter mile south. They slipped close to the city wall, beyond the Traders' Gate to the low town. Only sporadic cumulus clouds crossed the moon's face. They crept uphill in the clouds' passing shadows. The ladder was there. When they had raised it, Guihen climbed first.

"All is safe!" he whispered moments later. "The house is empty."

Pierrette scrambled up. As soon as she lowered herself into the courtyard, the moon deigned to sweep the cobbles with silvery light. There, on the table inside the door, were her powders and potions, just as she had left them.

"Can you warn Kraton?" she asked her companion. "I don't know what help he can be, but perhaps—after today—his friends have had a change of heart."

"If they have, what shall I tell them?"

"The Romans will muster in darkness, and will march at first light. If there is to be a . . . a battle . . . inside these walls, it will have to be at the*nemeton* , at that time. Have them be ready—with torches. If they can think of a way to distract the sentries on the north wall as well . . ."

"I presume that the torches will be used for something besides their light."

Pierrette nodded. "I'll need all the help, all the distractions, that I can get."

Guihen left Pierrette seated at her table, staring at the poor collection of magical things laid out there. Herbs and potions, against thousands of*fantômes* ? She had little hope of winning. But she had to try. Softly, she whispered a spell ancient when the Minoan sea kings first made boats of wood, instead of branches and greased animal skins.

"Yes, that one," she murmured. "And this one. . . ." She uttered other words in the staccato syllables of the Hittite tongue. The unseen effects of one spell combined with those of the other, and she felt a surge of power, a tingle like the very moment before lightning was to strike. . . .

Sorcery, unlike simple magic, was in the free and flexible combination of such spells, just as music was the combination of notes, or a stew, of ingredients, each with its own spice, savor, and taste, making a unique dish. And, she reminded herself, she was a sorceress, not a simple housewife. She would brew up a dish fit for a king.

Chapter 28 - Victory and Defeat

In the Roman camp, the last fires had died to embers, and only a single torch remained lit in front of the praetorium, by the consul's tent. It illuminated two sentries. Calvinus himself had slipped out the rear, under the tent's wall, and now stood at the foot of the Via Praetoria. Because the legions had no allied troops, and because the camp itself was small, he had ordered the muster unconventionally:*Ala* I of the cavalry—one hundred and fifty horsemen—gathered in silence at the Porta Principalis Dextra, the west gate.*Ala* II was at the Porta Principalis Sinistra, the east. The foot troops assembled in two halves, with the first cohort just right of the Porta Praetoria, which faced Entremont, and the tenth just left of it. The cohorts stood in exact reverse order of the line of battle, with V on the extreme right, VI left. The ranks also were reversed, with*hastati* at the rear, and*triarii* at the front.

When the cohorts filed out of the wide Porta Praetoria, Cohors I through IV would march right, and Cohors X through VI left, thus exactly reversing their orders left to right and front to rear. The cavalry

would angle from the side gates forward, and anchor both ends of the forming battle line. Calvinus estimated (and hoped) that the entire force would be deployed in record time, and would be across the open ground to the citadel before the Gauls could sortie.

The*velites* attached to each maniple formed up with ladders they had spent the night making—ladders built according to Polybius's clever formula, which guaranteed they would be tall enough to top the city walls, even though no Roman had gotten close enough to measure them. That formula—the Greek mathematics were beyond the consul's ability to follow—had served Polybius's friend Aemilianus well at Numantia. It would serve Calvinus now. But first, his troops had to reach the walls.

The*velites* would rush ahead to place the ladders. At the first sign that the Gauls had spotted their activity, the tribunes were to order horns sounded, and the entire Roman force would assault the walls. Ballistae, sighted in during the recent battle, would sweep the town's walls and fill the air in front of the sally port with their heavy bolts. Catapults would send fireballs, lead shot, and rounded basalt stones over the wall into the*campus martius* , to disrupt the Gaulish horsemen forming up inside.

Legio II, now joined by its*triarii* —for this battle was to be all or nothing, and there was no need to guard the refuge of the permanent camp—would attack from the south in similar fashion, sweeping the main gate with ballista arrows, shot, and fireballs—but with a difference. Most of the legion would not march against that gate, but would break away at the halfway point, and would throw their ladders against the east wall. There, they would bring a great steel-shod battering ram to bear against the Traders' Gate.

Calvinus's overall strategy (and his hope) was thus: the Romans could not stand against the Salyen line, augmented by the giant Teutomalos, who could stride from one end of the battle to the other, breaking the Roman formation wherever he wanted to. But if the Romans gained the walls, and once the troopers were in the streets, the giant's sweeping sword could only batter rooftops and walls, and trample over his own people as they scurried to hopeful safety.

All depended on surprise, on an ultimate application of Roman precision and discipline. Would they be enough?

* * *

Pierrette was almost ready. As soon as Guihen returned, they would slip through the streets, and if Kraton and his friends would help, she would soon be within the high town.

The door swung wide, and crashed against the wall. Pierrette gasped. Silhouetted in the moonlight was a tall figure, a man, but . . . above his head towered the branching horns of . . . "Cernunnos!" Cernunnos, the stag-god, right out of Pierrette's childhood nightmares. . . .

The apparition's eyes flared wide, and he spoke: "You! Again!" Then Pierrette understood—it was not Cernunnos, but a man wearing deer horns and fur. "Cunotar!" she hissed.

He pushed into the room, followed immediately by men with swords drawn. "I'm glad, now, that I didn't leave Entremont. I was at the postern, ready to fetch reinforcements—Allobroges and Calvarii, even now on their way. Swift horses awaited me below, beyond the Roman camp, but . . . I sensed you. I smelled the stink of burning oil, and I knew . . . But how? What magic do you command? I will have to find out before I allow you to die."

"The stink was your own corruption," Pierrette said, recovering slightly from the shock of his entrance to distract him from those trains of thought. "The very air reeks of it."

"Bind her well," the*dryade* commanded his men. "She escaped her fate once, in Heraclea, but not again." Two men pulled her arms behind her back. They flung her to the floor. Coarse-fibered ropes bit into the skin of her wrists.

"What's this?" Cunotar grated, passing through into the back room, where the table was laid with Pierrette's experiments. "Sorcery! We've captured not just a*veleda* , a seeress, but a witch." He snorted. "Thyme and sulfur, fool's gold and dried flowers—not much of a sorceress, I'll warrant . . . but gag her anyway. There's no sense taking a chance of her uttering some feeble spell."

His scornful words turned Pierrette cold. Were they simply bravado or were her efforts so obviously feeble? And was Cunotar a mage as well as a priest? She hadn't thought so, before. But for him, ten years had elapsed. What had he done with them? Ten years, under what evil tutelage?

Someone stuffed rags in her mouth, and wrapped her head in torn bedclothes. It immediately became hot and stifling within, and she had to fight for every breath. Rough hands lifted her to her feet.

"Take her to the*nemeton* ." Cunotar's voice was muffled. "Leave everything here as it is. I'll study her magics later."

Pierrette tried to keep her feet as the soldiers dragged her down the rough, cobbled streets, but even before she felt the ground rising, approaching the old battlements of the original high city, she felt her bare feet slipping in her own blood. She could hear nothing over the leathery slap of her captors' sandals, the rattle of the double-chain belts that held their scabbards. It was almost daylight, and people must be about. Was anyone watching? Kraton? Guihen? Would anyone tell them?

She knew when they approached the*nemeton* by the tangy reek of cedar oil. She could imagine the preserved heads peering from their niches in the doorway columns. What did they think? Did they pity her, or welcome another future addition to their grisly camaraderie? Muffled as she was, she got no sense of them at all.

"Wait!" she heard Cunotar rasp. "Not here. I have unpleasant memories of what she did to the*nemeton* at Heraclea. Put her in a*dolium* instead, and weight the lid with heavy stones." A*dolium* —a huge grainary jar. If Guihen was still free, would he—or anyone—know where to look for her?

She felt herself dragged again, facedown, unable to regain her feet. Her knees battered against the cobbles, but not for long—the granaries were only forty paces away, adjacent to the big, common ovens that baked the town's bread. "Strip her. I don't think she's clever enough to have anything of use secreted in her clothing, but take no chances.

When they removed her blindfold, the glare of the grain-court was blinding, but she had no time to adjust to it. Her slit garments were torn from her. "You've got more meat on you than I'd have thought," Cunotar said dryly. "A pity no one will be able to enjoy those pert breasts and thighs before your head is separated from them. Perhaps I'll impale you on a sharp stake, when I return, in memory of the tree that gored me on the Plain of Stones." Then she was spun away from him, and thrust head-down into the darkness. Her forehead struck the bottom of the man-tall jar with a dull thump, and she knew no more.

* * *

Calvinus spoke with each element of the Roman force separately, in a quiet voice that did not carry beyond the fort's battlements. A hastily scrawled copy of his short speech had been rushed by carrier to the Legio II camp, where it would be read to the troops by the*primus pilus* , the senior centurion of the

triarii , and thus of the entire legion.

Now it was time. The moon had set, the sun was soon to rise, and the initial deployment would be over ground carefully cleared of all obstacles during the night. The legion would move forward at quick time, and only the*velites* with the ladders would be out of breath when they arrived at the city walls. . . .

The consul nodded, and the tribunes quickly moved right and left, to Cohors I and X. The rude, unhinged timbers of the Porta Praetoria, Porta Principalis Dextra, and Porta Principalis Sinistra, were drawn aside, and the exodus began. . . .

* * *

Bellagos had kept Aurinia by his side all the night. Ordinarily, her father might have been expected to protest such impropriety, but these were not ordinary times. Now they stood on the wall near the sally port—so Bellagos would be near his horse and his men. A sentry stood a few paces away, his eyes only infrequently straying from the empty field below the wall to the lucky*kentor* and his pretty blond companion.

Aurinia's eyes, lovely, limpid, and blue, were better suited to moonless nights than were Bellagos's—or the sentry's. She could not tell exactly what she saw, except that it moved, like the rippling shadow cast by a passing cloud. She only guessed what it was. She turned to the sentry. "How long before dawn?" she asked him. "Do you think the Romans will come out against us again?"

"Soon," he replied. "In the time you'd take to descend the wall, the sun will rise. And yes, they'll come—and we will destroy them. Our*vergobret* is now a god—the*dryadeae* have said so. What mortal man can stand against a god?"

"Did you actually see him fight, today?" Her voice was warm, excited, girlish. It would have distracted even the most duty-bound man.

"See him? I fought alongside him, outside the main gate, and—"

A wooden thud interrupted his brag. Aurinia squeezed Bellagos's hand, then stepped back from the wall to give her lover a clear path. Bellagos immediately understood—and in the moment made the decision he had so long avoided. . . .

The sentry had no time to cry out an alarm when he recognized the rag-wrapped ladder poles. Bellagos was the larger man, and he hit the sentry with the full impact of his weight, sending him over the low parapet. The thirty-foot fall was too quick for him to draw breath to scream. The night was still too dark for others along the wall to see what had transpired.

"Come," he commanded Aurinia. "The first men up that ladder won't stop to ask if we're their enemies." They hurried along the wall to the steep stairway. By the time they were halfway down, a sentry further along the wall raised the alarm. How much time had they granted the attackers? Was it enough to make the slightest difference in the outcome?

"My horse is ready," Bellagos whispered. "Come with me now."

"What of Father and Mother?"

"The*veleda* said nothing of them. What of . . . our son?"

"You know I'm with child? How . . ."

"The*veleda* told me. She . . . she saw him, in a far place, standing beside us. We must make her vision true. Come."

* * *

*Dolia*were not stacked above the ground, but were buried in it, an improvement on the grain-pits of earlier times. This one was empty, a groggy Pierrette realized, not because its contents had been consumed (the siege had not been that long) but because it was badly cracked. Silt had washed into it. She licked gritty mud from her teeth and spat it out.

She wriggled until her head was above her knees, then struggled to stand. Her fingertips just reached the stone lid of the jar, but she could exert no force on it. She was well trapped. Tears made muddy tracks down her cheeks. Even now, the Romans might be assaulting the walls, and she was stuck here. Even now Teutomalos would be . . .

She sank back to her knees. What hope was there? She would die in this black confinement, Calvinus would be slain, Marius and Caesar would be born as slaves to Gaulish overlords, and the spirits of a million dead would linger, slaves themselves to a greater Evil.

She would die. But would her body remain here? Or would it be found on the cold, foggy slope below the sacred cave? What was the reality? What was not?

Brightness like a sliver of daylight illuminated a small corner of her mind. The spell*Mondradd in Mon* did not transform her back in time—not exactly. At first, it had allowed her only to see events past, riding as a passenger in the tiny mind of a magpie. Later, it had permitted her to walk through the veil of years in a place where that barrier was weak. Later still, terrified, she had flung herself into a different reality, where she had encountered Cunotar at Heraclea. On Rhodanus's shore, she had walked out of that time into her own.

She reviewed the essence of the spell's ancient words, line by line, not translating them (because they refused translation) but sensing their totality.

* * *

Mondradd in Mon.Borabd orá perdó.Merdrabd or vern.Arfaht ará camdó.

* * *

There, in the second line—"*Borabd orá perdó*"—the sense was not of time, but of difference. Only the first line spoke of the Wheel of Time, once complete, now broken; there was a shift between different realities: she had a brief impression of a thousand worlds only a thought apart from each other, each one differing only by a single concept, a single rule or natural law, a single possibility.

In one, had been she been born a mouse, not a girl? Could she scurry out a crack in the*dolium* , and tunnel through the hard earth to freedom? In another, was she only a dream in someone's sleeping head and, as in a dream, could she be in one place one moment, and then abruptly in another, without a break in the dreamers credulity? If this were all a dream . . .

"*Mondradd in Taìn,*" she whispered. "*Borabd orá perdó*." In the first verse, she had changed a single word, and "Time" became something else—a displacement of reality, a tiny bubble of oneness that stayed right where it was while the Earth continued to move along its regular course. A tiny moment stretched to seem as though all the sand in Polybius's glass had run through when, in actuality, a single grain might have fallen. In that moment, in her stubborn, immobile, bubble, Pierrette waited while the Earth turned,

and she felt the*dolium* 's hard clay pass through her, like the twinge she felt when she remembered Alkides's, touch. She felt the stony earth beyond as the gentlest of caresses, inside herself, and then she felt the quiet air of dawn on her bare skin. . . .

* * *

Cunotar had left a guard on her prison. Now he stood staring, eyes wide and terrified, his mouth agape. The naked girl had risen from the earth right before his eyes! Now she stood brushing mud from her tousled black hair, from her breasts, and she spoke words in a foreign tongue. As he drew breath to cry out, he felt a strange sensation in his feet, then his calves. He looked down, and saw that the stony ground was enveloping him. Already he was waist-deep in it. Then he screamed. It was not an alarm, only an inarticulate cry, his fear given voice, because his world was no longer a solid place, and he no longer stood upon it.

"This is the Otherworld," she said in Gaulish. "It's not real—no more so than anything is." He did not understand.

* * *

But Pierrette did. This was not really happening. The world was no different. This was some other place, some different universe. Elsewhere, she was still in the*dolium* (or perhaps outside the sacred cave, or in the Roman bath) but she was also here. And that was enough for her. There was Cunotar, his black eyes wide. She uttered soft, simple words, and raised her hand. Somewhere far away, lightning rippled above the western hills, and belated thunder echoed. Kin to the coming storm was the white, jagged light that leaped from her fingertips.

Cunotar recoiled, raising a warding hand—then screamed as Pierrette's blow struck. His fingertips flared with brilliant light. Burned flesh scaled away and floated toward the ground, leaving behind clawed, twig-thin, blackened bone.

He cursed, uttered harsh, unintelligible words, and his hand was again whole. "You've learned a few things since you burned my*fantômes* ," he snarled, "but have you learned as much as I have?" His cloak hem fluttered, and the black cloth over his arms became feathers, his sharp nose a raven's beak, his words a harsh croak. He launched himself through the air at her, his talons spread wide.

A magpie squawked and fluttered away beneath the sooty shadow. It was green, black, white and blue, iridescent in the low morning light. Sun in the east and black towering clouds in the west fought to dominate the emerging day. The raven became a black viper, and struck at the magpie, but its fangs broke on the shiny basalt cobble it struck, where the magpie had been. Cunotar howled, and clapped his restored hand over broken, bleeding teeth, and Pierrette, whose name meant "little stone," stood where the cobble had lain, and laughed. Now she understood the magic of this place! Now she had the key to it. This was the Gauls' time, their universe, in which magic came from the Otherworld where they now fought. On Samonias, the holy day when the veil between the worlds stretched thin, the spirits of the dead wandered among mortal men, and unlucky mortals in the realm of the dead. Teutomalos's plot—or was it Cunotar's, and the king only his tool?—was to make every day of the year an unholy Samonias, and that task was well under way.

But now, that served her as well as them, because when nothing was truly real, nothing could be unreal. She remembered the limestone rocks above Citharista that Yan Oors had called "the dragon's bones," and even at this great distance she felt the earth shudder as the dragon arose, drawing stony flesh about itself, and took to the air. But even a dragon could not cover the miles in time to aid her.

The thunderheads took on the shape of a giant man whose legs were coils of snakes. "Taranis!" she

cried in greeting. Her own fingers flashing with small lightning, for the god was her friend, from long ago and yet to be, in Minho's fair land. Cunotar snarled impotently at the god's thundering approach.

* * *

Calvinus eyed the coming storm with mixed feelings. Already, his men were atop the wall in two places, on both sides of the south sally port. Oil-soaked brush flamed against the gate itself, and no one could pass in or out. That trapped the Gaulish horsemen, who could only mill about in the*campus martius* , or seek other egress from the town—but the main gate was across the city, and the streets were filled with men, women, and children, directionless, not knowing which way they should go.

Overhead the*whoosh* of fireballs and the cleaner*whish* of basalt, fired clay, and lead projectiles was followed by the screams of the burned, the clatter of breaking roof tiles and falling masonry, the crackle of rising flames within the walls. The storm might put out the fires—but rain would intensify the confusion in the streets. A breathless tribune reported that the maniples of*principes* were now ascending the ladders, and that*hastati* held the walls against the Gauls, who assaulted them from within. "What of the giant?" the consul demanded.

"No one has seen him," the tribune answered. "Could we have injured him, yesterday? Or is his . . . strength . . . exhausted?" The educated, rational Roman could not bring himself to use the word "magic."

"We can't count on that," Calvinus said. "Order the*triarii* of the second cohort to attack the main gate with a battering ram. If he comes to defend it, like yesterday . . . are the ballistae in place?"

"They are."

"Then we may see if this Gaulish monster is proof against arrows as big as he is," Calvinus concluded.

He then took a report by a courier from Legio II. The Traders' Gate still held, and only the*hastati* of two cohorts had gotten over the walls. They had invested the houses—including, known to neither man, the one where Pierrette's magical appurtenances now lay trampled beneath the hobnails of Roman *caligae* . Their numbers were not yet enough, the senior tribune of Legio II judged, to carry the battle into the streets, or to assault the*campus martius* from behind.

* * *

Teutomalos grasped the tree-trunk haft of his new sword, at last finished, and growled his displeasure that he had been kept so long from the developing battle. He stood too tall to pass through the main gate, so he strode down the Sacred Way instead, intending to step over the city wall itself at the north, where the Romans pressed hardest. The engineers at the edge of the forest beyond the main gate watched that great head of flamelike hair recede, as they stood impotently by their ballistae.

Teutomalos crushed his own folk with each heavy step, but did not care. He was no longer Teutomalos. He was Teutatis, the war god himself. He was*teuta* , the tribe, and those who died were no more important as individuals then the hairs he shed, the flakes of dried skin on his scalp, the chips knocked from his toenails when he plowed through a house he could not walk around.

* * *

Even beyond the veil that separated the Otherworld from the ordinary, Pierrette felt the god's crushing, pounding approach, but Cunotar was pressing her hard. One moment he was a wolf to her fox, a flood to her flame, a falling tree to . . . she could spare no effort for anything else. It was stalemate. Cunotar was master of this environment, she a talented, innovative newcomer. Desperately fending off a swarm of bees, she became smoke to disperse them, but Cunotar became wind. She would be better off fighting

him in the real world with a knife or . . .

As quickly as the thought arose, Pierrette became . . . nothing. She was not even a void; she was air moving with the rest of the air, no more flecked with dust, and no less. Cunotar's wild eyes cast about himself. Where had she gone? From what direction would she next attack?

Pierrette was not gone. She was back in the "real" world. And there, where the soldier had flung them, were her clothes and . . . and her pouch. She dressed quickly. Groping in the pouch, her fingers touched something cool and smooth. She pulled the "serpent's egg" out. The blue and red veins in the clear glass seemed to pulse with a semblance of life. She draped its string around her neck. She remembered a time when there had been a similar thread between her voyaging spirit and her body. She had not broken past that early kind of soul travel until she been forced to stay in the past, to live, drink, eat, even love, there. Had there been such a thread trailing from Cunotar on the Plain of Stones? She did not know. Was there now?

The gentle breeze ruffled the*dryade* 's hair. There! Thin as spider silk, invisible except by the inner light from her eyes (or so the Gallic philosophers believed light to be). The tenuous thread drifted into and out of Pierrette's perception, and only when the currents of her passage moved it could she trace its course, out into the street, the Sacred Way, and . . . into the*nemeton* . Of course.

A hurrying*dryade* hustled past . . . through . . . her, and out into the street. The breeze stirred dry leaves under the staircase, and rose with the warmest air. It sighed through the planks of the door, and there was Cunotar, asleep on his cloak, amidst the heads of his victims. And there at his waist was his sword.

The fingers of the zephyr tugged at the leather-wrapped hilt, and became visible: soft, glassy things like the tendrils of jellyfish floating in the sea near Citharista. They began to block the light from the sword hilt, and they became real. Pierrette's shadow fell across the sleeping*dryade* .

Ever so gently, grasping the scabbard with one hand, she pulled the sword free. Cunotar's eyes opened suddenly. "You! Here! How did you get out. . . ." His fingers curved into claws as he sprang to his feet.

She held the sword in front of her. Cunotar laughed. "Magecraft only works in the Otherworld," he grated. "You are still trapped in a grain-jar, into which I will pour oil—boiling oil." He rushed at her as if she were not there, and he was going to hurry down the stairs, believing her true self elsewhere. Holding Cunotar's blade point outward, Pierette stepped into the doorway to block his passage. He lunged forward, not even bothering to brush the sword aside: it was illusion, as was she. That illusion, his nemesis, with both hands on the hilt of the great weapon, thrust it at him with every effort of body and will.

Piercing Cunotar's belly just right of center, it spun him against the door frame, jerking the blade from Pierette's grasp. Cunotar staggered backward, eyes wide and incredulous: when would he truly believe that she—and the sword in his own vitals—were real?

Pierrette let go of the hilt, her one remaining question still unanswered: was she capable of killing him in cold blood?

Cunotar's hands ran red as he tried to pull the blade from his gut, but the point was lodged in his spine. His legs folded and he pitched forward, his face a mask of agony and surprise. His weight drove the sword point through, and the bloody blade stood out from his back.

Pierette had never hurt anyone like that. The only weapon she had ever held was her father's ancient,

rusty spatha. What had she done now? Her mind recoiled: this was wrong! Suddenly she understood: Cunotar's death at her hands would soil her, poison and pollute her, impelling her in a terrible direction she did not wish to go. It would burden her with an evil that would fester within, and turn spells of moonlight and irises into . . . something else, something black . . .

Pierrette squatted beside him, fingering the glass bauble at her throat. It seemed to pulse in time with the blood that pushed from Cunotar's fatal wound. "What are you doing?" His voice was a harsh whisper.

"I'm waiting for you to die."

"How are you here? What didn't I understand?"

"You believed that spirits only travel in the underworld, though your eyes have long told you otherwise."

"What do you mean?"

"The*fantômes* are in this world. Teutomalos sucks them in as if they were swarms of flies. You saw them yourself."

He emitted one last, bubbling groan, then blood gushed from his mouth. Pierrette held her serpent's egg before his wide, panicked eyes, now glowing like coals. "Is your master coming for you?" she whispered. "Can you feel him? Are you ready? You can still escape. Quickly,*dryade* —come here instead." The jewel caught and reflected the color from his eyes, and . . . Cunotar died. She felt his last, desperate effort as his soul leaped from his eyes toward the glittering bauble. Somewhere near, but not in this world, she heard an angry, frustrated howl.

Pierrette smiled. "You can't have him," she said. "He's in here." She swung the serpent's egg back and forth. It pulsed more visibly than before, like the veins in a frog's bloated neck. The faint, hot glow was no longer a reflection. It emanated from within the glass. "He's safe from you at last," she told the Eater of Gods. Pierrette tried to feel something—anything—but her only emotion was gratitude that he had obliged her by dying, so she could do what she had to do. Belisama had been right. When it was time, she had known what to do, what the serpent's egg was for.

* * *

"The Greeks!" shouted a courier from Legio II. "The Massilians approach!"

"Where?" Calvinus asked.

"The coast road. Three thousand footmen and five hundred horse."

"Send them against the main gate. Wait—how goes the fight in the low town?"

"We are holding. All but the*triarii* are inside." Calvinus waved him off. A centurion led up a fresh horse, and the courier almost leaped from one mount to the other.

The exultation the consul felt at the news was not due to impending victory alone. He was thinking of his bargain with Pierrette. But it was short-lived: another courier galloped up from the west. "The giant is loose!" he cried. "He has vaulted the wall and is among us. Most of Cohort II is down already. The engineers are working to bring ballistae to bear, but one of his strides is ten ordinary paces."

"Tell them to do their utmost," the consul said. He turned away. The battle had gone well until now—just

like yesterday. Would it now turn sour? Even with their Greek allies, could the Romans prevail against . . . he shaped the word with great distaste . . . a god?

* * *

"Kraton!" exclaimed Pierrette. The Gaul stood in front of his companions, in the Sacred Way.

"How can we help?" he asked, then ducked instinctively as a thrumming, spattering fireball plunged to the street and burst.

Pierrette looked at the burning oil and rags, then at the*nemeton* . Kraton, whose eyes had followed hers, nodded wordlessly. What she wanted would not be easy for him. Had she asked Father Otho to burn his precious chapel, with its reliquary containing Sainte Claire's bones, or Anselm his library, their expressions would have been no less reluctant. But Kraton would do it. He picked up a burning rag on the point of his sword and stepped between the square pillars, past the desiccated heads of his countrymen.

His companions followed suit. Pierrette did not wait. She ran beside the swath of broken houses where Teutomalos had strode. She rushed up to the parapet of the city wall, then gasped. There he was, dwarfing the Roman horsemen who rode around him just beyond the reach of his terrible, bloody sword. His free hand batted at dozens of*hastae* and*pili* that flapped about his legs, clinging in his flesh. He roared in a voice louder and deeper than any ever heard before—a god's bellow, but . . . he was not a god. Not yet. Not quite.

* * *

From the tall pine tree Guihen watched as the fresh Massilian phalanx first drove back and then surrounded the Gauls who had come out of of the main gate. He could not see Legio II, now entirely within the low town, but he saw their results: creeping columns of smoke that marched slowly toward the *campus martius* and the high city. He occasionally glimpsed the flame-red brightness of Teutomalos's hair over the north wall, but could make nothing of the fighting there. Greeks swarmed in the main gate, four, even six abreast, abandoning their long spears outside. Surely the battle was almost won.

* * *

Caius Sextius Calvinus would not have agreed. His visions of dark hair spread across his pillow, of delectable small breasts brushing his chest, had evaporated. In their place was the very real sight of an entire cohort slaughtered, even the*triarii* , their mutilated body parts scattered across the trampled grass like bloody offal from a butcher's cart.

Even as he watched, Teutomalos's monstrous blade cut a horse right through, just behind its rider, who went down in a tangle of slithery gore. Even as he watched, he became aware that Teutomalos had seen him. The giant Gaul turned toward the rise where the consul stood with his two tribunes and the*primus pilus* holding the eagle standard. Calvinus's dark eyes locked with the monster's fiery ones.

* * *

Atop the wall, Pierrette gritted her teeth in helpless rage. She could not get down, because battles raged in the streets below where heavily armored Greek hoplites fought larger, but less well-armored, Gauls.

The first raindrop fell, and splashed off her nose. Lightning flashed from cloud to cloud. Her fingers tingled sympathetically. "Taranis," she whispered. Perhaps there was yet something she could do. The face of a storm was like an ancient house unchanged in centuries; the veil between one reality and another was thin there. This time, she had no need to part the veil, only to blow a breath of air against it, to shape what was already there into something that was . . . almost . . . there.

As the flame-haired monster waded through the Romans toward the consul's golden eagle standard, reaping them like dry wheat, thunder boomed behind him, and the black clouds coalesced near the ground, whirling madly. They roared—a long, continuous basso howl that seemed to form the syllables of a name: "Teutomalos!"

The giant whirled around and faced this new challenge. A sword of brilliant lightning swept toward him, and he caught the blow on his own blade. The battle of the gods had begun. Pierrette, the Romans, the Greeks and Gauls, all stood as if transfixed, as argent lightning and aureate flame did battle, towering over them all.

It seemed an even match: Taranis, chief god of the Gauls, whom the Romans might call Jupiter, and Teutatis the Red, whom they called Mars. Around they whirled, grunting thunderously as each struggled for advantage, their blades locked. One caught the other's heel to trip him, and both swayed, but remained upright. Taranis seemed attached to the sky itself, and would not fall, while Teutatis's feet were in the earth and could not be lifted from it. On and on they struggled, for gods did not tire.

Pierrette forced her gaze away from the combat and glanced toward the high town, where a new light flickered and a new column of smoke rose skyward. "Yes!" she cried exultantly. Kraton had fired the *nemeton* . As she watched, the flames reached the second floor, then the third . . . and the whole roof lifted on a pillow of orange flame, then fell back, and collapsed inward. Thick, oily smoke shot with brilliant sparks climbed quickly and spread out across the bases of Taranis's clouds. The temple's upper walls wavered like parchment, but did not fall.

Pierrette heard the war cries of the Massilians, and saw several of them dart into the yet-unburned ground floor of the*nemeton* . They emerged with the statues of the Gallic gods, which they tipped and smashed on the cobbles of the Sacred Way. Then the walls collapsed, the first floor plunged downward, the square columns pitched outward into the street, and smoke obscured everything in that direction, filling the air from ground to the low clouds. From it arose a silent shout, a thousand exultant voices, as the flames set the captive*fantômes* free. Behind Pierrette, Taranis's voice rose in a bellow of equal glee. She turned to look.

Teutomalos shrank. He narrowly avoided being crushed by his own sword, that he could no longer hold. His scream of rage was a thin, distant piping as he scurried away from his giant enemy, who laughed scornfully and sheathed his flashing sword. Taranis whirled about, faster and faster, and he rose up into his black, roiling clouds.

A different shadow scudded across the ground: great wings, long ophidian neck, and lashing tail. Pierrette waved gratefully to the great beast, and bade it go home. "The battle will soon be won," she called out to it. "You may resume your long nap."

Then the rain began to fall in earnest, and soon Pierrette's eyes were blurred by rainfall mixed with salty sweat and tears. The downpour put out the lesser fires, but the*nemeton* blazed on, crackling, whistling as if the spirit of a giant god still animated it. But Teutomalos was gone. He had leaped onto a Roman horse, and had galloped off, abandoning his city and his people. So much, Pierrette thought, for Teutatis, god of the tribe. The real Teutatis was not a captive construct of evil men, but endured in the living tribe, lingering a while in proper*fantômes* hung respectfully from ridgepoles and doorways, and filling the fertile soil with his living essence, drained from the bodies and bones of all who lay within it.

And there, far below, stood Caius Sextius Calvinus, who raised his eyes to the wall, and saw her there. Even at this distance she saw—or imagined—his smile, as he looked upon one more prize he had won

today.

Chapter 29 - The Spoils

Even when their defeat was indisputable some Gauls fought on, and not until dusk was the town declared pacified. Disarmed warriors were driven into the*campus martius* , women and children into the high town forum, the market square.

Pierrette did not think any Romans would get much sleep that night. Almost a third of their force stood guard over the captives, or on the walls and at the broken gates: the countryside was dotted with outlying Gaulish camps, and there were a dozen other*oppida* —though none as strong as Entremont, except Heraclea with its Greek walls.

Already, Calvinus pored over his maps of the Rhodanus Valley. Was he just planning the rest of his campaign—perhaps against the Vocontii, the Allobroges, the Calvarii who claimed much of that fertile plain—or was he envisioning the future Roman Province as Pierrette had described it: the cities marble-clad jewels pendant on great aqueducts that spanned rivers and chasms, and tunnelled under mountains, bringing fresh mountain water to splash in their fountains and shimmer in their pools? Or was he building, in his fertile mind, a villa of golden stone, red tile, and black basalt cobbles where he would keep his own jewel—his black-haired Ligure mistress—for those times when he was not in Roma?

Pierrette and Guihen wandered the streets that war had rendered once again unfamiliar. She carried a lead tablet with the consul's name and seal. Without that, the soldiers would have confined her with the other women and children, to await an iron collar—the legion's smiths were working through the night to forge those, and already a train of wagons was being loaded in Massilia with chains to link those collars together. Massilian, Iberian, and Italian slave merchants, who had awaited the outcome of the battle in the safety of the Greek city, were already arriving on lathered horses to have first pick of of the human spoils.

In coffles of fifty, the entire population of Entremont would be marched to their new homes: the slave quarters of Massilian nobles and Roman senators, of Campanian farmers and Etruscan industrialists, or to the benches of the great galleys that kept the*Mare Nostrum* , "Our Sea," free of pirates and foreign adventurers.

Pierrette and Guihen listened from the shadows as off-duty Romans tried to make sense of the last two days, especially the Battle Between the Gods. Those who had seen it firsthand argued with those who had not, and against the latter's skepticism they used ever-growing exaggeration until Teutatis stood higher than the sun itself, and Taranis became as broad as a mountain. As the imagery became more preposterous, the countering skepticism also intensified, and "explanations" proliferated: red-haired Teutatis had been the flames of the burning*nemeton* , and black Taranis a whirlwind, a cyclone that dropped from the storm clouds to quench the fire. "Thus," Pierrette told Guihen, "are legends born—and thus they also die. I wonder what my friend ibn Saul will make of this, when he reads what I will write?"

"Ask me later," Guihen said with a bemused grin. "I haven't met him yet."

Pierrette already knew what ibn Saul would say. There was no place in the scholar's universe for gods of any kind, but he would gladly envision fires, storms, even cyclones that reached down from the clouds to put them out.

"Where are we going now?" asked Guihen as Pierrette pressed upward into the high city.

"The baking ovens," Pierrette answered. "I am about to confirm for once and for all that I am really here, not in some suspended state in a Roman bath centuries away, or on a cold hillside among the beech trees." Guihen did not understand, but he followed, and he obligingly pushed the stone lid from the*dolium* and observed with Pierrette that the silt at the bottom of it was not smooth, but showed signs of disturbance—as if someone had struggled there, and had left a footprint just the size of Pierrette's own.

"This means I was in in there," she said, "and that I got out through . . . the Otherworld . . . and thus that I really am here, now."

"I could have told you that," said Guihen, who thought her reasoning convoluted, and perhaps mostly wishful thinking at that.

"I know," she said, sighing. "Seeing is believing, as I have often been told."

* * *

They caught a few hours' sleep in the anteroom of some nobleman's abandoned house, on sooty cushions that reeked—as did everything in the high city—of smoke and cedar oil. Several brown chickens pecked distastefully at oily, sooty insects in the dirt and cobbles just outside.

At dawn, when they tried to get out of the shattered main gate, Massilian sentries stopped them. The Massilians could not read Latin—or, most likely, Greek either—and Pierrette's tablet was only a sheet of lead, to them.

"I need a hot bath," Pierrette pouted. "Can you get us out of here?"

"All the gates will be guarded and even most Romans can't read. Unless there's a tribune handy to read your tablet . . ." They returned to the house where they had slept.

"Look!" exclaimed Pierrette. She pointed at the chickens.

"What?"

"That hen. Can you catch her?"

"I'm not hungry. Are you?"

"No. I don't want to eat her. I want you to catch her. I think that is Penelope."

Guihen looked at her head as if she'd gone awry. "And I suppose the rooster over there is Odysseus."

"You don't understand. I want to get out of the main gate, and the guards won't let us, and . . ."

"You can't bribe them with a chicken—or maybe you can if you bake it first, with a bit of garlic and some crocus pollen from the kitchen over there . . ."

"The Guihen I knew as a child had . . . has? . . . a white hen. When he stroked her, he became invisible—or at least he came to resemble a tamarisk or a feral olive tree, or a . . ."

"That hen will not be hatched for centuries. And I can already `become' woodbine, when I need to."

His obtuseness frustrated her. "That is a white hen. It is the first white hen I have seen here, where all are brown. It is a sport, a unique thing, and I'm sure that is not a coincidence. That hen is Penelope, and you must catch her, or I will never get my bath!"

Guihen sighed, and got to his feet. "Here, bird," he cooed as he stalked the hen. "Cluck, cluck. In Chicken, that means `I have a nice juicy worm for you.' Cluck, cluck."

The hen, ignoring him, pecked among the stones. When Guihen got close, the other birds scurried and fluttered out of reach, but the white hen, now with a hefty beetle in her beak, merely looked annoyed. When Guihen picked her up, she settled in the crook of his arm, even though he had lied to her, and had no juicy worm.

"She is a lovely creature," Guihen said. "Soot doesn't even stick to her feet." He stroked her back and, briefly, Pierrette thought that Guihen became just a bit soft around the edges, like an ink drawing left in the rain.

"Listen carefully," she commanded him. "This is what you must say to her." She spoke words in the forgotten Hittite tongue, which was a little like Greek, but only a very little.

"I can't say that. Why can't I just say `cluck, cluck, squawk,' which, in Chicken, means . . ."

"Be serious! It is a spell. It will make people look past you, and see only a bush, or the stones of the wall you're leaning on. You must learn the words."

Guihen sighed again. He was getting quite good at expressing tired, condescending, skeptical, patient tolerance that way, without having to utter a word. When Pierrette repeated the phrase, he mimicked it almost perfectly, and that time she was sure his image wavered and she could see the mortar lines of the wall behind him, right through him.

The second time . . . he was gone, for a moment. But she could still hear him: "My hands! My arm. They're gone! What have you done to . . ." Then he was back. "Ah. There they are. I could feel them, but I couldn't see them. It gave me quite a fright. How can I be expected to do anything, in that condition? How can I go anywhere if I don't know where I am? I think your spell is more trouble than it's worth."

Pierrette giggled. "You don't need a mirror to pick your nose! And you don't look at your feet when you walk—or when you do, you bump into trees, like yesterday."

"That was different! I was watching out for twigs that would snap if I stepped on them."

She made a mental note to remember to teach him how to feel for dry twigs with his toes, as the hunter Aam had taught her, long ago, and to push them aside before putting her weight down. Being invisible would be useless if he made as much noise as a trotting horse.

"The spell worked, though. You'll get used to it. Now hold my hand, and let's get out of here. We'll be at the camp in hardly any time at all."

* * *

Steam arose from the warm water. Pierrette pillowed her head on her folded clothing—clean clothing, her blue skirt and a pretty, embroidered, cream-colored chiton salvaged from the noble house where she had napped, and her*sagus* , recovered from the woods near the Porta Praetoria on the way back. A nap sounded good, right now. . . .

* * *

"You did it, didn't you? I told you I'd be thanking you—but not yet, I'm afraid. You still have something to do."

Pierrette's eyes snapped open. This goddess was just as annoying as the other one, the one who had—in her own circuitous way—sent her here. Why couldn't she just sleep, in this lovely warm pool? Was there always something else to be done? "You mean sleep with Calvinus, as I promised, and lose the ability to perform even the simplest spell?"

"That will be as it will be. I'm talking about my people—your friend Kraton and his family, and the others, who torched the*nemeton* for you, and brought that upstart Teutomalos down to size. Where are they now?"

Pierrette sat up abruptly, splashing hot water over her fresh clothes and the goddess's skirt. "I forgot! Where is Calvinus? I must tell him . . ."

"He's on his way here. Listen. You've been sleeping for hours. Legio II is already back, the*oppidum* is empty, and everything there is aflame. Three thousand collared slaves are stumbling down the road, and will be here before you can dry off and get your clothes on."

Pierrette pulled herself from the pool, and wrapped her skirt around her waist without bothering to towel herself with her cloak. She pulled the chiton over her head and, belatedly remembering the resolution she had made the last time, backed toward the door, keeping the goddess in sight.

"You won't figure it out," the red-clad woman said, laughing indulgently. "You never will, until you're a goddess yourself. Go ahead! Watch both doors. You won't see me leave."

Pierrette backed out, and shut the door. She wedged a stone under it, and though she couldn't see the far door, she could see the approach to it. Now if she quickly dashed to that end, and opened it before anyone could push the other one open . . . then she, too, laughed. "Until I'm a goddess too? Is that a prophecy? I should ask you to define `goddess,' but would you comply?"

No one answered her. She walked away without looking back. Goddess, sorceress, masc, or ordinary girl, that future she had not lived through, and thus had not seen. She would do what she had to. Even if she fulfilled her promise to the consul, she still had her dream of darkly handsome Minho, of two ivory thrones at the edge of the stormy sea, and that had not yet come to pass. Perhaps it was indeed a child's fantasy, and it never would. Perhaps otherwise. But Kraton was as real as anything in this strange universe, and the thought of him, of his wife Chiomara, his daughter Onomaris, with iron collars about their necks, was more than she could bear.

* * *

The first coffles of newly enslaved Gauls had arrived in front of the Porta Praetoria. They were silent, exhausted from the march from Entremont, their feet bruised, their necks chafed raw. Even the babies in their mothers' arms only whimpered.

Calvinus and his tribunes stood in the gateway, in the shade of the timbered towers. Pierrette walked up to him, and he smiled, and put a proprietary hand around her waist, pulling her against him. Her own reaction confused her: his affection was genuine, and so was her sense of comfort and security, close against him like that. But so, too, was her despair.

Refusing to surrender to either emotion, she told him how Kraton had agitated for a peaceful agreement with Roma, and had consequently lost his fine house in the high city, his place on the council, and the respect of his tribe.

"Most of the male captives are still on the road," the consul said. "When they arrive, point him out to me." Then he saw something that required his attention, and he left her standing alone.

* * *

"This is Kraton," she said. The Gaul did not speak. His expression was solemn, resigned—no expression at all. How could he know what promise she had gotten from his captor?

"Unchain him," Calvinus commanded. That was easily ordered, not easily done. The single chain was threaded through loops on all fifty collars, and Kraton was near the middle of the coffle. Every prisoner to the end of the chain had to be released before Kraton could be. The chain had to be drawn from twenty collars, before being drawn through his.

"Strike loose his collar," the consul said. A smith was already on hand with a hammer and chisel, and a field anvil spiked to a short, thick log. Calvinus motioned Kraton to kneel. When the Gaul placed his cheek flat against the cold iron anvil, the smith wedged his hardened chisel between the collar's tabs and, with one blow, severed the soft iron rivet. When Kraton stood, the smith, muscles bulging with effort, bent the collar wide. Kraton was again a free man. "How many others stood by you?" the consul asked him. "How many stood by your commitment to Roma?"

"Fifty of us protested Teutomalos's rebellion," Kraton said. "We favored peace, and the chance for free trade. But neither are we traitors—to either side."

"I would not imply it. This woman, whom I trust, has spoken for you, and that is enough. Now tell me, how many others might have stood by their agreement with Roma, but for their fear of Teutomalos and his druids?"

"A hundred of us were banished from the high city when Teutomalos led the revolt, last winter."

"One hundred men. I presume most had wives, and children. Grandchildren too." Kraton nodded, but did not speak. "Then nine hundred seems a fair number to me." Calvinus turned to address the tribunes. "This loyal Gaul will choose nine hundred of his fellows to be freed."

Again, to Kraton: "Choose well. Exactly nine hundred of you will go free to rebuild your town, or to go elsewhere. Nine hundred, including you. Not one man or one woman more—except children too young to grow hair beneath their arms and at their groins."

Kraton's face was now animated by an emotion Pierrette could only surmise, as much despair as elation: how could he choose fairly? How could he say "This one," and not "That one?" And how could he meet the eyes of those he did not choose?

Calvinus had thought everything out in advance, she realized, when a decurion and ten legionaries

stepped forward with brushes and buckets of lime mixed with oil, when ten more smiths came up, dragging their anvils and bags of tools. Pierrette watched for a while. When Kraton indicated a particular man, a soldier painted large white circles on his back and chest. When Kraton walked on, other soldiers released the chosen one, and led him to the line of smiths, where his collar was removed. The freed men were ordered to stand apart from the bound, in ranks of ten. Would Kraton allow each man to choose what kinfolk he most wanted freed? Overcome with emotion she could not explain, Pierrette rushed back through the gate, to the dubious comfort of the tent she shared with Guihen.

Chapter 30 - Partings

Calvinus found her in the tent, asleep. Her eyes were red from weeping, but she could not have said why she had wept. There were too many things to feel awful about, none so great as to explain her tears. There were also many things that had gone right, but hers had not been tears of relief, either—not entirely.

"Come to the praetorium with me," he said. "Polybius has once again made his notable lamb stew. I suspect that is why Aemilianus kept him around so long." If Polybius was to be there, her promise would not have to be fulfilled right away. She went with the consul.

"You're not walking to your own crucifixion," he said. For a moment she was confused. The Christian Son of God would not be born for a hundred-odd years. But crucifixion had long been the Romans' preferred method of execution. Calvinus was only attempting humor.

Polybius was not there—only his stew was, simmering at the edge of the brazier. She made as if to sit on the folding stool, but Calvinus guided her to the wide couch instead, and sat next to her. "I've learned much from you," he said thoughtfully. "I suspect also that there are things I might have learned, but did not."

What did he mean? His arm around her waist, his other hand on her knee, hinted at the direction of his thoughts. "You taught me how a woman might please a man, yet remain a virgin," he said. "But I have not yet learned to please that woman, who wishes still to remain so."

"That would be . . . difficult," she said softly, not wishing to insult him. "Fear and pleasure are like oil and wine."

"Then put your fears aside, little sorceress. Teach me only what you wish, and then go where you will—to that strange future you have told me of, if it still exists. I release you from your promise."

She was speechless. Was it a ruse, to put her off guard? She knew him better than that. She thought she did. "I mean it," he said as his hand drew her head around, as he leaned forward to kiss her. "Only what you wish."

The sun's diffuse light through the window moved slowly up the walls, then faded, before that kiss, and its aftermath, were concluded.

* * *

"How convenient," he mused as he poured cold wine into two cups, "that my own greatest pleasure was

what most pleased you. I had never considered that."

She smiled, and took the cup he offered, and sipped.

"I never dreamed such . . . mutual entertainment . . . could go on and on so," he said. "You realize it is already night out there? The moon is up."

She sipped more wine, dribbling some on her breast. He knelt, and licked it. That soon led to other things—of which, she discovered, Alkides had taught her only a few. Where and when would the discoveries end?

The moon crossed the sky. She remembered dozing from time to time, her limbs entangled with his. Once, when she remembered something tantalizing that she had dreamed of, she tried it on him, and when he awakened, it was to such a strange and intense arousal that he cried out, and the sentry outside inquired if all was well. "I was dreaming," he said, almost truthfully. "All is . . . quite well."

"It's all well for me to dally all night with you," he said at sunrise, "but I received word late yesterday that two more legions are marching from Rhodanus's mouth, and I must meet them halfway. There are still battles to be fought, before this summer ends. Teutomalos has fled to the Allobroges, which gives me adequate pretext to attack them immediately. Are you sure you can't stay with me, at least until fall?"

Could she? She wanted to. But if time on the far side of the veil of years marched at the same rate as here, ibn Saul would tire of waiting for her. And she did not know, for sure, that her success here had changed things there—and she could not enjoy a summer with Calvinus, not without knowing.

"Never mind," he said with a rueful smile. "I should not have asked. Will you leave right away?"

"I must say good-bye to Master Polybius, to Kraton, and to Guihen."

"I thought the Ligurian elf might go with you."

"He will be there when I arrive."

Calvinus drew her to him for one last, naked kiss, then hurriedly pulled on his tunic and*caligae* , and lifted his breastplate and helmet from the bench by the door. "Good-bye, then," he said.

"Good-bye."

* * *

"You seem pensive, Master Polybius," Pierrette said as she shared a last meal with the elderly Greek. "Is something troubling you?" Outside, the camp was noisy as Calvinus prepared his legions for departure. A garrison, mostly allies, would remain there.

He sighed breathily. "I always ask questions," he said. "The backbone of good history is what's gathered from people who witnessed events firsthand. Now I myself am such a witness—and I don't know what to ask . . . or I don't dare. I'm not even sure I'll write of this battle. After all, I'm quite old, and I might not live to finish it."

Aha! Pierrette understood what lay behind the words he uttered—the thoughts he did not voice. "You can ask that question you want to," she said. "I'll answer it fairly—but my answer will be hedged in even more ambiguity than Apollo's voice at Delphi because . . ."

"Because?"

It was her moment to sigh. "I told you who I am, and why I am here. Whether you believe me or not—and you must at least have some latent trust in what I've said, or you wouldn't even consider asking what you want to—the history I learned in my master's library has changed. Anselm's books recorded a Roman victory three years ago, not two days. In them, Calvinus's legions landed near the Rhodanus to the west, not the Argentia, to the east, and there was no mention of allies remaining overlong within Massilia's walls. The Massilians met up with the legions at Salinium, and were here to dig their share of the ditches that encircle us." She shook her head as if the conflicting stories could be shaken like dried beans and peas in a jar, and would sort themselves out in neat layers.

"Then you'll have to tell me what you read, won't you—and let me interpret it just as I might the Delphic oracle's obscurities, with the same risk of error."

"I suppose so. So ask."

"Should I began the task of chronicling this campaign?"

"You alone can decide. That isn't your real question."

"You'll force me to face it?" Again he sighed, a quavering exhale that evoked her pity for his fear. "Very well then. Simply put: when will I die?"

"I once read—I don't remember where—that you lived . . . would live? will live?—to your eighty-second year, and perish from injuries after falling from your horse. And I remember no forty-first book listed in your index volume. The only evidence that you will write more than you already have is a curious phrasing in Book III, which some scholars say was . . . may be . . . added by a copyist centuries from now, in which you state that the road between Emporiae, in Iberia, and the Rhodanus, has been measured by the Romans and marked by milestones every eighth stade. But as yet the Via Tiberia has not been named, and when it is, it will be called something else, and the treaty allowing Roman passage along it has not been written—if indeed it will be, in this changed history."

Polybius smiled. "Eighty-two? Then I may have seven more years, because I now possess seventy-five! That is plenty of time. And just because you found no forty-first book in my index . . . why, I'll write one anyway, and I'll carefully not include it in the index at all! And I'll wait until the last day before my eighty-second birthday to write about the milestones on the Via . . . what did you call it?"

Pierrette was amazed. The old historian had not lost his edge with age. He had cut to the quick of her own effort to manipulate the course of history, by creating a circumstance that could not be fulfilled unless it went the way he wanted it to go! If he did not amend Book III until he was almost eighty-two . . . But he was forgetting something. . . .

"This history is not the one I knew, master," she said regretfully, not wanting to dash his hopes, but not willing to allow him false ones. "Perhaps when I return to my own era, I will read something different."

"Ah—but that uncertainty I can live with! After all, you said this battle was fought three years late, didn't you? Perhaps I will live another decade, and when you reread my book, you'll find that I have corrected the passage about the source of the Padus as well—the one you tweaked me with the first time we spoke together."

She smiled. Indeed, when . . . and if, for nothing was certain . . . she returned to the fane, and passed through it to a later time when Master ibn Saul and his apprentice Lovi awaited her, she would read Polybius's second and third volumes, and see for herself.

She got up. "No need for you to rise, master," she said, placing a hand on his shoulder. "I want to remember you just like this, by the comfort of your fire." She leaned down and kissed the top of his shiny, bald head, then whirled away to the door, to conceal her tears. In her mind, already stretching forward to her own time, this dear new friend was already centuries in his grave, and she did not want to think about that.

* * *

"Did Aurinia and Bellagos get away?" she asked Chiomara.

"They are not among the captives or the dead. The consul was kind enough to let us look, before his soldiers buried them in a great trench outside the city wall."

"Should I send someone after them?" wondered Kraton. "After all, they would not be enslaved, because I have chosen only eight hundred and ninety-eight. Two places remain."

"Choose two who are worthy of freedom," Pierrette said. "Aurinia's destiny lies far away from here. And if time behaves as I suspect it must, your courier would not find her anyway."

He nodded. "Good-bye, then. I will speak of you with Onomaris's son when he is older, and bid him remember everything I say. And he will tell his children. . . ."

She smiled and shook her head. "No one will remember, centuries from now. Speak instead of Bellagos and Aurinia, for they will be remembered." She turned away so Kraton and Chiomara would not see her tears.

Guihen took her arm, and led her to the fane. "I'll miss you," he said. The hen—which he refused to call "Penelope"—clucked softly, nestled in the crook of his arm.

"I'll see you tomorrow," she said. "Or surely the day after. Can't you be there to meet me in the Roman baths?"

"I'm not fond of cities," he said. "I doubt*that* will change. But if I am able, I'll find you before you get home. And for me, I think it will be a very long day, and that that tomorrow will not soon come."

"I suppose that is so," she replied, "but you have your life to live. Why, you have not even met Yan Oors."

Guihen shuddered. "I'm not sure I want to, from what you've told me."

She laughed. "Good-bye, for now." She entered the fane, and quickly shut the door. There had been too many good-byes.

Chapter 31 - The Scholar's

Consternation

"This is ridiculous," Pierrette mumbled. "I just had a bath." Instead of entering the pool, she sat at its edge, and trailed a finger in the water. Ripples spread in expanding circles. When they reached the far edges, they rebounded, creating complex patterns that drew her eyes as she tried to follow them. "This," she murmured, "is how it all began. Perhaps now I will have some time for myself, for my studies."

She drew a mental picture of the fane as it would be, centuries hence, with benches along the walls and heavy, ornate doors. She pictured marble columns; dim, magnificent arcades where now was the dust of the Roman camp. "*Mondradd in Mon*," she said softly, and let the sinuous, sparkling wavelets in the pool draw her in. "*Borabd orá*. . ."

* * *

A touch of vermilion caught her eye. It was a water jug. It had not been there moments ago, but it had been the first time she had entered the fane. Now the doors were again shiny with thick varnish, and the mortar between the stones was old and sooty gray. She was home—or as near to it as she was likely to get, in a world out of joint, where Tiberius Gracchus had never governed Provence, and gods of fire and storm had fought among mortal men.

She pushed the door open. A tremendous clatter ensued as brass pots and other impedimenta fell to the paving. Something caught, and the door remained mostly closed. "Master! Wake up! Someone—something is trying to get out!"

"Eh?" Ibn Saul sounded groggy. "Well then, stop pushing on the door, and let it emerge."

"It can't be him! It's been too long. What if it's . . . What if it's . . ."

Pierrette picked up the empty water jar and held it to her face. "Lovi! Open the door, or face my wrath!" Her words sounded hollow—the voice, perhaps, of a*fantôme* , if*fantômes* had voices.

"Master!" the apprentice squeaked.

"It is Piers," the scholar said. "Now let him out." There was the sound of a scuffle, and the door opened when Pierrette pushed.

Pierrette—now Piers—stepped out into the echoing, vaulted hallway of the Roman bath. "Good evening, Master ibn Saul. Or is it morning? I can't tell, in here."

"It is midday, I think. Well? You must have found that tunnel hidden under the pool, and it must have gone somewhere, because you been gone long enough to have starved, otherwise. But did you find the gold? Where is it?"

Tunnel? Gold? For a moment, Pierrette was confused. Then she understood: history had indeed been changed, and in this new version of it, her purpose in shutting herself in the fane had been entirely different. But she could not explain that all in a breath. "I found no gold, Master ibn Saul. We must sit down and talk, and I will tell you what I did find." She patted the rolled-up manuscript. "I think you will deem it treasure enough. Of course, if you'd rather sell it for gold . . ."

"Let me see it!"

"Here?" Pierrette looked around. There—strewn with the pots and other articles that had made such a clatter—was a pallet, and Lovi's blanket. At the other door was another, ibn Saul's. A brazier overflowing with dead coals stood halfway between. A heap of several weeks' ashes and trash completed the signs of the two men's occupancy. "Shouldn't we find somewhere . . . perhaps an inn?"

Ibn Saul eyed the roll of vellums greedily. "Lovi! Pack up our things. We are moving to the inn." When Pierrette made no move to help him, the boy's sour countenance turned quite surly—but he remembered his master's promise of a good meal at the inn, even if ibn Saul did not, and he gathered up their belongings with great alacrity.

* * *

The inn was perhaps ordinary, but to Pierrette everything was strange—and dirty. The Romans had been fastidious, personally and officially, and their camp had been free of refuse, though the unpaved*viae* were muddy or dusty by turn. And they bathed. Entremont had also been clean—and of course there had been soap. Why hadn't she thought to bring some of that wondrous Gallic invention back? Would she, remembering that the ingredients were basically olive oil and wood lye, be able to duplicate it?

She wrinkled her nose at the stink of the room they were offered. "Don't you shovel the filth from the corners of this chamber once every year?" she asked the innkeeper. "And isn't it nearly time for it?" He seemed to find nothing wrong with the spillage from countless chamberpots, or the food scraps that had obviously passed through the intestinal tracts of some very large rats, but when ibn Saul waved a small coin the warm color of gold, he sent his two daughters for brooms and buckets of water.

In the meantime, Pierrette quietly whispered a spell that dealt with the purity of water, the cleansing nature of mushrooms in good soil, and the clarity of sunlight. It failed to have any discernible effect; thus she was convinced that this world was not really much different from the one she had originated in. She was back—and she felt the first real stirrings of regret for what she had left behind.

Ibn Saul, at Lovi's prompting, remembered his promise about a good meal. They adjourned to the common room while the daughters swept and splashed. "Now," said the scholar once they were seated in a corner lit by a small unglazed window, "that manuscript."

"But Master ibn Saul—don't you also have a written account for me?"

"What? I don't believe I do."

"Then it is true. The world has really changed," she said.

"What do you mean?"

"Read this. It will explain." She plucked the binding loose, and smoothed pages in front of him. He began to read.

"But . . . this is in my own hand! Where did you get this?"

"Read on, master." He did so. His eyebrows lifted, first momentarily, then frequently, and by the time he turned the third page, they stayed up, and his eyes remained wide in an expression of frozen surprise. Food arrived, but only Lovi noticed it, or partook. Ibn Saul continued to read, and Pierrette watched him, following his progress by his twitches, murmurs of surprise and amazement, and shakes of his head. At last he set the final page aside.

"This is true?" he asked. "You swear it?"

"Ask yourself that, master. Is it in your own hand indeed? And is there a description of something only you could know, that no one else could write down?"

"It is as you say. But there are no*fantômes* , and the historic summary of events is all wrong. Things did not happen like that."

"But surely they did—you would not lie to yourself, would you? Our experiment—even though you don't remember it—was a success. History has been changed, and the only reason this manuscript exists now is because it was not here, to be changed along with everything else."

"I must think on this," the scholar mumbled. "There must be another explanation."

"I'm sure you can devise one, or several—but in the end, you'll reach only one conclusion."

"That remains to be seen," he replied. Pierrette fell abruptly uneasy. The scholar had a clever mind. Could he rationalize away the evidence his own eyes showed him, written in his own hand? But on the other hand, did that matter? She knew what really had transpired, and if there were no*fantômes* , no gray, encroaching unreality, no nightmare empire without Rome, without imperial Christianity or its successors, then she had indeed won, and what the scholar believed was of little import. She gathered up the pages.

"What are you doing?" asked ibn Saul. "Give those to me."

"You may read them again—in Anselm's keep, in his library. Until then, I'll keep them safe."

"But I wrote them. They are mine."

She pointed to the top of the first page:

This is a true copy of an account by Muhammad abd' Ullah ibn Saul, given into the hands of Piers, apprentice to the mage Anselm, for his library.

* * *

"You see? The original is yours. This copy is not."

"But that's not fair! If the original is lost, or . . . or if it . . . never . . . existed . . ." his words petered out in breathless silence. The conclusion he did not want to reach had—almost—issued from his own lips.

"Either way," Pierrette said, "this one must go to Anselm's library, and I must go to bed. I have much to sleep on. I hope it will not be lumpy."

* * *

The three of them shared a bed wide enough for four, but though Pierrette's portion of it was soft, ibn Saul, in the middle, seemed to find lumps aplenty. They were mostly figurative—the ruts, rocks, and potholes his sleeping mind encountered on its journey through a realm where reality was fragile, and the essence of a life could change without the knowledge or consent of he who lived it.

Ibn Saul's tossing kept Pierrette from sleeping, and Lovi also. Morning did not come too soon for any of

them. Ibn Saul sent Lovi for their donkey, while he and Pierrette sipped pear cider on a terrace shaded by leafy vines. They did not speak of manuscripts, experiments, or changed histories, only of their plans for the new day. Of course ibn Saul and Lovi would return by the southerly road to Massalia. But Pierrette? The city was out of her way unless she found someone with a boat to sail her to Citharista—and there were promises she had made to herself that dictated a different route.

Without a beast of burden, she could only carry a few things—a loaf of bread and some cheese, her *sagus* , which would serve for a blanket and a bed, the manuscript, and the clothing and jewelry Belisama had given her. She fingered the serpent's egg that hung from her neck. It was warmer than her skin, as if the hot rage of its inhabitant perfused the blue-and-red-veined glass.

"You should be grateful,*dryade* ," she murmured. "I know men who would be happy to lie between my breasts."

Belisama. That was one of her promises: she would return to the cave in the mountainside. What—who—might she find there? And what of Cerdos and Ferdiad—and poor Gustave, her abandoned donkey with his skeptical eyes? Yes, her route lay eastward out of Aquae Sextiae, along the scarp of the Holy Mountain, across the ridges and valleys, and at last, home.

"Will you visit me in Citharista, Master ibn Saul?"

"Since you will not give me that manuscript, I must—but I would anyway, for the chance to drink your master's wine, instead of watching mine flow down his gullet like Rhodanus down its valley."

"Then good-bye," she said.

When she picked up her*sagus* , she found something that gladdened her heart, heavy from too many "good-byes" in all too short a time, even though they were centuries apart. There on her cloak lay a single white feather, a downy tuft no larger than the first joint of her little finger. "Guihen?" she whispered, looking around herself. No one answered. Was it indeed a chicken's feather, or a gull's, or even a rock dove's? Still, when she departed, her step was light.

Chapter 32 - Old Friends

The great Roman paving stones were deeply rutted by wagon wheels, but otherwise were smooth. The few hills seemed easy to ascend, steeper on the far sides, which lent a spring to her step. The sunshine was bright, the air dry and cool; the shadows of olives and platanes, oaks and willows, were soft and welcoming. The stones were still and silent, without discernible spirits—unless they merely slept, and dreamt of other times, when they were strong and vital, and men left gifts for them, when they passed by.

She made a simple camp near the breast of a low range, where a tiny spring grudgingly gave forth cool, sweet water. If there was a goddess in the little trickle, she was not a voluble one, and did not respond to Pierrette's "thank you." Her fire-making spell again created only a tiny spark, enough to ignite a morsel of charred linen tinder. She had to feed the minuscule glow that ensued very carefully, blowing lightly, before she had a tiny flame. But that was good, because everything felt quite normal again. When she fell asleep, she was undisturbed by dreams.

* * *

Halfway through the morning, the road took on an uneasy familiarity. She stopped abruptly. What was it? There, a short way to her left, branched a southerly trail. Then, as if reality had suddenly changed again, she saw around her, like faded ghosts, the headless bodies, the scattered goods. Cold fog enveloped her, and she heard the drumming of horses' hooves—but then the vision faded, and the fog, which was only in her mind, dissipated as well. This was where, in a different universe, she had been arrested by the Gaul Segomaros. And there, where the trail breasted the rise, was where she had witnessed the slaughter of countless refugees fleeing the terrible change. . . .

But now it was only another crossroad, without bodies, or the memory of them, not important enough to have a shrine, even a simple crucifix on a nearby tree.

Pierrette turned southward onto the narrow trail, and near dusk she saw the gray scarp of Sainte Baume, too distant to discern the dark spot of the cave halfway up its face. Tomorrow she would arrive fresh in the valley, then would press on to the cave.

* * *

She awakened to the thud of heavy footsteps and crashing in the brush. She leaped to her feet, afraid it was a bear, or worse. It was as large as a bear indeed, but . . "Master Cerdos!" she exclaimed.

"Eh? hello, boy—do I know you?"

Pierrette's head spun. Did he know her? Of course he did . . . but if she had changed the past, and no Gallic empire would arise, then in this world she would never have been sent on the mission that led to her meeting Cerdos. No, he did not know her. Not anymore.

"Everyone knows you, Master Cerdos of Tarascon. Haven't you built bridges from Tolosa to Nicaea, and didn't you recently build the Frankish king's new palace? Aren't you even now laying the foundations for the new hostelry of St. John Cassien?"

"Oh—looking for work, are you? Well, you won't get it with flattery. You're far too small for a mason's apprentice. But maybe the glaziers or carpenters . . ."

"I'm not looking for work. I'm just passing through. But what are you doing up here?"

"There's a spot where I can see the hostelry almost as if I were a bird. I come up here once a fortnight. Are you sure we don't know each other? You look strangely familiar, as if . . . as if . . . no, it is gone now. But come. Perhaps my friend Ferdiad can explain it. He's an Irish rascal, who believes in ghosts, and has such strange moments all the time. Come. There'll be a hearty breakfast in it for you."

"Thank you, master mason. I will. Perhaps Master Ferdiad will sing for us. I long to hear him. It's said his voice is a songbird's, and that he knows the most ancient tales, like the song of Master Jock."

"That does it! I do know you! I remember . . . but it's as if in a dream." He tapped his head as if to shake out cobwebs.

Amid the once-familiar bustle of the laborers' camp, they found Ferdiad gaming with two carpenters—and winning, of course. Cerdos introduced them. Then: "Breakfast, boy. Come."

"You go, great ox," said Ferdiad. "By the time you finish your first helping, we'll be along." Cerdos needed no urging. Ferdiad then swept up his winnings. "Another time, fellows," he said. "The boy and I

have things to discuss." Pierrette was quite puzzled. What did he mean? "I've kept your donkey, Gustave, for you," he said.

"You remember me! Oh, Master Ferdiad! How can that be?"

"In the fog on the hillside, you disappeared. Something very strange was happening, and I became afraid, for myself as well as for you. I sang a very old song, and slipped into the Otherworld, though it was not Samhain. Then I understood, and did not forget who I was.

"I lingered there, a shadow, while the world around me changed. I watched my friend Cerdos lay the foundations of a shrine dedicated to the goddess Sequana. I watched him carve holes in the foundation stones, where the druids put copper pots containing the heads of dead men. I did not dare come forth from my refuge until three days ago, when suddenly everything was . . . almost . . . as it had been."

"Almost?"

"The differences were slight—a wall where I remembered none, a strange face among familiar ones, and a different monk in charge of the workers. Then I found Gustave, who was entirely unchanged, and who remembered me well."

Pierrette laughed. "Of course he did. Gustave is a skeptic. He is the most skeptical creature I know. If he did not believe the changes happening all around him, then for him they could not happen, and they would not. Where is he?"

"Tied beside our tent. If, that is, he has not chewed through his rope." He had not—not quite. And was he delighted to see Pierrette? He was not.

"What you see is what you get, beast," she said, stroking his soft nose. "Yes, you'll be travelling with me again. But I have nothing heavy to burden you with—only my cloak and this small bundle of clothing and papers." Gustave did not look as if he believed her, even though she had never actually lied to him before.

"Breakfast," Ferdiad reminded her. "We mustn't let Cerdos consume everything." Pierrette slung Gustave's panniers on his back, secured them, and tossed her few belongings inside.

"Tomorrow there is a processional pilgrimage to the cave," said Cerdos, his mouth full of bread. "Are you going?"

"I'm going today—by myself. I'm all packed. I'll be leaving shortly."

"Take a few of these loaves with you. The monks bake plenty of them." He tossed two to her. She packed them away—and secured the pannier lid. There were no bags of grain for Gustave, who would have to graze along the way.

Neither Cerdos nor Ferdiad favored long good-byes. "I may visit you, before I return home," said Ferdiad. "Until then—good luck with your quest."

"Indeed. Good luck," said Cerdos, around his mouthful of cheese. "Whatever you're looking for."

* * *

The trail to the cave seemed almost too easy this time. Gustave hardly balked, even on the steepest parts.

At the entrance, she tied him outside. There were thistles all about, and he began consuming them with relish, despite their thorns.

In this age, there was a stone wall across the mouth of the cavern. A door was ajar. Inside, the rough rock had been paved with smooth bricks, and an altar stood in front of the rock where she had slept, long ago, the only truly dry spot in the cave. Stone steps led down to the spring, which was now pent within a basin hewn from similar stone.

She sat for a while, and waited for . . . for someone. But no one came. No one, she decided, was going to. The goddess Belisama was not here. The girl Doreta, and now Magdalen herself, were dust and bones, in graves dug long ago. She sighed, and went back out into the light of day. If the trail over the ridge was as she remembered it, she could be well on her way to Citharista by dusk. Home. What changes would she find there?

Chapter 33 - Coming Home

When she topped the last ridge, she could see the green-clad island offshore, the red scarps of the Eagle's Beak and, westward, even the white stones that people said were the remains of a dragon. That last sight struck her like a physical blow: is that what they are? Just stones? Just the honeycombed remains of limestone cliffs, eroded by wind and rain? She remembered the shadow of great wings over the embattled walls of Entremont: that had been such a brief encounter, over in moments. No one else had even looked up. Had there been a dragon? If so, what purpose had been served, except to make her feel as she did now: awash in a sea of doubt, unsure what had really happened, and what part she had played in it.

But atop the furthest crest of the red rocks was a dark, regular shape: Anselm's keep, solid stone, and quite real. And . . .

"Cluck."

She spun around. "Guihen!"

"Hello, little one. Welcome back. It has been a long day indeed." She looked long and hard at him. Had his face always been lined with the fine wrinkles of age and exposure? Had his violet eyes always been so deep, so wise and . . . so old?

"Oh, Guihen! Did all really happen? And were you really young then?"

"Since we last said good-bye and you went inside the fane, I have watched the Roman Empire grow, and then die. When the Christian priests came, and pointed accusing fingers at every holy well, every ancient tree driven with a thousand nails, sacred to this god or that, I watched the magic in the world fade away, because they deemed it evil, and theirs was the power to decide. I fled to the Camargue, the vast reed sea at the mouth of river Rhodanus, because I was no longer a Ligure boy, but a magical being, and only there could I survive.

"But when it was time—as you told me it would be—I left my safe haven, and I found you where you said you would be. You were a little girl then, lost and alone. I watched over you, while you grew, and your belief sustained me in a world grown hostile to my kind.

"When you wanted to go to the keep atop the red rocks, I barred your way, until you were old enough to withstand what Anselm might teach you. I knew this, because you had told me, long ago, when first you emerged from the fane. I am myself, and I remember all those long, empty years before you were born. Were they real? Am I?"

He shrugged. "Come. Let's go home. Everyone is wondering where you have been lately. A few things may be different, not exactly as you remember them, but people don't change much. They're always curious."

"What shall I tell them?"

"If you tell them the truth, they won't believe it, and will probably create a myth of their own, more fantastic than truth. If you give them a lie . . ."

"I'll not explain, then. I'll just smile, and say that the winds off the Plain of Stones are cool even on hot days, and Rhodanus is broad and wide, and that the new hostelry Cerdos is building for the monks of Saint Cassien will be bigger than the old one and surely more comfortable. And all those things are true."

* * *

Day or night, the perpetual noonday sun shone in the windows of Anselm's keep, but in the library Pierrette only allowed a narrow shaft of golden Provençal light past the drapes, because she had had enough of fading ink, even if the cause was only excess sunlight.

She unfurled a scroll of Diodorus Siculus on the smooth-worn table, and settled onto the same bench her small buttocks had polished when she was a child. She no longer felt like a child. She had experienced passion—her own, and Alkides's, and Calvinus's—though she was still virgin (enough, that is, to satisfy the requirements of sorcery).

Now as she unrolled the scroll, she noted that the ink at the end was no less dark than at the beginning. She skimmed familiar passages near the end, and much to her relief found nothing changed. Other books were similarly untouched: Augustine had written*The City Of God* when he had written it in her original history, and Caesar's*De Bello Gallico* occupied the exact moment as before. And yes, Marius had ordered his*fossa* , his canal, dug in 104 B.C., and had bested the Teutons in 102 B.C.

Only when she turned back another two decades did she find changes: Calvinus had stormed Entremont in 124, not 127. He had then proceeded to take Heraclea and a dozen other*oppida* , all the way to the Rhodanus, thus permanently breaking the power of the Salyen League. The general who succeeded him, hearing that Teutomalos had been given safe haven, used that pretext to wage war, and to annex many rich lands for Roma. She set the scroll aside.

With increasing trepidation, she arose, and approached the shelf where forty volumes of Polybius—bound volumes, with wood-and-leather covers, not scrolls—resided. And there they were, all forty, including the now-completed index. She opened that one with trembling fingers. There were, she soon verified, just forty volumes, not forty-one. So. Polybius had lived to complete the index, but had not written another book. Or had he? Was there anywhere a true account of the siege of Entremont? Could there be a secret volume that went beyond the bare outlines, the Capitoline lists of consular victories and triumphs? She put the index back on its shelf.

What was this? The small, plain scroll had been misplaced. It did not belong on Polybius's shelf. It was unlabeled, so she spread it on the table to ascertain what it was, and thus where it belonged. . . .

"This is the forty-first book by Polybius . . ." the inscription read—the small, Greek-style letters were written in a cramped, shaky hand, one that she recognized immediately. The next line confirmed the scribe's identity: " . . . written in my own hand, and of which no single copy has been made.

"My dear Pierrette," began the next sentence, "I saved this space at the beginning of this volume for the words I would write last, when all else had been done. If you are reading this, then my most clever enterprise has succeeded. That, of course, was to insure that this scroll would reach you down all the intervening centuries.

"I wrote this volume, an account of the campaign for what is now the Province of Gallia Transalpina, over seven years, and only recently completed it. I am now entrusting it to an elderly sage who fancies himself a bit of a sorcerer. He is also a functionary here in the Capitoline library in Roma. Of course I don't believe in magic, or the literal intervention of Fortuna, but my friend C. Flaminius does, and as soon as I finish these last lines, he will take this scroll and hide it, and will utter a spell that will conceal it until the year A.D. 10, as you told me years are reckoned in your age.

"If you are reading this in your mentor's keep on the red rocks overlooking Citharista, then I was wrong to disbelieve, or else my disbelief did not matter. (By the way, I have visited the site where Citharista will be built someday, and have seen those red rocks, just as you described them. There is, of course, no keep on top of the outermost, and only a rude Gaulish fishing village on the shore, but when I squinted my eyes, I could almost see the outline of a wall atop the cliff, and the eerie silhouettes of monstrous, spidery machines, like ballistae grown huge, hovering over the lovely little harbor. But that was surely my imagination, spurred by the stories you told me.)

"The scroll is addressed to Anselm, and if the finder is honest, it will be delivered a year or two after your mentor arrives to build his keep, in a shipment of works he ordered copied in Roma. There, in your glorious home, in the light of never-ending noonday, it will remain until you find it, for a further spell (or so Flaminius tells me, and I dare not disagree) will render anyone who touches it incurious, and it will remain unread until it reaches your own hand, your adult hand that (as you confided in me, so sweetly blushing the while) has known the not-very-mysterious secrets of a man's passion. I can see you blushing now, and I have no desire to embarrass you, so I will finish quickly. Flaminius has already begun his mumbo jumbo, and is looking anxiously at me.

"Use this as you will, and reveal it or not. I will be long gone and no longer susceptible to the pride of accomplishment. I have no idea if its introduction to the world centuries after my demise would cause echoes and perturbations down the dark corridors of future time, or whether like a single raindrop in the stormy sea, its ripples would be lost in the waves and spume, and have no lasting effect. Perhaps you'll know the answer to that, when you have compared the history you knew to that which you find, at your faraway destination.

"Now I must go, and leave this scribbling. I have not ridden a horse since last I spoke with you—just in case your foreknowledge was still valid in this different world, and I might thus thwart Fortuna's plan. But today is my eighty-second birthday, and I have hired a horse to carry me home. I have missed riding, and if I have lost the skill, and my docile mare throws me off—well, then the goddess I don't believe in will have the last say."

* * *

There ended Polybius's hurried scrawl, and below it, after a short interval, began the body of the document, in the same hand, but neater, as if unrushed and deliberate:

* * *

My other books were written for the edification of Greeks, to further their understanding of the greatest political system of all, the Romans and their Constitution, and to elucidate the events that led to that fruition. This one is written only for one person's eyes, and if the world ever sees it . . .

* * *

Pierrette stopped reading, because her eyes had filled with tears, and she did not want to smudge the ancient ink, unfaded after all the centuries it had remained in the darkness of the tightly rolled scroll. Perhaps she would allow Anselm . . . or even Father Otho . . . to read it to her. Yes. Father Otho. He would neither get overexcited, nor would he cry.

* * ** * *

There were other tasks to be done in Anselm's library. For the better part of a week, Pierrette turned the pages of uncounted books, and unrolled as many scrolls, looking for a familiar name: Caius Sextius Calvinus, consul in 124 B.C., founder of the Roman colony called Aquae Sextiae Salluviorum.

She had read of the election of Flaccus and Gaius Gracchus as tribunes in 122 B.C. At that time, the Gauls had not yet entirely been defeated—the final operations, against the Arvernii and the Allobroges (into whose arms the defeated Teutomalos had fled) were left to Cnaeus Domitius Ahenobarbus, in 121. He was the man who stepped into the shoes of Tiberius Gracchus, untimely murdered in this new history, that was only subtly changed from the one Pierrette knew, and in this age the great road was named for him: Via Domitia.

Because the Gaulish lands were not yet available to be given to the Roman poor, the new consuls proposed a compromise: Roman citizenship, with all its rights and protections under law, was to be given all Latin allies, and the rest of Italia would gain the old Latin Right, which also conferred certain protections of Roman law. That was in exchange for their relinquishing much of the land they had held since the Punic wars.

But it was too little, too late. In 121 both Flaccus and Gaius Gracchus were murdered by their political enemies, and almost three thousand of their supporters were tried in the courts, convicted, and executed. Now Pierrette sought among once-familiar pages for a familiar name, but she did not find it. For her, the fate of one particular supporter of the reformers, Caius Sextius Calvinus, remained unknown.

Epilogue

The young sorceress found most things in Citharista unchanged, but not everything. The mage Anselm and the*Episkopos* Theodosius still rant and remonstrate, but I have little fear that the good bishop will mention his ultimatum again. One night, in his cups, he confided that were Anselm to weaken and allow himself to be baptized, the first thing Theodosius would do would be to excommunicate him, so they would still have something to argue about.

One change troubled her deeply, for a while. "I haven't seen Cletus about," she remarked to me, one day soon after her return.

"Who?" I asked. There had once been a Father Cletus in Massalia, but to Pierrette's dismay, I

remembered no boy of that name, nor was there a house on the spot where she thought he had lived, only old foundation stones.
"I have destroyed him," she wailed. "He was never born." She was inconsolable. I pointed out that her own arguments about the nature of time made that unlikely. "He is merely somewhere else. In Arelate, perhaps, or some small village down the coast." At last she accepted my argument, I think, because the burden of not doing so was too heavy to bear.
"The young knight Diodoré is alive and well in Aquae Sextiae," I remarked. "Bishop Theodosius speaks of him with great affection—but he has never been here in Citharista, as you say he once was, and thus he never fell in love with you."
She agreed that her life was easier that way. I did not probe deeper then, because though Pierrette is outwardly content, she has lost more than most people ever have—her entire world. Though its replacement is not much different, she can't help but wonder if even her father and I, and Anselm, are really the same people who watched her grow from a frightened, defiant child to the woman she has become—and is still becoming.
The "serpent's egg" hangs always between her shapely breasts. If it is home to the soul of a man centuries dead, I cannot confirm it—nor deny it. "Cunotar cannot depart yet," Pierrette says. "He still has a task he must perform." What is his task? She says she will know, when the time is right. I hope I am not there, when that time comes.
She spends many of her days up the narrow valley, beyond the Roman fountain, now dry, where beech trees grow and sweet water bubbles out of the earth. At night she returns to guide her wine-befuddled master Anselm home from the tavern to his lofty bedroom high above the town.
She is perhaps less afraid, in this world, than in the one she lost, because if there is a message or an omen concealed in the foregoing tale, it is that though the Black Time still looms, and Christians (perhaps wiser than I, but less informed) still separate the small mysteries of this harsh, beautiful land into Christian good and pagan evil, its coming is only one possibility, because history is as mutable as the course of a stream damned by a rock.
Of course—as Pierrette insisted I say here—events, like streams, tend to find again their natural course when a way around an obstacle is discovered. She insists that the unchanged history of Marius, his canal, and his battles, proves this, and proves as well that the Black Time will not easily be thwarted.
The tale just told is thus, she insists, only the righting of a singular wrongness, a skirmish in the unending war against the Eater of Gods, because the original source of the imbalance between good and evil, that allowed him to come into existence, has not yet been found. But for now the enemy has suffered a defeat, and no Gaulish*fantômes* tread the bridges and byways of Provence. Olive trees bear olives, not grapes, and no one remembers a time when it might have been different.

Otho, Bishop of Nemausus

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Afterword

Religion, History, and Philosophy

Multivolume works pose problems for author and reader alike. I have tried to make*The Veil of Years* an independent tale, entertaining by itself, if you have not read*The Sacred Pool* or if you have already read the third volume,*The Isle Beyond Time* . If you expect books to do more than entertain—if you want to follow the development of the theological, philosophical, and anthropological arguments as well—then I suppose you'll have to read them in chronological order. A discussion of the nature of mutating myths, and an extensive bibliography have already been printed in a predecessor volume,*The Sacred Pool* . I won't duplicate that here, only summarize briefly.

The theodicy question: in a world created by a good God, whence comes evil? Manichaean and Gnostic dualities violate the Rule of Elegance, Occam's Razor; in*The Sacred Pool* , the demon was created by men with free will, by their lumping together frustrations, annoyances, pains, and petty wrongdoings—by their having defined it. It was destroyed when every person present at the "exorcism" consumed a portion of it, thus putting evil in its proper perspective, a purely human attribute.

Great religions and philosophies define great evils, and individuals small ones. When people categorize ever-smaller wrongs and sufferings as evil, they perceive a world that is less and less good. A political analogy is apropos: the more we legislate the details of human behavior, the more of us are, by definition, criminals, and the higher the "crime rate" rises. The "Black Time" represents the end product of such tendencies. We might instead try to appreciate the pagans (or Christians) among us for the clarity and focus they give to our own worship, to appreciate our pains for the vital information they supply: warnings, and affirmation that we still endure.

Caius Sextius Calvinus saw nothing wrong with killing enemies or enslaving the vanquished. Was he an evil man? By our rapidly evolving modern standards—I immediately think of the feeding frenzy over Thomas Jefferson's alleged slave mistress, based on the flimsiest quasi-evidence—he was. Evil is clearly socially as well as religiously defined.

* * *

Mutating Legends, Names, and Languages

Centaurs and kentors, Huns, hunnos, and hundreds: the Greeks, who like most ancient Indo-European folk once rode to war in chariots, probably derived their centaurs from their first glimpses of Scythian horsemen. A "hunno" was the Germanic leader of a hundred families, a centurion the leader of a hundred Roman troopers.

The story of Bellagos and Aurinia is cut from whole cloth, representing all those legendary figures who, at tale's end, depart for some mysterious place that lies beyond mortal ken. Master Jock is a legendary Provençal figure, whose tale is masterfully told by Claude Clement in his wonderful collection*Contes Traditionelles de Provence* . Perhaps indeed he was once Lugh, god of artisans (and many other things), kept alive by giving him a pseudo-Christian "cover story."

My*fantômes* , one-third of the Gaulish Trinity of body, ghost, and soul, owe much to Fernand Benoit (Entremont, 1962). Benoit's speculations have been superseded in recent decades, replaced only by admissions of ignorance, but both classical sources and archaeology demonstrate the importance of severed heads to the Gauls. Bran, the Celtic raven-god, whose severed head remained alive for forty

years, to advise his traveling companions, gives strong support to the concept of head as the seat of consciousness and identity. The head-sized niches in the pillars of Gaulish temples are literally graven in stone. Superseded or not, Benoit's views survive, if only as one further example of the "mutating myths" that underlie*The Veil Of Years* .

Most Roman names I've used are ones with descendants in modern French—Claudia/Claudius, and Marius, which survives unchanged. Poul Anderson, whose understanding of things historical far surpasses my own, and who caught numerous errors in*The Sacred Pool,* grumbled about "Pierrette," which is a thoroughly modern diminutive of "Pierre." I considered changing it, but found that the symbolism of Petra/Peter/Pierrette, all "stones," was too deeply interwoven to be easily removed. Bear with me and imagine that, like many other names, there was a late Latin or other Indo-European word for "a little stone," and that it might have sounded a little bit like "Pierrette."

Some Gaulish names, like Segomaros, are known from surviving inscriptions. Others are composites of proto-Indo-European or Gaulish roots, like "borro," rapids (thus tidal bore), or "danu," river, whence Danube, Drina, Dnieper, Don, and Rhodanus (now Rhone). The names of most Gallic chiefs and gods that have come down to us are eponymous, like Teutatis, "god of the tribe" (teuta), Teutomalos, "Hammer of the tribe," Nemetona, "of the nemeton, the sacred grove."

Perhaps the most overused eponym of all is Cernunnos, which means simply "the horned one." It has obtained the stature of a true name in modern literature, fiction and nonfiction alike, but in actuality there is only one dedicatory inscription where the letters KERNVNNOS are actually written down. Sometimes the mutated myth is much more successful than the cultural "gene" from which it sprang.

Belisama's cave, on the north slope of the Sainte Baume escarpment, is a well-maintained shrine. In Pierrette's time, before Mary Magdalen's bones had been exhumed from their crypt in the valley below and placed in a glass case in the cave, and before some king who did not wish to scramble over rocks ordered the strenuous pilgrims' trail graded and smoothed, it was already a famous destination. The liturgy quoted in*The Veil Of Years* is my translation of the French one in use at Sainte Baume today. The "walking liturgy" that I describe derives in equal parts from the Stations of the Cross and from Gestalt therapy, similar means to different ends. I am grateful to Karen Armstrong (Armstrong, 1996) for articulating not only what I felt walking that pilgrims' path, but the importance of place and physical participation in religious experience in general.

* * *

Roman and Gaulish Military

The legions at Aquae Sextiae Salluviorum's table of organization, march order, and camps, are directly from Polybius, with clarification and details from Theodore A. Dodge (*Hannibal*, 1995). The legions of 124 B.C. were roughly in the middle of a transition period between the Republican citizens' levies, organized around the maniple, and the paid or "professional" armies of Marius and the Caesars, with the cohort as the primary tactical unit. I have shown Caius Sextius Calvinus anticipating the Marian reorganization to some degree, assuming that the need for the tactical cohort anticipated its full implementation.

As for the Gauls, I suspect that literary images of disorganized masses of berserkers with long swords are holdovers from a much earlier day—from the Hallstatt Iron Age incursions of Gauls into the Padus

(Po) River Valley and elsewhere. By 124 B.C., Gauls had been successfully fighting Romans and Greeks for centuries, and thus a high level of organization must be assumed. Gauls fought alongside Hannibal, and as mercenaries in other Carthaginian and Greek armies, and were surely quite comfortable with ordinary phalanx formations. I have chosen to show Gallic organization as a superposition of Carthaginian and Greek structure upon the Celtic/Germanic "hunno" as described by Delbruck (1990).

The exigencies of plotting a novel have given rise to several unlikelihoods, like Calvinus's arrival at the scene of battle without at least two allied legions, and (perhaps due to that manpower constraint) his failure to construct walls of circumvallation or other siegeworks around Entremont. My rationale is simple: the problem of manpower for the legions was already acute, a major source of political unrest in Rome, and Marius's solution, a paid, professional army, was still two decades away.

The known facts about the two-year conflict with the Celto-Ligurians are sparse: Fulvius Flaccus was granted a triumph in Rome in 125 B.C. after fighting the Salyens; Diodorus Siculus describes Kraton as a Roman partisan who suffered at the hands of his fellow citizens who had*revolted* , presumably against Rome; Calvinus was granted a triumph in Rome following his victory in 124 B.C.; there is archaeological evidence of two sieges at of Entremont. Taken together, these sources imply that Flaccus (likely with Latin or Italian allies, not Massilian) accepted the Salyens' surrender in 125 B.C., after battles in the field but perhaps without having successfully stormed the citadel itself. Thus Calvinus's expedition likely began as a police action to reimpose terms, and escalated to the destruction of the oppidum itself, perhaps at the instigation of the Massilians, for whom its very existence was a continuing threat.

Having two alternate worlds to work in, I chose to have the Roman conquerors use both likely routes to Entremont—via the Rhone and via the Argens. W. H. Hall (Hall, 1898), in our history, makes a good case for the latter. Needless to say, the final history is ours. The great road across Mediterranean France is the Via Domitia, not Tiberia, because Tiberius Gracchus did indeed die in 129 B.C. Flaccus triumphed in 125, Calvinus in 124. And Polybius fell from his horse that day, or soon thereafter.

Supplemental Bibliography

(These are only the latest books I have used in writing the three volumes of*The Sorceress's Tale* . A more extensive listing occurs at the end of my previous novel,*The Sacred Pool* .)

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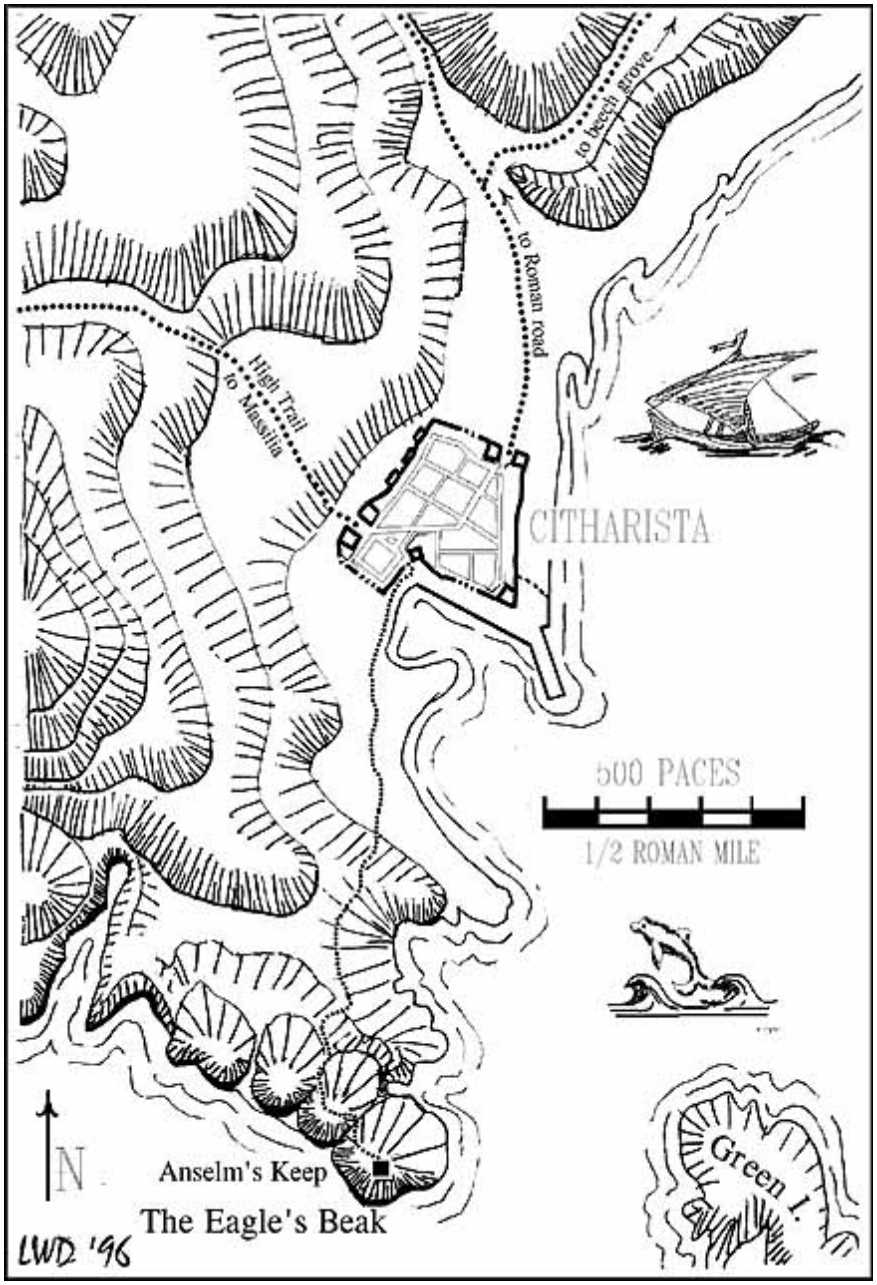
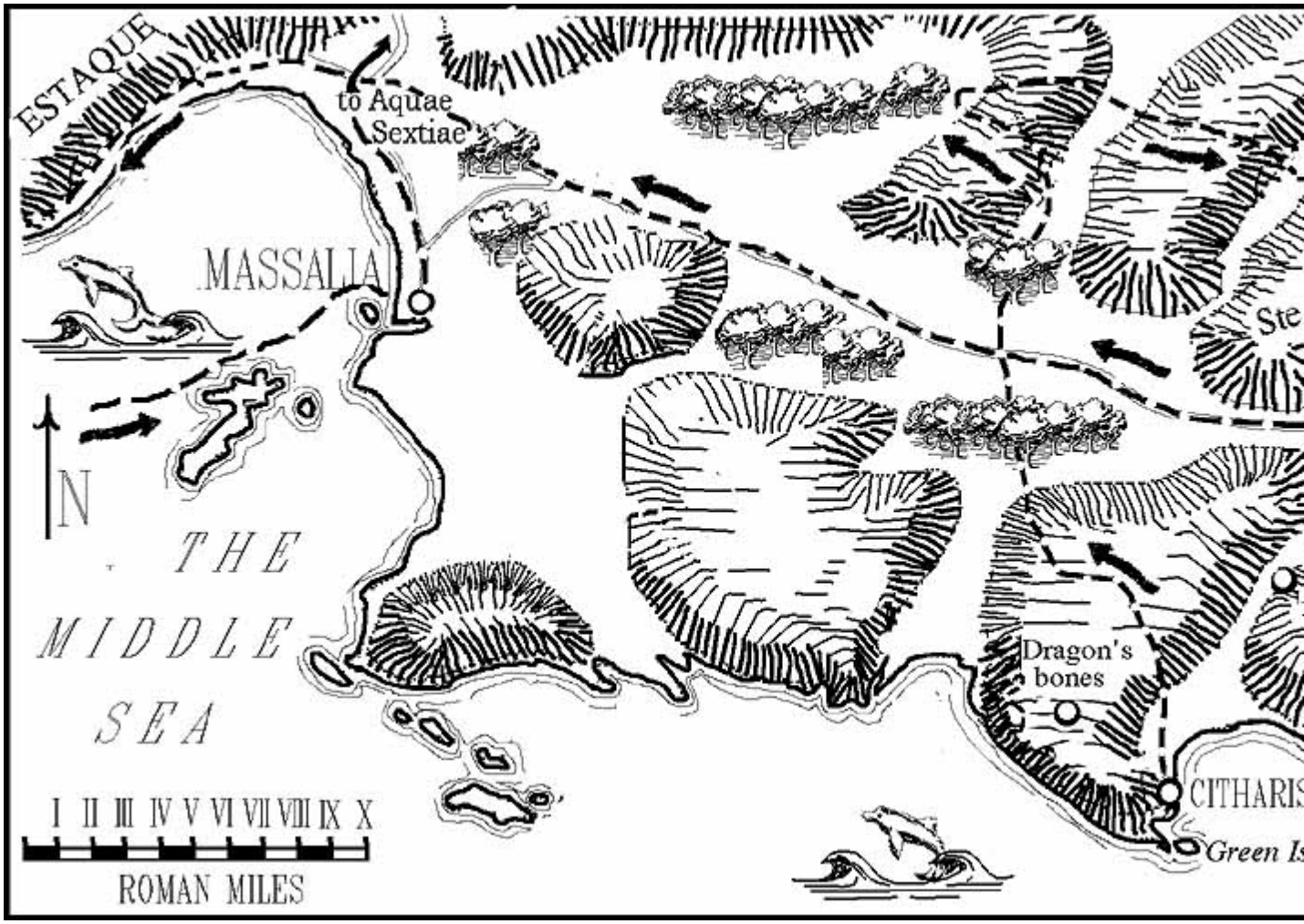
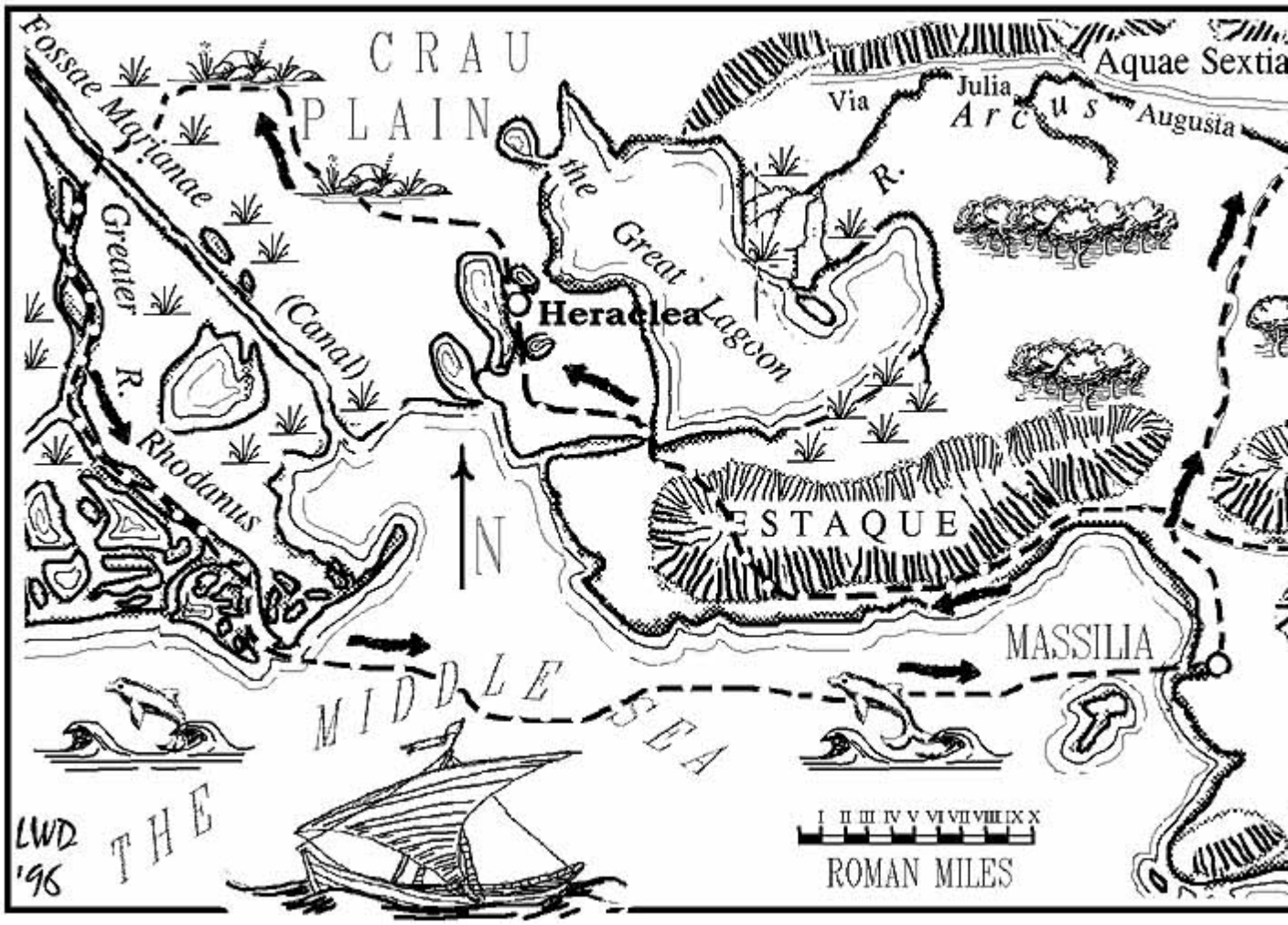
MAPS

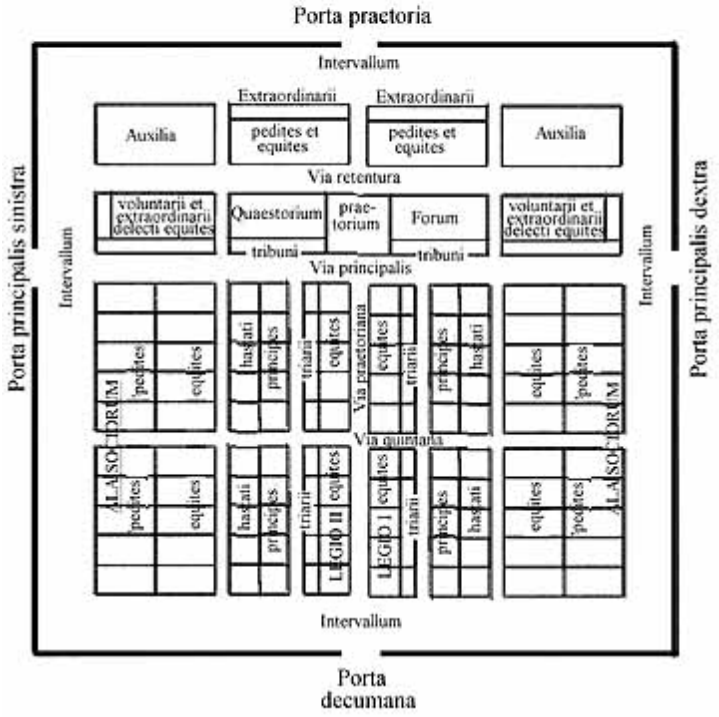


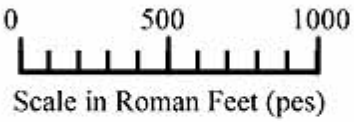




Plan of a Two-Legion Roman Camp

Circa 120 B.C., after Polybius & T. A. Dodge





Plan of the Camp at Aquae Sextiae Calvinorum