

RAVEN'S WARNING

24 AD, Southeast Coast of Britannia

Princess Catrin reined in her horse at the edge of the precipice overlooking the sea below to study the pattern of her raven's flight, seeking an omen. Her dream of the skull-faced moon, bleeding crimson, still plagued her. It was as if she had glimpsed both into her soul and into the future, yet she did not know how to interpret it.

The Raven, her animal guide, shot like an arrow into the thickening mist that partially obscured the sun. The sudden nip of a cool, salty breeze made her shiver. Longing for the disappearing sun's warmth, she nestled into her plaid cloak and focused on the bird's aerial acrobatics, first diving at the sheer cliff, then darting up. This close to the edge, one misstep of her horse could dash them both onto the jagged rocks below. Only her raven, a divine messenger, had the power to overcome such a fall and rise into the heavens to soar with the gods.

The Raven disappeared into the fog. Out of the haze, the red-striped sail of a flat-bottom ship suddenly appeared. Driven mainly by oars, it thrust to and fro in the turbulent water; it was unlike the deep-hulled vessels of seafaring merchants powered by air currents over their sails. At the bow of the ship was a strange looking beam shaped like a bird's beak.

Catrin's gaze followed the Raven's movement beyond the white cliffs, where more striped sails were emerging from the mist. She counted ten, but there might be more. A chill feathered up her spine.

Could these be warships?

From the distance, she could not determine the total number of ships or the country of their origin. She needed to see through her raven's eyes for that. But to do so, she had to be alone to meld her thoughts with the Raven. Uneasy that her sister, Mor, and their companion, Belinus, might disrupt her connection to the Raven, she scanned a clump of brambles some distance down the grassy slope where she had left them. A few weeks back, the couple had met at the Beltane's spring festival and had since become intoxicated with each other.

Catrin was still rankled that Belinus had tricked her into weapons training. His real purpose had come to light the evening before, when he told her to wait on the hillside so he could finish practicing with Mor. A warm blush spread across Catrin's face as she imagined their legs entangled with each other. Did they think that she was deaf and blind and that she was too dimwitted to understand what they were doing? The king would not think kindly of it if one of his trusted warriors charged with training his daughters for battle was seducing one of them.

Now barely discerning the couple through the thick brush, she surmised they were again fully occupied with each other, leaving ample time for her to take the next step with her raven before they again joined her.

She dismounted and raised her sword, a signal for her raven to return. The large bird swooped toward her like a dark shadow. She lifted an arm on which the bird landed. Its midnight-black plumage contrasted sharply with her fair skin and gold braided hair. On the threshold of womanhood, she felt closer to this creature than to many of her own kind. Still, she hesitated connecting with the bird.

A few years back, she had told her father of her ability to see the present and future through the Raven's eyes. She desired to be a Druidess. He denied her request to be trained in the spiritual order, saying, "I have decreed that no one in my family can use the powers of the Ancient Druids."

When she asked why, he responded with a grim frown. “The magic is too unpredictable and often alters in deadly ways. Foresight is not a gift but a curse in our family.”

The king’s answer confounded Catrin, but she dared not defy him openly or get caught when she secretly practiced her new mystical ability that the Raven had shown her.

The Raven first sought me out, she reasoned in favor of using her newly discovered powers. I must heed the Raven’s warning. If I am to assess the danger the ships pose, I need to study them up close.

She had to hurry, though. The fire between her sister and Belinus would soon cool.

Catrin lifted her arm and looked to the Raven, considering her decision. “What do I have to fear from you? I am a Cantiaci warrior.”

The Raven cocked its head and gawked at her, as if ready to answer her question.

She asked, “Did the sun god send me an omen about the warships offshore?”

When the Raven mumbled some gibberish, she tapped its beak. “What does that mean?”

The Raven screeched, bobbing up and down. She smoothed its ruffled feathers. “Do you know why the ships are here?”

The Raven grew still on her arm. She winced, recalling the image of the blood moon in her dream. She asked, “Do they plan to attack?”

The Raven nodded excitedly, as if in response. Encouraged, she asked, “If I saw through your eyes, could I learn who they are and the reason they’re here?”

The creature tilted its head sideways, the signal for her to enter its mind.

She hesitated. “What if Father learns that I’ve taken this next step? Will he punish me for disobeying him . . . for ignoring his warning?”

The Raven shrieked and arched its wings. She chuckled. “That is right. He did say to study the enemy before each encounter, but never hesitate in battle. That’s what I’m doing—exactly what my father

expects. I'm finding out if enemies are aboard the ships, but to do so, I must see through your eyes."

Catrin again hesitated. Once before, when she had melded and disconnected from her raven guide, she lost consciousness. It took awhile for her head to clear after that episode. If that happened again, it could spell disaster so close to the precipice.

She stepped away from the cliff's edge and stared into the Raven's eyes, which glowed like amber gems. The bird's talons emitted a bolt of electric heat into her arm. A light flashed in her mind, and the Raven's essence permeated her core being. She knew that she had entered the Raven's prescient mind.

The landscape appeared blurry until she adjusted to the Raven's eyesight. Brightly colored wildflowers dazzled her with purple hues that she was unable to detect with her human eyes. A thrill rushed through her veins as she sensed the bird's breast muscles contracting to flap its wings. When the Raven began its thrust into flight, she felt the misty air lift its outstretched wings.

When the Raven soared toward the channel, she could see her human form standing as motionless as a statue on the emerald hilltop clasped to the jagged precipice. The sheer chalk cliffs formed an impenetrable wall against the crashing waves. Beyond the cliffs, there was a sparsely vegetated shoreline toward which several ships were sailing and where other vessels were moored. Armored infantrymen were disembarking, wading to the shore, and marching across the beach. On higher ground, soldiers set up tents in a square encampment. One of the guards had a lion's head covering his helmet. In his hands was a pole with a silver eagle on top. She assumed it meant powerful animal spirits were guiding them.

A palatial tent in the center of the encampment caught her eye. Its outside walls were made of twined linen sheets, violet and red, brocaded with eagles. Surrounding the central structure were crimson banners, each emblazoned with the sun god in a horse-driven

chariot. At the tent's flapped entrance were two foreign noblemen attired in purple-trim white togas. Another man, towering over the foreigners, wore a rustic toga and plaid breeches—garments that nobles from her kingdom typically dressed in. From the back, he looked familiar, his thick coppery hair draped over his shoulders like a lustrous wolf pelt.

To confirm her suspicions that she knew this tall, brawny man, Catrin directed the Raven to circle around, so she could get a closer look. When the man's ghostly, disfigured face came into view, her heart wrenched. She recognized her half-brother, Marrock.

Grotesque images of ravens pecking tissue out of his face flashed in her mind. For seven years, she had believed herself safe from him, but there he was—a specter arisen from the cold ashes of her nightmares.

Why has he returned with an army?

A sense of doom crawled all over her when Marrock's head tilted back, as though he knew her essence was flying overhead. His blue-green eyes began glowing and changed to the same amber-gem color as her raven whenever she harnessed its magical power. The Raven's muscles suddenly paralyzed, freezing its wings. A strong force pulled her through a crevasse in the Raven's mind and hurtled her into a tunnel of brilliant gold light.

She plummeted, tumbling out of control, toward a black portal in the center of a rainbow-colored arch.

SECRET MAGIC

Just before Catrin burst through the portal, she found herself lying on familiar, yellow-flowered grass on the cliffs. Above her, the Raven's wings disappeared into a gray haze. A shiver of panic as sharp as needles prickled down her back.

Was this what my father meant about the magic being unpredictable?

With the landscape settling around her, she inhaled the briny air and felt her own world again. Still, a burning tingle lingered in her arm as questions barraged her mind.

Did Marrock do this to me? Did he somehow sense I was spying on him by using my raven's eyesight? Did he put me into another world? Is this the deadly magic my father warned me about—the double-edged blade that others who detect my raven-sight can do me harm?

A woman's shrill voice startled Catrin. She rolled on her back to find her sister, Mor, looking down at her, the reins of her bay horse in hand. Gusty wind swirled Mor's ebony tresses around her face, which was etched with concern.

"What happened?" asked Mor. "Your horse was loose. From a distance, I saw a raven on your shoulder as you collapsed."

"I slipped and fell," Catrin said, trying to wrap her mind around what had just happened. "Help me up." She grasped Mor's extended hand and pulled herself to her feet. Still light-headed, she teetered while brushing the chalk from the cliff stones off her leather chest armor.

"Did that raven do something to you?" Mor asked. "Before you collapsed, you appeared frozen; your arms twisted over each other

like broken wings. It was as if you left this world and became something else. A wraith or a soulless corpse comes to mind.”

Catrin glanced around, thinking it odd that Belinus was not with her sister. Assuming he was nearby, she looked beyond Mor, but there was no sign of him.

“Why don’t you answer me?” Mor snapped. “This is the second time I’ve seen this happen to you this week. You know what Father said. You are not to do magic with that raven.”

The image of Marrock with the foreign troops flashed in Catrin’s mind, and she blurted, “I saw warships offshore. Marrock is leading them!”

Mor scanned the ocean channel, now thick with rolling fog. “I don’t see anything.”

Catrin pointed northward. “Look beyond the cliffs.”

Mor shielded her eyes with a hand to search again. A moment later, she gave Catrin a dubious frown. “There is too much fog to see clearly. When did you see Marrock?”

“A bit ago—” Catrin suddenly realized it could have been quite some time since she had been in the Raven’s mind.

Mor gripped Catrin’s arm and pulled her closer. “Did your raven cast a spell on you, and you imagined this? People say your raven makes you mad!”

Catrin bristled. “That is utter nonsense! I only connect to the Raven when I need its help and have complete control over it.”

When Mor’s jaw dropped, Catrin realized she had let her secret slip out. She bit her lower lip, but it was too late to take the words back. Upon further consideration, she didn’t know how to convince Mor of the threat posed by Marrock and the foreign army unless she disclosed her use of forbidden magic. She finally admitted, “Whenever I need help—like ... like seeing something in the distance—I can enter the Raven’s mind and see through its eyes.”

“Explain exactly what happens when you see through its eyes,” Mor said. “Do you shape-shift into a raven?”

“My human vision turns off when I switch to the Raven sight. I can see below me when it flies. The Raven also sends me dreams of the future. Last night, I dreamt the moon turned into a bleeding skull. I took this as an omen that our kingdom is in grave danger. When I saw Marrock with foreign soldiers, I confirmed this was true.”

Mor paused, as if trying to absorb what Catrin had just said. “Merchant ships are always sailing near the coastline. How could you even tell they were warships from the distance?”

“Armed soldiers were disembarking from vessels moored on the beach beyond the cliffs—”

Mor interrupted. “Nobody can see that far, even through raven eyes.”

“Let me finish!” Catrin snapped. Mor’s lips clamped into a scowl as Catrin continued. “My raven flew over the bay, where I saw hundreds of soldiers setting up camp on shore. That is where I saw Marrock!”

“I find your tale truly hard to believe,” Mor said, shaking her head.

“I’m not a liar,” Catrin insisted. “We must heed the Raven’s omen. Soldiers would not be with Marrock unless he plans to attack us. We need to warn our father.”

“Warn him of what?”

“Marrock is back with a foreign army!” Catrin declared. “Remember, sister, Marrock swore to slay everyone in our family when Father banished him seven summers ago.”

“You’ve made a bold claim without proof,” Mor exclaimed. “I never saw Marrock with my own eyes and, for that matter, I never saw any warships. What if you’re wrong? You don’t have any evidence that he is plotting to attack our kingdom. Father will be furious when he discovers you used your raven’s magic. Besides, I want to stay here and finish training with Belinus.”

Catrin could feel her face flush with anger. *Train with what—his sword?* She pointed to herself. “I’ll accept the blame if I’m wrong, which I’m not. We must go back now!”

Mor put her hands on her hips. "I'm not leaving until I see these phantom soldiers and ships with my own eyes."

Catrin, noticing her sister suddenly glance up, turned and spotted Belinus waving from the adjacent hilltop to signal weapons had been set up for practice. The last thing she wanted was for Mor to persuade him to stay so they could finish their tryst before slinking back home. Mor had lost all sense of propriety with a common warrior.

Of all days to practice, I should be warning Father!

When Mor pulled the reins of the bay and began walking away, Catrin yanked her by the arm to halt her. "What are you doing?"

Mor spun toward Catrin. "Belinus is set to go. I am getting your horse ready, so you can practice spear throwing."

Catrin wagged her head in disbelief. "Didn't you hear what I just said? We must go now and tell Father what we have seen."

Mor glared. "I don't take orders from someone who practices black magic with a raven. You see things nobody else can."

Catrin ripped the reins from her sister's fingers. "I don't care what you think. I'm going. If Father asks me why you are not with me, I will tell him about your little meeting with Belinus."

"And what do you mean by that?"

Wordlessly, Catrin mounted her bay and stared at her red-faced sister.

"Answer me!" Mor shouted.

Catrin pointed to the spear on the grass. "Hand me that lance. I'll tell Belinus about what I saw. You can load up your weapons and join us."

Mor flung the spear up to Catrin.

Catrin adjusted the weapon and kicked her horse into a gallop. Gale breezes from the channel stung Catrin's eyes as she drove her horse near the cliff's edge and up the ridge to where Belinus was waiting. With thoughts running wild about a possible attack by Marrock, she ignored the perils of the precipice and the rocks below. With spear in hand, she clamped her legs against the horse and threw it.

The metal tip pierced the raven's image on a shield that Belinus was holding. Clad in leather breeches and chain mail, he yelled, "Why did you do that? I wasn't ready."

Catrin halted in front of him. "We need to get back! Warships have landed; Marrock is leading them!"

Belinus gave a shocked look. "Marrock? Warships? Where?"

Catrin pointed northward. "In the nearby bay."

Hearing horses approaching, Catrin turned and found her sister riding the black stallion and leading a pack horse.

Mor huffed. "Why didn't you wait for me? You're lucky I don't have to scrape your smashed bones and flesh off the rocks."

"No time to argue!" Catrin snapped. She ordered Belinus, "See to the weapons. I'll explain everything to you on our way back to the village."

Mor blazed at Catrin as Belinus packed the weapons. After he mounted his horse, he told Catrin, "With the coming fog, it may be difficult to see the ships on our way home. Ride with me and tell me more about what you saw."

Catrin rode with Belinus on the pathway while Mor followed them. As they descended the grassy hilltop, Catrin told Belinus about the warships and Marrock's return. Belinus appeared alarmed, glancing all around. He asked Catrin more questions and suggested they take a closer look at the seashore.

They directed their horses into a darkening forest in the valley. When they rode out of the woods and approached the beach, thick fog was swallowing the ships in the bay and marching out of the haze were soldiers heading their way.

Catrin glanced back at Mor. "See ... there is the danger."

Mor's shoulders stiffened. "Keep riding."

Belinus rode ahead and kept his hand on his sword's pommel. "Follow me. Don't look scared. These are Romans!"

ROMAN DEMANDS

Catrin watched for any untoward movement from the marching Romans as she followed Belinus, with Mor trailing her. They wove their horses around some infantrymen laden with heavy gear. Some of the soldiers glared at them while others grumbled among themselves.

Passing the troops, Catrin wiped some cold sweat from her brow and looked down at her ragged trousers. She twitched a smile. She remembered the queen's instructions for her to dress more befittingly of their family's noble status at the feast to be held that night. Curious she would think of that now, she groaned at the thought of wearing a skirt.

Belinus must have heard her. He looked back at her and grimaced. "I don't like the looks of those soldiers. They look hungry for battle."

The comment from one of the most renowned warriors in the kingdom reinforced Catrin's trepidation. "Marrock is behind this," she added.

"We need to hurry back to warn your father," Belinus rasped.

Mor bellowed from behind. "What are you two jabbering about?"

Belinus glanced back. "The Romans! Now get up here, so I don't have to yell."

They trotted their horses through a pine forest and onto a pathway between farm fields that led to Durovernum, the Cantiaci capital. There, they urged their horses up the steep hillside encircled by two concentric ditches. On top of the fort hill, they entered the fortified settlement through the main tower gate. On the other side, heavy stench from nearby cattle corrals and smoky dome-clay furnaces

racked their senses. Agitated farmers and tradesmen were streaming toward the town's center on the central thoroughfare.

Catrin pressed her horse through the congestion, weaving between the thatch-roofed structures until she reached the entrance of the thatched-roof, stone-walled palace. At the entryway, commoners were cursing and shoving against the king's guards, holding firm to prevent them from entering.

She again thought of the omen of the blood moon and felt her heart quicken.

Catrin halted her horse and waited for the king's commander, Trystan, to order the rabble back. Unlike the scruffy commoners, he was clean-shaven, his military chain mail and a gold-pin clasped cape distinguishing him as a noble warrior. He shot a surly frown at Belinus and yelled, "Why are you late from training? King Amren has begun introductions."

"With whom?" Belinus shouted.

"Roman agents," Trystan shouted back. "He wants his daughters inside now!"

The commander's announcement alarmed Catrin. She dismounted her horse and gave the reins to a stable boy. The sisters trailed Belinus and Trystan into the reception hall jammed with the king's guards and scurrilous villagers. The stifling chamber stank like gutted cattle, most likely from a couple of butchers standing nearby, still wearing brown-smearred aprons.

Catrin knew the crowd's presence meant that her father was ready to make a major decision. She again pondered if the blood moon in her dream portended a rebellion. She felt her stomach drop like a hung corpse when she heard her father's gravelly voice echo off the room's stone walls.

"Mor and Catrin, come in here now."

Belinus and Trystan rammed Catrin through the masses to the front of the elevated thrones where her parents were seated. King

Amren appeared calm, the gold torc around his thick neck reflecting his status and wealth. Queen Rhiannon sat next to him, elegantly attired in a burgundy dress and a black wolf pelt. The commoners usually held the king in reverence as a generous ruler who shared his plunder from rival kingdoms.

Today, however, they were ready to riot.

When the king rose from his throne, Catrin rushed up three stairs to the platform and into his arms. "Father, what is happening here?" she anxiously asked. "Did you know Marrock has returned with a Roman army?"

She could smell her father's musky scent as he hugged her. "I am aware of this. Don't worry. Just stay close to me while I calm the situation down."

Catrin watched Mor climb the stairs to stand between her mother, still seated, and Vala, the eldest sister, standing erect. Remaining at her father's side, Catrin warily scanned the high-vaulted chamber to assess the assemblage. A caped Roman commander with a disfiguring facial scar and his soldiers stood at attention near the central hearth. Near the entryway were the king's warriors and commoners, squeezed in like fish caught in a net.

Belinus and Trystan, both speakers of Latin, joined two Roman diplomats at the front of the royal dais. The elder statesman reminded Catrin of a boxer with a thick neck, square jaw, and eagle-beaked nose. Next to him was a striking young Roman attired in a scarlet-edged white toga. A few years older than her, the young man had short curly hair that gave him a boyish charm, but she could almost feel his licentious eyes wandering over her hips.

No man from the village would dare look at her that way!

A seething confusion boiled into her heart as she drank in the nobleman. The danger of galloping off a cliff now seemed tame. Her father also seemed to notice the Roman's salacious mien. The young Roman, appearing aware of the king's glower, turned to the elder statesman.

King Amren stepped away from Catrin to the front edge of the dais. He raised a hand for quiet. Silence fell over the chamber as he addressed the audience in Latin, a secondary language that Catrin could speak and read.

“Welcome, Senator Lucius Antonius, noble descendent of the legendary Mark Antony. I recall our meeting as young men in Massilia, Gaul, where I was educated by your mentor. I assume the young man beside you is your son.”

The revelation that her father knew the senator surprised Catrin. She could not keep her eyes off his imposing son as the senator introduced him in a commanding voice.

“This is my youngest, Marcellus Antonius. He is training to be a diplomat and has journeyed with me to learn about your customs.”

The young noble’s name resonated like a song in Catrin’s mind. *Marcellus Antonius*. He acknowledged with a nod, his eyes consuming her as they flamed in the torch light. She smiled shyly into his fiery grin. Heat flushed over her face as she looked again to her father, now presenting the queen.

“Beside me is my beloved wife, Rhiannon. As queen, she stands as my equal.”

Catrin noted the senator’s dismissive sneer while Marcellus leaned forward with interest.

Her father proudly introduced Vala, dressed as a warrior in a chain mail shirt, gray trousers, and variegated cape.

“This is my eldest, Vala. As you can see ...”—the king rubbed his lips, as if trying to restrain a chuckle—“she took height away from her younger sisters to see eye-to-eye with any opponent.”

Catrin smirked. Vala had a soldier’s demeanor that quietly announced her ferocity. She had soundly defeated every one of her challengers in single combat. With frizzled dark hair, Vala was as different from Catrin as a moonless night and a golden morning.

The king gestured toward Mor. “Next to Vala is my middle daughter, Mor. She is a mirror image of my queen at a younger age.”

Unlike Vala, Mor wore leather chest armor over a knee-high tunic and piqued the interest of many men in the kingdom. The king had recently negotiated a dowry for her to marry the son of the rival Catuvellauni king. Only Catrin knew Belinus was Mor's true love.

Lastly, King Amren affectionately wrapped his arm around Catrin. "This is my youngest daughter—the runt of the litter. Like me, she has bandy legs. Perchance ..."—he peered at her trousers—"that is why her breeches are torn."

Hot sweat flooded Catrin's face as she squirmed under her father's comment. She glanced at the big rip in her plaid trousers and looked up to find Marcellus grinning. At that instant, she wanted to hide in a cave and disappear into its walls.

The king continued jesting. "Don't let size fool you. Catrin is the bravest of my daughters. She is—"

Senator Lucius Antonius interrupted. "What of your son?"

"My son?"

"Marrock."

Catrin could feel her insides tumble when she observed her father's smile sour. The chamber stilled like a moonless night before a tempest. She again pondered why Marrock had returned, another harbinger of potential conflict.

King Amren proclaimed, "Marrock is no son of mine! I renounced and banished him almost seven years ago for his treacherous acts."

The senator remained adamant. "Rome only recognizes the birthright of your eldest male heir, not the queen or your daughters."

"Marrock!" Amren growled. "Why would Rome support him?"

"Cunobelin, the king of the Catuvellauni, claims your son is the rightful heir."

The senator's disclosure shocked Catrin; she could feel her heart pounding in her chest. Even though her father and Cunobelin had been bitter rivals, they had recently forged a truce. Obviously, Cunobelin had offered her father a hand of friendship while stabbing him in the back by championing Marrock's claims.

She seethed. *This is brazen betrayal. Marrock cannot become king! He will destroy everyone in my family!*

When Catrin noticed her father's clenched jaw, she assumed that he had reached the same conclusion as her. She had seldom seen him lose control of his steel-edged demeanor, but his face blazed like hot metal. A battle-hardened warrior, he might lash out. Her mother must have also seen this, because she rose to calm him with a soft touch. It seemed to work, as her father appeared to relax, his face returning to normal color. He looked at the senator and said in a tempered voice, "How did you hear of Marrock's claims?"

The senator pulled at his toga. "From the mouth of the Catuvellauni king himself in Rome. Last fall, he presented your son's case to Emperor Tiberius."

Every new disclosure by the senator grated on Catrin; nothing made sense. Why would the mighty emperor support her half-brother's claim to the throne if he had seen his monstrous face?

She overheard her father grumble in Celtic, "Cunobelin, that treacherous dog." Her mother again nudged him and shook her head. This time, the king made no attempt to hide his rage.

"Why should Cunobelin's support for Marrock matter to Rome? This is a local tribal issue that has no impact on the empire. For that matter, neither does it affect the Catuvellauni."

"I beg to differ," the senator countered. "Cunobelin accuses you of blocking Roman merchants from traveling through your kingdom to trade with the Catuvellauni. Marrock promises to open trade ways through your territory."

"Where is Marrock now?"

"Under the protection of the Catuvellauni, Marrock is married to Cunobelin's eldest daughter."

Catrin gaped at the senator with shock. How could Marrock have gained so much influence with Cunobelin without her family knowing? With the tensions escalating in the chamber, she intently studied each person's stance and reactions.

The king jabbed a finger at his own chest so hard that Catrin feared he would break his ribs. His voice rose like a thunderstorm. “Cunobelin should have consulted me before giving Marrock safe harbor. Rome should only deal with me about issues in my territory. Our treaty with Rome is separate from the Catuvellauni. Again, what does Rome hope to gain by declaring its support for Marrock?”

The senator matched the king’s fervor. “Marrock promises to recompense sums still owed Rome from treaties bartered by your forefathers and Julius Caesar, almost eighty years ago. He also agrees to pay additional tribute in exchange for favorable trading and peace with Rome.”

“What tribute?” Amren said, raising his voice. “We have always met our obligations.”

Each of the senator’s demands now rumbled through the chamber. “One thousand gold coins; fifty horsemen to serve in the Roman auxiliary; one hundred slaves, including captured warriors to fight as gladiators.”

“We never agreed to these in our treaties with Rome,” Amren said through gritted teeth. “How can you expect us to supply you with gladiators when our kingdom is at peace?”

Trystan interrupted and shouted in Celtic to the crowd in the rear, “The treacherous leach, Cunobelin, has turned on us. He demands that Marrock be declared heir to the Cantiaci throne. The next rightful heir is Queen Rhiannon, not that child murderer, rapist, and traitor! Rome wants our warriors to die in their legions ... or be sold as gladiators!”

From the back of the hall came staccato cries. “Never ... never ... never!”

Of all the people in the room, Catrin had the most compelling reason to hate Marrock. He had abandoned her as a child to die in the forest. Nonetheless, Trystan’s inciting outburst was reckless. Even worse, it was open defiance to the king. She looked to her father, expecting him to take control of the situation.

“Quiet! Let me deal with the Romans,” King Amren bellowed.

Trystan stomped closer to the platform. “My Lord Amren, I refuse to bow to this Roman boar’s demands. Every warrior has sworn to cut off Marrock’s balls!”

“Stand down, Trystan,” the king ordered. “You forget your place! I negotiate for my people.”

Trystan scowled and reluctantly stepped back.

Catrin shifted her attention to the senator, his eyes flitting between Trystan and the king. The elder statesman asked, “What did your guard say?”

“The truth,” Amren answered in Latin. “Cunobelin intends to steal our lands through treachery and deception. He has negotiated from both sides of his face. He promised to forge an alliance with me through the marriage of my daughter to his son. Yet today, I’ve learned he has already married his daughter to Marrock, and behind my back has crawled to Rome pleading for support of my treacherous son’s claims. How can I trust Cunobelin? He threatens to tear my kingdom apart by using Rome to secure Marrock as the next king. Now you make new demands for tribute. My people will never accept this!”

The senator fidgeted with his unraveling toga. “Remember, Rome’s reach extends far into Britannia. A cohort of expeditionary forces is now ashore to make sure you meet all the emperor’s demands. You must bend to Rome’s rule if you want a favorable position as our client king.”

“Not if Rome chooses the wrong side!” the king roared.

Catrin’s heart seized when Belinus suddenly pulled a knife and pressed the blade against Marcellus’s throat. The young Roman gasped as the blade cut and blood seeped around it.

In turn, Trystan clutched the senator by his toga. The fear-stricken statesman cried out, “Amren, remember your pledge. No harm must befall me or my son.”

The loud clamor of shuffling feet and clanking swords rumbled throughout the room as both sides became restless. Warriors, incited by the reckless actions of Trystan and Belinus, encircled the Roman soldiers. Amidst the commotion, Catrin could hear her rapid heartbeats pounding in her ears. When she looked at Marcellus, he appeared deadly calm, even with a knife to his throat. He rasped, "Easy, let us not get excited."

Even so, Catrin's throat constricted from fear that he might be killed. Why hadn't her father stopped Belinus? He must know harming a Roman diplomat would ignite a bloody brawl. Fearing that anarchy would break out, she reached for her father's hand. "Don't let Belinus kill him!"

Her voice sounded puny against the deafening noise in the chamber. The king's icy stare and silence seemed to sanction the young Roman's doom. Catrin turned to her mother for help.

"Do something!"

The queen reached for the king's arm. "Stop this! Or you will start a war."

The king wrenched her hand away. "Let me handle this, woman!"

The queen stepped closer, eyes ablaze. "Then act like a king! Control your warriors."

When the king glowered at the queen and his lips pressed into a firm line, Catrin knew that she had to act now to stop the conflict. She squared her shoulders, stomped her foot, and ordered Belinus, "Release that man now!"

This time, her voice resonated around the chamber.