

Annabella Crabtree: Hostage

By Nick Creech

Volume III of the Annabella trilogy

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Set in Times New Roman

*For Deborah, who has borne with
this travail more than any author
has any right to expect.*

And with particular thanks to Susan and Dan.

Historical note:

*Within the bounds of conflicting and imprecise sources I have
attempted to be scrupulously accurate in all matters of what
might be considered fact.*

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ALSO BY NICK CREECH

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Annabella Crabtree, Volume 2: Hunter

Beekle Henry

A Way with Dragons

The Blob, the Frog, the Dog and the Girl

Three-P

Galiconia

THE AUTHOR

Nick Creech is a former newspaper journalist. He has two sons, both now successful and more-or-less responsible adults who still deign to talk to him from time to time in tones of kindly condescension. He has a wife who does the same, mostly.

Since leaving journalism he has written extensively for children, young adults and people of all ages who just enjoy a story.

Prologue

It was an ambush, a flat-out ambush. And unconscionable.

Heaving a thankful sigh, the Sheikh, home again at last, had alighted on his beach and paused to savour the peace, the quiet, the blessed isolation. The New York clubs had been as stimulating and delightful as ever but somehow greatly more exhausting. He really was growing old, he reflected with a resignation tinged with melancholy. He was just beginning to luxuriate in the elegiac remembrance of things past when the harmony of the gentle lapping of the water and the gentle lapping of his thoughts was shattered by a voice imitating the sound of a chainsaw, yet to be invented.

"Harun!" Only one being in the world ever assaulted him with his given name. Jamina, his sister. She had sidled up behind him and hovered there, arms metaphorically akimbo.

The Sheikh sighed again, this time with vexation.

"What?" he demanded, successfully suppressing any inclination to be courteous.

"Harun, you are an irresponsible idiot." Jamina spoke with aggressive certainty. Not for the first time or even the ten thousandth when dealing with his sister, the Sheikh was totally nonplussed.

"What is it this time?" he said wearily but also warily.

"Basil..."

"Of course," he said. "When has it ever been anything else...?"

"This latest...attachment... It must be nipped in the bud... Immediately."

"What on earth are you talking about? I think Annabella is splendid. Quite splendid!"

"You know exactly what I'm talking about and you know exactly why it can't be allowed to continue."

"Nonsense!" the Sheikh dared to exclaim and even to add: "Baloney!"

"Keep a civil tongue in your head!" Jamina snapped back. "And don't you dare talk American to me." The Sheikh took a deep breath.

"Annabella is an excellent influence on Basil..." he said, striving for calm. "Quite the best there has ever been. He is a changed djinni because of it. Quite remarkably so, to the extent that I am now considering handing everything over to him and retiring properly. Let me state categorically, here and now, that I have absolutely no intention of ever interfering in that relationship."

"Pathetic, Harun! And reprehensible! Retire...! As usual, you're being shamefully weak and shamefully self-indulgent. Furthermore, you're putting the whole tribe at risk."

"Twaddle!" the Sheikh shouted in a passion, shooting up into the air and making a beeline for the refuge of his cavern. He was closely pursued by Jamina, still shouting.

"Harun! You come back here...! I haven't nearly finished with you..."

But instead of disappearing inside and barring the entrance to his sister as he had intended, the Sheikh stopped short on the threshold, shocked to his core. Jamina came up beside him and also jerked to a halt, equally appalled.

The Sheikh's piano – the full concert grand that he had built himself as a semi-retirement project after years of surreptitious study in the manufacturing halls of Steinway and Bosendorfer – reposed as usual in the centre of the floor but instead of presenting magnificent reflections of the chamber from the immaculately polished surfaces of its lid and case, it lay a splintered heap of wreckage.

"What...?" Jamina began after a long silence. The Sheikh cut her off.

"Iblis," he said. He was referring to his counterpart on the dark side of the Other World.

"What...?! He wouldn't dare..."

"He would, and he has."

"Iblis?" Jamina said, still disbelievingly.

"Of course, Iblis," the Sheikh shouted in frustration. "Certainly no one else would dare."

"But why...? Why would he do this?"

"A warning," the Sheikh said slowly. "An ultimatum. A declaration of war for all I know."

"War! Harun, what don't I know? What have you been keeping from me?" The Sheikh said nothing.

"Harun! Answer me!"

"Annabella..." the Sheikh began and ground to a halt.

"Annabella what?" Jamina demanded.

"Annabella escaped from Waq Waq," the Sheikh said in a rush.

"What!"

"You heard," the Sheikh muttered.

"And you didn't think to tell me? You deliberately hid this from me? You will tell me now. Everything..."

And hovering there at the entrance to his cavern, contemplating the wreckage of his pride and joy, the Sheikh did. In flat, unemotional tones he recounted the bald facts of how Annabella had contrived first to free both herself and her parents from the infernal island of Waq Waq and its human fruit conjured by the mind of Iblis, and then later how with Basil's aid she had managed to avoid being returned there. The Sheikh finished with Iblis's Parthian shot:

"I see you, al Yazid," he had said to Basil after engineering the final doom of Hassan-i Sabbāh. "Still it is not finished between us. Still the woman is owed to Waq Waq..."

After a long moment of disbelief, Jamina spoke:

"He said that? Iblis said that?" The Sheikh made no reply, his silence eloquent.

"I'm too old for a war," he muttered at last, more to himself than Jamina. There was a distinctly querulous tone to his voice.

"Then you know what must be done," Jamina said firmly.

"A nice, tidy solution?"

"Well, isn't it...? To both problems..."

"Perhaps, but I can't," the Sheikh said, his voice querulous again. "I just can't."

"Harun, you are so weak."

"I can't," the Sheikh repeated.

"The girl is twice damned," Jamina insisted. "She will be the ruination of everything we've ever worked for... Thousands and thousands of years..."

"I can't," the Sheikh said yet again.

"You must."

"You don't know her. She is so..."

"Her personal qualities, whatever they may be, are quite beside the point," Jamina interrupted, beginning to shout again.

"No," the Sheikh replied, his voice also rising in response yet somehow lacking in conviction. "They are the point. You will meet Annabella and you will see for yourself... You will see why she must be protected from Iblis whatever the cost... Why she is the future for Basil, and accordingly the Marid."

Jamina said nothing.

"Whatever the cost..." the Sheikh repeated, volume disguising the shiver of uncertainty deep within his words, uncertainty that nevertheless was quite apparent to Jamina, knowing her brother as she did.

Even for Annabella, accustomed as she was to the weird and the wonderful, not to say the bizarre, this was quite the most surreal occasion of her life.

Pater says it's time you met the family, Basil had announced out of the blue. Annabella, however, had not been fooled for a moment.

You mean, the family wants to inspect me, she accused.

Um...

What family? she went on.

Um... Everybody...

Every body?

Oh, jolly witty, Basil said, embarrassed by the position in which he found himself. *Every djinni...*

Ha, Annabella said, not the least disposed to show mercy. *And what makes the Sheikh think I'd ever agree to being gawked at by your rotten relatives?*

Not the relatives, so much... Aunt Jamina.

Oh no, Annabella said quickly. She had heard something of Aunt Jamina, who was the principal reason Basil chose to have his residence far inland rather than by the sea, like any right-thinking Marid, in the often vain hope that out of sight might mean out of mind. Aunt Jamina regarded the Sheikh as a totally inadequate parent and as such that it was incumbent upon her, therefore, ipso facto, q.e.d., to keep Basil properly up to the mark, a labour that would have defeated Hercules, but not Aunt Jamina, never, and certainly not for want of trying.

Please, Basil pleaded. *Lady Bright... Lady Gorgeous... Lady Mine...*

Abso-jolly-lutely not.

But you must... Or life won't be worth living.

Your life. Nothing to do with me.

Please, Basil repeated with a tinge of genuine desperation. Jolly please...

Annabella took the time to enjoy the look of supplication on Basil's fine-drawn, aquiline features. On holiday, they had retreated to the privacy of Basil's tower, lost in time, deep in the mountains of the Sinai Desert, and Basil had allowed himself to materialise from the wisp of smoke that was his usual manifestation, smoke to a djinni being the equivalent of clothes.

Annabella stretched luxuriously and the silk sheet slipped rather less than innocently to the floor. Basil's eyes drifted accordingly.

A bath, Annabella said. A long bath. And a massage. A long massage. With the lavender oil. Then I might be in the sort of mood to respond just a fraction more favourably to such a totally outrageous request...

Much later, a scroll of papyrus appeared and unrolled itself in front of her.

See? Basil said, more in hope than expectation that the moment might now be propitious. It was an invitation, apparently hand-inscribed in golden ink:

Sheikh Al Yazid
Invites you to a reception
To meet
Basil's intended,
Annabella Crabtree
At Concert Corner
Sunday, the 21st
6.30 p.m.
RSVP

(Dress formal; carpets for 10pm sharp)

Intended? Annabella demanded. *What's this intended? First I've heard of it.*

I intend to spend the rest of my life with you, Basil said defensively.

You'll be lucky. You'll be very lucky. And what does "" dress formal" mean?

Formal dress...? Djinn...?

Well if you come, you'll jolly well see. You will come, won't you? You have to... You just have to...

"Gallopig golliwogs," Basil said aloud as their carpet rounded the southern cliffs. "Pater's gone the whole jolly hog." And he had. His beach, spread before them and which had become known as Concert Corner to his intimates, was resplendent in full party regalia.

Away across the Gulf of Suez, the sun had slipped below the horizon and was bidding farewell by painting a scattering of cumulus with a palette of crimson and

gold. The seabirds were darting hither and yon, pointing out missed bits and shouting raucous advice. The evening breeze had arrived punctually and was conscientiously setting about its duty. The cool after the heat of the day was delicious.

However, it was not nature that had caused Basil's exclamation. Not content with the natural advantages of his retirement home – semi-retirement, he continued to insist – the Sheikh had taken matters into his own hands, loosely speaking. The arc of white sand captured by the two forbidding headlands was now the largest Zen garden the world had ever seen. Subtle fluting swirled and flowed the length of the beach, curling into an elegant scroll here, enfolding and embracing a solitary rock there, dancing in frozen figures along the top of the dunes. But not content with the serenity of his formal design, the Sheikh had also caused the delicate coral reef just below the surface of the pellucid waters to glow magically luminous with a constantly shifting array of elusive colours. As the sunset faded, reflections from the reef began to infuse the beach with new life and movement, at once harmony and counterpoint to the arabesques carved in the sand.

Towards the northern end, the simple beach hut that Basil had brought into existence on a previous occasion was now surrounded on all four sides by a laid dance floor, illuminated by free-range Chinese lanterns, drifting about. Gentle music, in fact a Schubert piano trio, ebbed and flowed. Neither Basil nor Annabella could know that the piano, not so long before, had been just a pile of wreckage. Even though it was not yet invented, the Sheikh had been able to repair it with some main force magic as he had, in fact, already built it from scratch himself.

As they came closer, Basil and Annabella could make out that the dance floor was already crowded with floating forms.

"The crafty old bugger...may he live forever!" Basil expostulated aloud. He had warned Annabella in advance that telepathic communication in this gathering would not be the least bit private.

"Basil!" Annabella protested. "You can't call your father..."

"I can," Basil interrupted. "And I jolly well will. He's set us up."

"What do you mean?"

"He told us 6.30."

"So?"

"And I'll bet he jolly well told everyone else six o'clock."

"So?"

"So we jolly well have to make a grand entrance, don't you see?"

"Awww, and you're nervous...?"

"Yes," Basil said seriously. "I am."

Formal attire for djinn, Annabella discovered, meant headdresses, for the most part turbans, of every shape, form and colour imaginable. There were tagelmusts and jamadanis, lungees and pagris, `imāmahs and dastars, but mostly they were original creations deriving from no known culture, fevered confections of the imagination and engineering marvels to boot, bobbing about like so many variegated lollipops atop the wisps of smoke that otherwise were all there was to be seen of the assembled djinn.

The effect was extraordinary and Annabella was hard put to keep from giggling. Then the logic of it dawned upon her. How to tell one indistinguishable wisp of smoke from another? Not easy...

"I think perhaps it might be best if you stand up, now," Basil said, his voice sounding distinctly out of sorts. "Let them all have a good look at you."

Annabella rose warily. She had never attempted to stand on a flying carpet before. It seemed perfectly stable and she relaxed. For her part, courtesy of Basil, she was wearing a simple sheath of black silk, her throat and shoulders bare. With her creamy skin, her slender but now entirely adequate figure and her chestnut hair piled high, she could only look stunning. The cobalt blue of her eyes was so intense that any other jewellery would simply have been extravagant bad taste. Basil allowed himself a sigh of pleasure. At least there was one good thing about this whole ghastly episode. It wasn't often that he had occasion to behold Annabella dressed to the nines.

In turn, Annabella glanced at her consort. He had refused point blank to submit his headgear, whatever it might be, to prior inspection and Annabella had been most curious to discover the sort of affectation Basil might choose to inflict on the world – some hugely elaborate turban, no doubt. She was pleased to find he favoured a simple scarlet fez of most superior kilim. She thought it suited him admirably, not so much in his manifestation as a wisp of smoke but his character: half clown, half warrior, and totally lovable, though she had no intention of ever telling him any such thing.

As they neared the dance floor, the trio broke into the quintessential fanfare and Annabella had time to see that the cello, the violin and the Sheikh's concert grand were valiantly singing their hearts out without benefit of anyone actually playing them. The crowding lollipops drew back to give them space to land and it occurred to her that the flooring must have been provided entirely for the benefit of the very high heels she was wearing, as she was the only one who would actually have occasion to walk on it. The Sheikh waited a moment for the dramatic timing of it all then swayed forward to welcome them. He was wearing a most imposing chand tora dumalla in splendid indigo complete with the traditional Sikh chainmail and silver swords. It entirely befitted his station as the most powerful of djinn, with the possible exception of Aunt Jamina.

The Strauss reached its famous crescendo and fell silent.

"Well come!" the Sheikh said in sonorous tones. "Well come, indeed." The assembly broke into polite applause, which proved to be a most curious sound, a sort of sputtering stuttering muttering. Annabella found it a gallant attempt at conventional hand-clapping and took it in the spirit in which it was offered. She smiled happily and the Sheikh bowed, so deeply that Annabella momentarily feared for his turban, though naturally there was not the slightest need for concern.

Then followed an appallingly long series of introductions, during which Annabella gave up all hope of ever remembering anyone's name. Except Aunt Jamina's.

She was presented last of all; short, remarkably stout for a wisp of smoke and resembling nothing so much as a fussy little teapot. Her small turban, with its tight, finicky pleating completed the illusion, bearing a strong resemblance to a tea cosy. A second image that sprang irresistibly into Annabella's mind an instant later was that of Jemima Puddleduck waddling through one of her childhood books.

Annabella managed a gracious inclination of her head, not quite a bow but near enough that it could be construed as such should anybody need to. The response was a very audible sniff of disapprobation. Annabella coloured slightly and felt her hackles rising. She was not, however, without defences.

"Oh, I'm so sorry," she said sweetly. "You have a cold. But you came anyway, how brave..." There was a stifled snort from beside her.

"Basil!" The voice was shrill, piercing, scarifying. "Kindly behave yourself."

"Yes, Aunt Jamina," Basil said, so meekly that Annabella turned to look at him, her eyebrows raised. Meanwhile, the trio chose that moment to abandon Schubert and Strauss – Zarathustra having spoken with splendid aplomb – and turned to jazz. With part of her mind Annabella tried to place the tune but failed. Disembodied trays began to circulate amongst the guests, offering little bowls of different coloured flame.

"I want a word with you, young lady," Aunt Jamina continued, ignoring Basil and addressing Annabella with sharp insistence. "Come with me." She turned and began to cleave a path towards the bungalow.

Annabella fought to suppress an urge to open rebellion – for the moment – and stalked in her wake. The first line of the trio's tune came to her. "Oh, the shark, babe, has such teeth, dear..." How appropriate, she thought, detecting the fine hand of the Sheikh at work and his well-known predilection for the New York clubs. Then she realised the choice was probably not so much commentary as warning. Her face grew thoughtful.

A door swung open before Aunt Jamina's advance, hastily, as though caught napping and fearful of the consequences. Annabella followed her into the airy interior of the well-remembered hut, stopped and stood waiting quietly, her skin prickling. If Aunt Jamina wanted battle, then battle she would have. The opening shot came on the instant.

"You will relinquish my nephew," Aunt Jamina stated baldly without any attempt at preliminary nicety. She had taken up position in the centre of the hut's main room, the high ground. Annabella circled slowly and returned fire.

"I doubt..." she said carefully. "I very much doubt that Basil will agree to relinquish me."

"Then the decision must be made for him," Aunt Jamina retorted. There was a long silence. Distantly Annabella could hear the chatter of conversation and the trio still working its way through Mac the Knife. "...Scarlet billows start to spread..." the instruments sang. Well I have teeth, too, Annabella thought, but for the moment, like Macheath, chose to keep them concealed.

"Perhaps it might be helpful," she said, "if you were to explain why..." Again there was silence. Aunt Jamina spoke at last, her voice perhaps less shrill but all the more definite because of it.

"Not only have you seduced Basil from his duty," she proclaimed. "But you are utterly unsuitable. For Basil. For any djinni. So unsuitable that any...liaison is unthinkable."

"Yes?" Annabella said encouragingly.

"You have taken al iksir." It was a statement, not a question.

"I was strapped to a table very much against my will," Annabella said quietly. "And it was forced down my throat, if that's what you mean."

"But you are nevertheless immortal." This time it was an accusation, not a statement.

"No," Annabella contradicted her. "I can die. I can be killed. We proved that. Hassan-i Sabbāh was killed by Leviathan. Devoured and digested. All gone. Finished. Anyway, I don't see why that's a problem. Basil thinks that for me long life is a good thing."

"Basil is merely a stupid male and in your terms a wilful adolescent, just like you...wilful adolescent whose father has disgracefully neglected the necessary discipline during his upbringing."

"In your opinion," Annabella snapped, starting to lose her temper. "What does al iksir have to do with anything?" she repeated. For the first time Aunt Jamina seemed a trifle less than absolutely adamant. She hesitated.

"Human-djinni...interaction," she began at last and then stopped. "...Unfortunately, it occurs. That is true. Unfortunately it is necessary. That is also true..."

"Why?" Annabella demanded.

"How dare you interrupt?"

"Then explain properly." Again Aunt Jamina hesitated.

"I'm astonished you don't know..."

"Well I don't. Someone has neglected to tell me."

"For procreation," Aunt Jamina said with marked reluctance. "For the continuation of our race..."

"You mean...?"

"I do," Aunt Jamina cut her off. "It's debasing, demeaning, but unavoidable if we are to survive. The one saving grace has been that humans, fortunately, are extremely short lived and in the natural way of things expire before they can impose themselves too unreasonably. You, however... The white drops... Your indefinite survival... Not to mention your complete lack of morals... If you were just another one of Basil's floozies, quick to come, quick to go, I would say nothing... But you're not. Most certainly you are not."

"No," Annabella declared. "You've got that right."

"And if I tell you that Basil is a rake, a roué, a playboy?" Aunt Jamina's voice suddenly held a hint of ambivalence, as though despite herself she couldn't help a sneaking admiration for Basil's prowess in the field.

"If ever he was," Annabella fired back, "he is now most definitely a reformed rake. I can promise you that." Aunt Jamina laughed mirthlessly.

"He will cause you heartache and woe."

"I'll take my chances."

"But it is not you I'm concerned about. It is your influence on Basil that must be terminated."

"Why?" Annabella demanded, now very angry.

"Because in due course, Basil will succeed his father. And it is plainly untenable for him to be in thrall to any one human for any length of time, particularly one of your unconscionable moral degeneracy. Untenable for the rest of us... You will release him."

"Think again!" Annabella hissed. She stabbed her heel viciously into the floor, spun neatly about face – one advantage of stilettos, she realised later – and made to stalk out, her back straighter than a musket barrel.

"Wait!" Jamina said imperiously. "There is something else." Annabella turned back, her left hand resting on the door handle. She raised a thunderous eyebrow.

"Iblis is demanding you be returned to Waq Waq," Jamina announced baldly. Annabella flinched, then froze.

"He is threatening war." Still Annabella stood rigid.

"He is threatening to destroy Basil," Jamina went on remorselessly. "If you truly love my nephew, as you say you do, you will voluntarily give yourself up."

For a moment, Annabella was flooded with the urge to noble self-sacrifice, then common sense prevailed.

"I don't believe you," she said, her voice icy. "What threat?"

"He destroyed the Sheikh's piano..."

"Really...?" Annabella interrupted, cocking her head to the sounds of music floating in from outside.

"The Sheikh has repaired it, of course..."

"You expect me to believe that?" Annabella said scornfully. "It hasn't been invented yet so he can't just wave a wand, or whatever it is that djinn do. Repair it! What nonsense! And you expect me to believe this stuff about Iblis? After telling me I must give up Basil, suddenly I have to go back to Waq Waq... How convenient. For you. Get real." And with that, Annabella thrust through the door and out into the balmy evening air.

Basil was waiting for her and gazed worriedly at the expression on her face.

"What?" he said. "What's happened...?" On the instant, Annabella resolved that Basil, and the Sheikh for that matter, could never know the details of her row with Jamina. There was no telling how devastating the ensuing family ructions might be. Inadvertently, she actually smiled at the thought of how Basil would react to the suggestion that Annabella should voluntarily surrender herself to Iblis and Waq Waq.

"Nothing happened," Annabella said. "It's all right. Just girl talk..." Basil looked doubtful, but Annabella laughed again, tickled by the thought of Jamina ever indulging in girl talk. This time, Basil was sufficiently reassured that he let it drop, particularly as they were swept up by a crowd of the Sheikh's guests.

For her part, Aunt Jamina found that the encounter with Annabella – impudent girl – had clarified her thinking remarkably. Clearly, war with Iblis was out of the question. Clearly Annabella's liaison with Basil was out of the question. There was, as she had said to the Sheikh, a tidy solution to both problems. The only question was

how to bring it about without exposing herself to the wrath of both her brother and her nephew with their high-falutin' notions of a CODE, justice and djinni honour.

She wrestled with the problem for some considerable time, days, until finally came inspiration, upon which she acted immediately.

The barren expanse of sand, utterly featureless and bleak beyond words, stretched unbroken to the encircling horizon, and to the horizon beyond that, and to horizons beyond that without number.

Aunt Jamina materialised as her customary wisp of smoke, still giving the impression of being short and stout – a perverse vanity – and set herself to wait as long as it took. It seemed a vain vigil. The sun climbed up from one side of the desolate arena, hung high in the sky and then began to descend. Only when it was about to disappear beneath the rim of the earth did a disembodied shadow appear and begin to move in cautious, circuitous loops towards her. Eventually, the shadow spoke:

"You dare!" The voice was sibilant, barely more than a whisper of wind.

"I dare," Aunt Jamina stated firmly. "We are matched. There could be no winner if we fought. Only destruction for us both. I am Jamina al Yazid." There was a long pause.

"And what business do you have with such as I?"

"Too modest," Aunt Jamina said. "You are Lilis of the Desert of Death, second in power only to Iblis."

"I ask again... I will not ask a third time. What do you want of me?"

"To convey a message to Iblis."

"Why should I take what you will not take yourself?"

"I am al Yazid. Iblis could never receive me." There was another pause, as though for reflection.

"No," Lilis said.

"The girl with the blue eyes..." Aunt Jamina said. "The only human ever to escape from Waq Waq... The only human ever to escape from you..." There was what sounded like a sharp intake of breath.

"She is protected," Lilis objected.

"She is protected now," Aunt Jamina said delicately. "But there will come a time when she is not. Soon. The war that Iblis threatens is unnecessary, bad for us all. A little patience and the girl will be exposed for the taking. That is my message."

"And how can such a message be trusted?"

"The message is my bond. Be ready. Be aware. Put your subjects to watch. But above all be patient."

It was the sixth night of the waxing crescent moon. It gleamed now through the leaves of the ancient oak and a stray beam of light danced along the blade of the little golden sickle held high in salute, in supplication, by the woman robed in white.

Would the god come this time, she wondered? Or would he not?

She began to climb, penetrating deep into the heart of the branches, searching the gloom for the mistletoe she knew to be there.

A faint susurrations through the leaves around her took form and substance.

"Blue eyes," the leaves murmured. "We seek the girl with blue eyes."

The priestess sighed with ecstasy. Again the god had come. Again the god had addressed her personally. Again she was blessed.

She dropped her harvest of mistletoe to the ground and descended to her waiting acolytes. The sacrifice of the two white bulls that followed was, for her, a most joyful occasion.

Later, however, she puzzled to find meaning in the cryptic message. What could it mean? That every girl with blue eyes should be sacrificed? Surely not. The slab would be quite drowned in corpses. And the god had indeed specified "the", the girl. A specific person, then? But who? And why?

Chapter 1

No, Basil said. I know what you're thinking. Abso-jolly-lutely not.

We can't leave her, Annabella said. Not now...

The Sheikh's reception, splendid as it was, had faded into unconsidered memory. Annabella had kept to her decision not to burden Basil with the substance of her encounter with Aunt Jamina. Even though Basil had pressed her once or twice she was sure that the potential for a family conflagration of spectacular dimensions would best be avoided by discreet silence and some vague white lies. For some considerable time afterwards, Annabella had been alert for any sign of enemy action, but as the months passed and nothing untoward occurred, she had relaxed and dismissed it all as just an elderly djinniya feeling displaced and cranky with it. Any lingering doubts were subsumed by the fact that in the meantime Vivienne's life had rather spiralled out of control.

In a curious echo to Aunt Jamina's demand that Annabella dump Basil, Darius, Vivienne's long-time boyfriend, was also insisting that he be given space and time, much to Vivienne's distress. Annabella and Basil, for their part, were fairly sure that Darius's cold feet had less to do with Vivienne than with Kim-Ly, daughter of the Trans, the family which had taken him in as a refugee from the 12th Century.

At the time, Annabella had thought Vivienne either brave or foolhardy in the extreme, encouraging Darius to share a home with Kim-Ly. Vivienne was a spectacular blonde, Kim-Ly the most delicate of Vietnamese flowers. It was all a matter of taste. But looks aside, Annabella also speculated that Darius might well prefer Kim-Ly's rather more deferential attitude towards the male of the species. Vivienne could be extremely forthright when she chose.

But it's supposed to be your birthday treat, Basil protested. No fun with V playing gooseberry...

Don't be mean, Annabella retorted. And stop being so selfish. It's my birthday, not yours, so we'll do what I like... She softened her tone. *I really can't leave her by herself... Not here... Not miserable...* She gestured about her at the rather grotty student flat she and Vivienne had taken to be close to the university. *And you know how much she loves surprises...*

Why won't you let me fix this place up? Basil said, going off at a tangent.

Too easy, Annabella said. It was a well-worn complaint and she responded automatically, content she had won. If we're going to be students, we have to play the part...

And indeed, Annabella had decided that a university education was a necessary prelude to making the most of a theoretically endless life. History would be her subject, she had determined, and given Basil's facility for flitting through time she had her own notions as to how historical research might best be conducted. Her birthday treat was to be her first deliberate foray into seeing for herself, although Basil had refused point blank to divulge their temporal destination despite threats,

blandishments and a really excellent tantrum that both of them thoroughly enjoyed... Particularly afterwards.

July, 1955, Milan.

Annabella and Vivienne emerged from time to find themselves at the back of what appeared to be a theatre box. They looked at each other, eyes wide.

"Wow!" Vivienne said. Everyone should have a djinni for a..."

"Lover," Annabella interrupted firmly.

"A birthday surprise is like really...wow...!" They stood surveying each other with patent satisfaction. Vivienne now looked even more stunning than usual in an evening gown of midnight blue, while Annabella was spectacular in a black and gold variation of the silk she had worn to Concert Corner.

With one accord, they moved to the front of the box and stopped, transfixed by the spectacle that opened before them. To their left was a towering proscenium arch with its magnificent curtain, scarlet and gold. To their right serried tiers of boxes soared five levels high, lined with crimson velvet and picked out in gold leaf, sweeping round in a grand unbroken ellipse until they met the opposite end of the stage. The centre area was taken up by massed rows of stalls, rapidly filling. Already the vast auditorium was vibrating with a heady mixture of anticipation and excitement.

"Where are we?" Annabella asked after a long, long pause.

"La Scala," Basil said comfortably, able to speak aloud in the privacy of their box.

"And...?" Annabella said, slightly breathless.

"We are going to see Maria Callas give her Norma in one of the very greatest of her performances, possibly *the* greatest."

"Opera!" Vivienne sighed with what might or might not have been disappointment. The other two chose to put the most charitable interpretation upon it.

"How wonderful!" Annabella exclaimed with genuine delight, drowning any lingering doubt. Long before, Basil, expatiating on the wondrous talents of La Divina, had promised to introduce Annabella to the artistic splendours wrought by the soprano generally regarded as the greatest diva of the age, if not all time. Now the moment had arrived.

The girls remained standing at the front of their box, mesmerised by the sights and sounds of the immense theatre before them, swirling with people in their evening finery and throbbing with acute expectation. Unnoticed, members of the orchestra had been filing into the pit and now the sounds of instruments tuning began to penetrate the roar of the crowd noise. Gradually, a hush descended as people sat and lowered their voices from a shout to a murmur. Then, as Maestro Votto emerged from the rear of the pit, strode forward and stepped up to bow at the rail separating him from the stalls, there was a resounding moment of silence followed by an equally resounding wave of applause.

Annabella and Vivienne hastily seated themselves as Maestro moved to his podium, raised his arms aloft and waited for the moment *juste*. Silence fell but still Maestro held the assembly in suspense as though to underscore that what was about to

befall would become one of the grandest occasions in the history of the grandest of all the performing arts.

At last his arms swept down and the orchestra launched into the thunderous opening chords of the overture.

Oroveso and the chorus of Druids entered the stage and for the umpteenth time Annabella had occasion to bless the gift of tongues that Basil had conferred upon her and Vivienne years before. The Italian of the opera was as comprehensible as any sung lyric could be. Aided by a quick glance or two at the synopsis in the program Basil had thoughtfully provided, she had no difficulty following proceedings.

Pollione, in the guise of the great Mario Del Monaco, confessed his betrayal of Norma's love, gloriously Annabella thought, though she did rather wonder how it could have been possible for a Roman proconsul, albeit such a tenor as Del Monaco, to persuade a Druid priestess to violate her vow of chastity in the first place. Then Callas finally appeared and at the first soaring unaccompanied notes of *Sediziose voci* Annabella stopped thinking altogether. *Casta Diva*, when it came, not only suffocated the possibility of thought but stopped her heart as well, or so it seemed, and from that moment on she was there in the forests of ancient Gaul, drowning in the luminous beauty of Callas praying to the numinous moon.

The eruption of the audience at the end of the aria, and subsequent eruptions throughout the rest of the opera, Vivienne's ecstatic responses, Basil's little moans of pleasure...nothing could shake the illusion. All during the long interval after Act One, Annabella sat unmoving in her chair, still immersed in the world that was being created on stage, unwilling to move or talk lest the magic dissolve. She was determinedly unresponsive to Vivienne's chatter – Vivienne was so excited that she barely noticed – and Annabella was grateful that Basil was content to leave her be, just pleased she was so moved by his birthday offering.

Act Two began and again she was instantly, utterly absorbed by the drama unfolding before her, though a part of her was already rebelling against the inevitability of the tragedy to come, aware without yet knowing that there could only be one possible end.

Annabella's Achilles' heel, her one, crippling weakness, was an unreasoning and ungovernable fear of fire. Ever since being trapped in her burning home as a very small child, rampant fire had possessed the power to reduce her to quivering immobility. And it seemed that all of the great crises of her life had involved the same primal terror. Fire! And the more she was forced to face it, the worse her dread became.

So when finally it came time for Norma and Pollione to ascend the funeral pyre and expunge their shame, seeking death in the flames, Annabella was shaking so hard that Vivienne, moved by concern and knowing her phobia, put her arms around her shoulders and hugged her tight.

The sightlines of their box hid the rear of the stage and they were unable to see the whole set. However, light began to flicker realistically flame-like as the climax built. Norma and Pollione moved towards it and were lost to Annabella's view. Visceral

horror consumed her, unmitigated by any clumsy stage fakery that might actually be taking place. Her suspension of disbelief remained complete, entire, devastating.

"Go now to the pyre," the assembled cast thundered, "and may your sacrifice

"Cleanse the altar and the temple,

"O you who shall be cursed in death!"

Then Callas's final searing note rang through La Scala, soaring impossibly high, impossibly long, impossibly pure above the astonishing volume of chorus and orchestra in fullest cry. Annabella rocked and heaved in Vivienne's arms and was consumed by a blaze of emotion every bit as powerful as the flames she imagined to be consuming Norma...

Chapter 2

"What happened?" Vivienne asked wonderingly. "Where are we?"

Annabella looked at her uncomprehendingly, still dazed by the vicarious terror of the illusory funeral pyre. Slowly, her eyes began to focus. She looked about her. They were standing in some sort of forest clearing. The branches overhead were so thick and so interlaced that they might almost have been in a cave. The light was dim to dark, threatening, making it impossible to tell the time of day. She could feel her sharp heels sinking into the leaf mould thick on the ground.

"What happened?" Vivienne repeated, this time with a mounting edge of hysteria. Annabella put a calming hand on her arm.

"Basil?" she said. "Are you here?" Both girls listened intently.

"Basil!" Annabella insisted. Still there was no answer and suddenly she knew there was not going to be.

"Oh no...!" Vivienne said. "It can't be... Where is he...?"

"I don't know," Annabella said slowly. There was a long silence.

"Annabella," Vivienne whispered. "What's happening? What's happened to us?"

"I don't know," Annabella said and then: "I can guess... Time-shifting... We've time-shifted..."

"What? How? Why?"

"I don't know," Annabella said again, but again she could guess. A sudden memory of Aunt Jamina came to her, of Aunt Jamina saying: "It is your influence on Basil that must be terminated..."

"What are we going to do?" Vivienne said. She was still whispering as though lowering her voice might keep this dangerous, unknown world at bay. Her eyes, Annabella noticed, were immense and staring wildly.

"I don't think you're supposed to be here," Annabella said. "I think that was accidental."

"Supposed to be here...? What on earth are you talking about? Are you trying to tell me that you are supposed to be here?"

"Not exactly here, perhaps..."

"Annabella!" Vivienne said, her voice rising again. "Talk sense."

"...But away from Basil." There was silence. Vivienne knew something of events behind the scenes at the Sheikh's reception.

"Aunt Jamina...?" she said at last. "You think she...? How...?"

"I don't know," Annabella said. She grimaced wryly. "Maybe she's some sort of time and emotion whiz... And you were being kind. You were hugging me. I was upset. You were upset for me..."

"You mean I got in the way?"

"Collateral damage." Annabella grimaced again.

"Where are we?" Vivienne asked again. "When are we?"

"Can't you guess?"

"Oh, no. Oh, no..."

"Afraid so." Vivienne abruptly changed tack.

"Well, as long as Basil doesn't muck around, we should be all right. We won't be here for long..."

Annabella said nothing.

"Will we...?" Vivienne insisted.

Still Annabella said nothing. Vivienne stepped back and regarded her piercingly.

"Annabella! What are you not telling me?" For once Annabella was rather lost for words. She looked about seeking inspiration. The trunks of the trees surrounding them, imprisoning them, were rapidly making her feel claustrophobic to the point of illness. The air was as still, as sepulchral, as the must of a tomb.

"I'm sorry," Annabella said at last.

"Sorry about what, exactly?" Vivienne demanded, though her voice was quiet now as though the situation was too serious for anything but icy calm.

"Basil doesn't know about Aunt Jamina. Nobody does, except you...a bit. I didn't tell him. I didn't want to start a family feud or something. Basil doesn't know she threatened me. He won't have any idea of what's going on...what might have happened to us... He won't have any idea of where we are. Or when we are... And Aunt Jamina is never going to tell him. For all he knows we might have been taken by Hassan-i Sabbāh's ghost." Or Iblis, Annabella suddenly thought, though she left that unsaid.

These were oak trees surrounding them, Annabella realised, but the floor of the large clearing was remarkably regular, almost a perfect circle, and remarkably unobstructed; no shoots, no saplings, just packed leaf litter as though someone or something periodically attended to the housekeeping. She finally noticed what she should have remarked immediately, a flat, rectangular and very large slab of roughly dressed stone, about the size and shape of a double bed. It was set towards one end of the clearing and seemed to be stained with something dark. Annabella made a tentative move towards it and then stopped. If it really were blood, she felt she would rather not know.

The missing joint on the little finger of Annabella's left hand began to throb and the thought came to her so suddenly, so forcefully that she staggered. This was a very bad place, a place of dark, brutal secrets.

The leaves of the trees were rustling now, murmuring, almost like speech. Words, she seemed to be hearing words but couldn't make them out. Then Annabella sensed a presence. Someone, something, was watching them, something dire, something inimical. The feeling grew to the point where it consumed her. Rational thought was obliterated. All that was left was panic. There was nothing to fight, there could only be flight... She took one step, two, and then she was running, blindly, desperately...

"Annabella!" Vivienne called, her voice rising. "Annabella! What is it? Stop...!" And then she too was running, equally infected.

Annabella had no notion of what it was pursuing them, but she could hear it. Over the racket they made crashing through the undergrowth there was the drum of hoof beats, but not those of a horse – lighter, faster, more erratic, terrifying. An image began to form in her brain, cloudy, unfocused... Horns? Were those horns?

Whatever it was seemed to be herding them, the sound coming first from one side then the other. Gasping now and slowing somewhat from her first headlong rush to escape, Annabella began to think a little. To be herded was bad by definition... Instinctively, she turned towards the hoof beats and ran straight at them. They veered to one side but again she turned towards them. Again they veered, but suddenly there seemed to be a lightening of the gloom ahead. Annabella raced on towards it, the undergrowth clutching and tearing, her shoes gone, her feet ripped and bloodied. The trees were thinning now. Then, like flicking a switch, she was out in the open. Seconds later, Vivienne came to a halt beside her. The two girls, deeply distressed, stood hands on knees, fighting for air.

"What was it?" Vivienne managed at last, her chest still heaving.

"I don't know," Annabella panted. "I don't want to know..."

"It sounded like some sort of animal," Vivienne said between breaths. "A deer, a stag?"

"No..."

"What then?"

"It wasn't a deer," Annabella insisted, though wondering at the recollection of the hazy image she had seen. Could the horns have been antlers? And what were the words that seemed to have been rustling through the leaves?

"Well, whatever it was it's sure made a mess of us..." Vivienne said. They looked each other up and down. Vivienne was stating only the literal truth. Their fine evening dresses were now little more than rags. Whatever bare skin was showing was scratched and bleeding. Their feet didn't bear thinking about.

Slowly, they began to become aware of their surroundings. They had emerged from the dank forest into open, rolling countryside stretching out before them. To their right, however, the ground rose sharply, climbing high, some hundreds of metres, until it seemed to level off on to some sort of plateau. The day was warm with a summery feel and from the position of the sun they guessed it was about midday.

"So," Vivienne said at last. "What on earth are we supposed to do now?"

For answer, Annabella pointed to the top of the plateau bulking high above them.

"That's smoke," she said. "There must be somebody up there."

"Or it's just a forest fire. It's hot enough..."

"No," Annabella said. "That looks more like a cooking fire, something small. There's another one... We should go look..."

"How?" Vivienne said reluctantly. She indicated the slopes nearest them. "It's very steep..."

"There must be a way," Annabella said reasonably. "Or there couldn't be anybody up there..."

There was a way, a broad beaten path leading from the forest, a path fashioned by the impact of thousands of feet. And, after skirting the plateau for half an hour or so, limping slowly, they came to an actual road.

"Did the Gauls make roads?" Annabella asked, more or less rhetorically. Vivienne shrugged and regarded the rough gravel surface with weary resignation. With their wounded feet, it would be even worse torture than the path, which at least had been relatively smooth.

"Come on," she said. "I'm starving. If we don't find something to eat soon I'll faint and you'll have to carry me."

"In your dreams," Annabella retorted.

They set off, wincing and limping and making very slow time, not quite so slow, however, as the ox cart in front of them. They came round a corner and there it was, crawling so ponderously up the slope of the hill that it seemed all but stationary.

With one accord, they stopped short.

"What do we do now?" Vivienne whispered. Annabella looked at her curiously.

"See if they can give us something to eat, I should think," she said.

"You mean, go up to them?"

"What else can we do?" Annabella waited patiently as a chain of thoughts flitted across Vivienne's face. Eventually, she too came to the only possible conclusion. She nodded glumly.

The cart itself was piled so high with fodder that they could see nothing of who might be conducting it until they were literally walking alongside. There were two women patiently urging the bullock on, one younger, one older, with the look of being mother and daughter. They were dressed in bright stripy material, reminiscent of tartan, each with a long tunic down to their ankle boots and shorter over-tunic reaching to their hips.

"Good morning," Annabella said politely in English, unable to know what language to use without first hearing it. "Or should it be good afternoon?"

The two strange women glanced towards her and then stopped short, amazed, as well they might be. The bullock opportunistically also ground to a halt and stood there phlegmatically chewing his cud, producing substantial quantities of phlegm in the process.

"What happened to you?" the older woman managed to say at last. "You look like you've been raped by the Romans..." Annabella and Vivienne glanced at each other. The mention of Romans made it seem likely that these people were indeed Gauls.

"No," Annabella said in the same harsh language. "Not Romans. We haven't been raped. We were in the forest..." She gestured over the shoulder of the slope.

"Something chased us. We don't know what." It came to Annabella then triggered by the new language, the words that had been rustling through the trees. "Blue eyes", the leaves had been whispering, "blue eyes". But there was no time to consider what the import might be.

The two women looked at each other significantly, and made a strange sign.

"You were lucky," the younger one said. "Where are you from? Where are you going?"

And here, very quickly, was the crucial question. What could Annabella possibly say, or Vivienne if it came to that?

"We're lost," Annabella finally ventured. "We were abducted...but we escaped... We don't know where we are or how we got here." Her story was greeted with disbelieving silence.

"Abducted from where?" the older woman finally demanded. She went on: "These are dangerous times... Very dangerous for strangers to be wandering our country..." Annabella hesitated and then fell back on the literal truth. She pointed as near as she could judge to the north.

"Our home is in Britain," she said. The woman regarded her narrowly.

"Yet you speak Gaulish," she said. Again Annabella and Vivienne glanced at each other. Evidently their worst fears had been realised.

"We are of the same people," Annabella said dismissively, hoping the two women might know enough of geography to accept the statement was essentially true. The older one regarded her suspiciously for a long moment and then seemed to come to a decision.

"I am Gesataia," she said. "This is my daughter, Suicca. We are taking fodder to the oppidum for our animals before the Romans get here. You'd better come too."

"Thank you," Annabella said. "This is Vivienne and I'm Annabella."

Gesataia looked searchingly at their bleeding feet. "You'd better ride on the cart," she said. "It won't make any difference to old Bag-o-bones, here." Both Annabella and Vivienne thanked her with pathetic gratitude and helped each other aboard.

"You said, the Romans..." Annabella began tentatively. It was clear that at the pace they were travelling, there would be considerable time to kill before they got anywhere and she felt that it might as well be used to advantage.

"Caesar!" Gesataia spat. "Gaius Julius Caesar!" Her vicious emphasis made the three words sound the worst of expletives.

"What I don't understand," Vivienne said. "What I never understood at school, was why Caesar ever wanted Gaul in the first place?" Annabella looked at her sharply. It was a casual remark but it opened up some very large questions.

"Politics..." she said slowly. "It was his ticket to power..."

"Gold..." Suicca interrupted. "We have gold mines. Rome doesn't." She touched the thin torc made from plaited gold wire circling her neck. "Dirty, thieving Romans..." Annabella breathed a mental sigh of relief. Vivienne's passing reference to school and consequent foreknowledge seemed to have gone unremarked. She made a note to tell Vivienne to shut up about anything she might remember of what was going to happen.

"Dirty?" Vivian inquired sceptically. "I thought they were supposed to be civilised..."

"They never wash!" Suicca burst out. "Everyone knows they never wash. They're barbarians..."

"Barbarians...?" Vivian began incautiously but was drowned out by Annabella taking evasive action.

"In the forest... What was chasing us?"

Mother and daughter glanced at each other, a look not lost on Annabella, and again made the strange sign. Then Gesataia shrugged.

"The Grove is sacred to Cernunnos," she said.

"Who?" Annabella asked. Both Gesataia and Suicca turned to look at her curiously.

"You don't know?" Suicca said with a hint of disbelief. Annabella shook her head. Obviously not or I wouldn't have asked, she resisted saying.

"Cernunnos..." Gesataia said. "The Stag Lord... The Two-horned God..."

"And you actually believe in him?" Vivienne asked. It was clear that her sceptical tone was deeply offensive.

"Of course," Gesataia said shortly. "How can anyone not?"

Annabella could see that Vivienne was disposed to argue and put out a restraining hand. A god might be stretching the point but something had certainly been pursuing them and both Annabella and Vivienne had had ample experience of strange beings generally held only to inhabit the realms of fantasy. Basil, for example. And with the thought, Annabella felt a great wave of emotion threatening to engulf her. Grimly she set it aside. What Aunt Jamina had done to the two of them, the three of them if you included Vivienne, was utterly unconscionable but railing against it or dissolving in floods of tears wasn't going to help. Again she sought to change the subject.

"You said the Romans are coming... When will they get here?" she asked. Gesataia shrugged again.

"After what they did at Avaricum..." She stopped, unable to go on. There was a depth of pain and grief in her voice.

"They killed her sister, my aunt..." Suicca said filling the silence.

"And 40,000 others..." Gesataia burst out. "Our people..." Annabella and Vivienne looked at each other. Vivienne was shocked but Annabella felt a sudden thrill of recognition and began trawling through distant memories.

"When was this?" Vivienne asked after a respectful pause.

"Months ago..." Gesataia said. "Caesar..." And again the name rang out as a curse. "Caesar has been trying to catch our army ever since..."

"But Vercingetorix is too clever for him," Suicca finished for her.

Annabella waited a decent interval and then inquired with casual interest: "What's the name of your oppidum, the one we're going to...?"

"Gergovia," Gesataia said with scant interest. Annabella, however, heard the name with the clang of instant recognition.

They came at last to the summit of the plateau and now it was the turn of Annabella and Vivienne to be astonished. Whatever half-formed notions they might have had of Gaulish civilisation – primitive in the extreme, no doubt – instantly dissolved. Stretching before them to either side of the road and far off into the distance within the undulating edge of the plateau were formidable stone walls, perhaps three times the height of a man, massively thick and topped with a timber palisade. It was apparent that the walls were also reinforced with great timber logs. Annabella realised with a

mental start that she knew this was to provide the tensile strength to resist battering rams, while the stone in turn protected the wood from fire. A spur extending out from the left forced the road to swing sharply to the right before doubling back to the town gates, which were thus protected from both flanks.

The gates themselves were equally as impressive as the walls, constructed of huge timber baulks and surmounted by an elaborate gatehouse. The structures bespoke money, skill and plentiful labour. The road, the walls, the gatehouse could only mean a high level of wealth and sophistication.

The actual gates were standing somewhat ajar, wide enough to admit the cart but not so far that they couldn't be rammed shut in seconds. A sentry stepped out as they approached. To Annabella and Vivienne he seemed huge, standing well over six feet tall without the aid of his elaborate iron helmet which extended his height to a point where he was truly colossal. He was dressed in chainmail over a short-sleeved, brightly coloured tunic and tartan braccæ, or trousers, gathered at the ankle above leather moccasin boots, laced down the central seam. The armour had been invented by his Celtish forebears long before it had been copied by the Romans. At his belt was a dagger and long sword. He seemed every bit as formidable as the walls he was guarding. He stood there, arms akimbo, long blond hair and moustaches flowing, quite aware that he cut a very fine figure.

"This is the last of it," Gesataia said. "Thank Cernunnos."

"Just in time," the sentry replied. "Vercingetorix comes and behind him, the Romans. There will be no more trips down to the farms."

"When?" Gesataia asked, meaning when would the armies be upon them.

"Soon. A day... Two days..." The sentry said dismissively, openly inspecting Annabella and Vivienne where they sat nervously on top of the load of fodder. "And who might these two be?" Gesataia shrugged.

"We found them down the road. They said they had been chased out of the Grove... That's why they look like this..."

"Ah..." the sentry said knowingly, making the same sign of the horns that Gesataia and her daughter had used previously. "And what were they doing in the forest?" At the sound of the extended exchange, two more guards stepped through the gate and stood confronting them. They were every bit as hulking as the first, though less beautiful. One had mustard-coloured hair, if you were being charitable, mud-coloured if you weren't, and the other's was reddish.

Gesataia shrugged at the question and stepped back, inviting one or other of the girls to answer for themselves. Annabella could think of nothing better than to stick to her original story, which at least had the virtue of being mostly true, as far as it went.

"Sir, we were abducted from our home," she said. "And when at last we managed to escape, we found ourselves in that forest... Something chased us..."

Blondie regarded her speculatively, then sceptically. Finally, his eyes drifted away and seemed to focus on something behind her.

"Post te!" he exclaimed, and simultaneously flinched convincingly. It was the oldest trick in the book, even in 52 BC, but at that moment Annabella would have

been less than human not to fall for it. She swung round defensively, raising an arm to ward off attack.

"So," Blondie said. "You speak Latin. Get down. You will come with us." As he spoke Gesataia and Suicca drew back, unconsciously seeking to divorce themselves from any guilt by association.

With a despairing look at each other, Annabella and Vivienne scrambled down, treading gingerly on their damaged feet. It prompted Annabella to remark:

"Do you really think the Romans would have done this to us if we were their spies?"

"Maybe, no," Blondie said. "But maybe, yes. Very cunning, the Romans. The Druids can decide..."

In the end, the men took pity on them. Blondie and Mustard slung the girls over their shoulders, leaving Red to guard the gate.

"You come too," Blondie commanded Gesataia. She frowned unwillingly and then gestured to Suicca to deal with the cart. The little procession moved off, Bag-o-bones bringing up the rear, still distributing phlegm phlegmatically.

Bumping along, her posterior pointing inelegantly at the sky, Annabella wondered whether the armour digging bruisingly into her middle was any less painful than walking. She tried to look about but from that awkward angle could gain only a confused impression. It appeared some of the buildings were wattle and daub, with thatched roofs; others were of stone and wooden shingles, two stories high. Several were much larger than their neighbours, set within their own fortified enclosures.

It was also apparent that the oppidum was vast, that the walls enclosed hundreds of acres and that the inhabitants must number tens of thousands. Annabella couldn't guess how many: fifty, sixty? Even in her own time it would have ranked as very large town at the least, complete with residential quarters, long streets of artisans' workshops, markets and a temple compound that would not have disgraced a Roman city, though the architecture was less elaborate.

The temple buildings themselves enclosed a formal square. Some were obviously residences, others places of business or learning. The temple itself was quite modest, playing as it did only a peripheral role in Druidic ceremonies. It was a place of contemplation and emergency prayer rather than a seat of the religion.

Blondie and Mustard carried the girls without hesitation into the second building on the left and set them on their feet, reasonably gently. They were obviously in some sort of anteroom. Blondie disappeared through a doorway. Mustard stood between them and the entrance. Gesataia strove to melt into a corner. Annabella and Vivienne paused to take stock and then clutched at each other. Staring down at them from niches in the walls was a macabre array of severed male heads, embalmed and still altogether too life-like.

"Yeeesh!," Vivienne exclaimed. The two Gauls regarded them curiously. Clearly, they were totally unmoved.

Vivienne gazed at Annabella with a look of questioning alarm. Annabella could only shrug helplessly. They waited.

At last Blondie returned and ushered them down a corridor, signalling Gesataia to follow. The room they now found themselves in was much larger, lit by small open windows high up in the walls, again with embalmed heads staring down. Even though it was warm and pleasant outside a small brazier was burning in the centre, producing a trickle of smoke that drifted upwards and which perfumed the room with some sort of herbal smell, acrid but nevertheless agreeable.

A woman dressed in flowing white robes and gaunt asceticism was standing there waiting for them, flanked by two men, one obviously a priest and the other, equally obviously, a warrior – an officer of some description, Annabella guessed. On closer inspection he appeared quite elderly, presumably spared the rigours of campaigning to be left in charge of the garrison. The woman's angularity was all the more stark next to the air of plump well-being exuded by the second priest.

For some considerable time the girls stood there in silence, suffering the disapproving inspection of various sets of eyes. Their torn gowns, reduced to tawdry rags, were unlike anything ever seen in Gergovia before and were suspicious of themselves, never mind the improbability of Annabella's explanation.

Finally, the woman spoke.

"What is that mark?" she demanded without any sort of preliminary, indicating the slaver's brand on Annabella's bare shoulder, inflicted some years before. Once the deep burn had healed it had revealed itself to be the outline of a scorpion. Somehow, it had never seemed worth the trouble of getting it removed.

"Nothing," Annabella said dismissively. She resisted the temptation to shrug and draw further attention to it.

"Such marks usually betoken secret sects," the woman observed. It was an accusation.

"Well, it's not," Annabella said. "It's nothing..."

"Why should you not be condemned as spies?" the woman next inquired. Her tone was now less aggressive than impatient, as though she had been called away from some much more significant task to deal with this passing irritation.

Annabella tried to think but found that she was suddenly being overtaken by an excess of emotion. The impossible position in which she and Vivienne found themselves, thanks to Aunt Jamina's unconscionable meddling, the injustice of it all, was now, at last, welling up beyond her control.

"Why should we be?" she spat. Her fists were clenched and she was breathing hard. Once before she and Vivienne had been accused of spying. She had resented it then, now she was outraged.

The woman said nothing, just waited, letting silence go to work.

"Who are you, anyway?" Annabella demanded finally. "By what right have you taken us prisoner? Who are you to question us?" There was another silence. The two warriors glanced at each other, thinking exactly the same thing: the girl had spunk at least.

"I am Vernogena," the woman said at last. "I am Chief Druid of Gergovia, which by definition also makes me Chief Judge. I have power of life and death over you."

Which, if nothing else, means it behoves you to speak with care. You come here telling a pack of obvious lies. I am rapidly coming to the conclusion that the most appropriate way of dealing with you and your companion is to send you to sacrifice."

Vivienne gasped, but Annabella responded by completely losing her temper.

"We are not spies!" she stormed. "I've never seen a Roman in my life..."

"You say you come from Britain?" Vernogena said, cutting short Annabella's tirade. Annabella nodded.

"You say you've never seen a Roman?" Annabella nodded again.

"Caesar invaded Britain three years ago...for the second time... And here you are... Arriving just days before the Roman Army. Remarkable." Vernogena stood calmly as though inviting comment.

"If Caesar did invade Britain..." Annabella said eventually, her voice suddenly weary as she knew very well that he had. "If he did, it doesn't automatically mean that we had anything to do with him or any other Romans. That we ever saw them..."

"So you say."

"I'm not a liar," Annabella said hotly. Vernogena regarded her for a long minute, evidently coming to some sort of decision.

"It shall be put to the test," she said at last. "We shall see whether you lie or whether you don't. Cernunnos will judge. Take them away." And she too made the sign of the horns.

Vernogena stood watching as the two young women were led away. Something nagged at her. Then it crystallised. The one with darker hair, the impertinent one... She had blue eyes... The last time the God had graced Vernogena with his presence months before, at the spring sacrifice of the white bulls, he had spoken of blue eyes, of seeking blue eyes.

She wondered briefly if there could be any possible connection, and if so, what to do about it, then dismissed the question. It would cease to have any relevance once the woman had been put to trial, blue eyes or not.

Chapter 3

It took some little time for Basil to realise the girls had vanished. He was caught up in the tsunami of sound pouring forth from the orchestra and the stage as the opera built to its soul-wrenching climax and then, like everyone else, he surrendered to long moments of hushed, disbelieving silence as the last reverberations faded away, finally to be overwhelmed by the frantic storm of applause that shook La Scala to its foundations.

At last he turned to share the moment with Annabella.

She wasn't there.

She was gone.

And Vivienne.

His first thought was that they must have slipped out to the ladies. But surely not, not during such a finale, such a torrent of rawest emotion. Nevertheless, he arrowed out the door at the back of the box and began hunting through the nearest lavatories.

Nothing.

He began to panic and set himself to search the whole vast building systematically.

Still nothing.

Now Basil was deeply afraid. A great throbbing pulse of fear pounded through him. Annabella's disappearance was inexplicable and in Basil's world, the Other World, inexplicable was the most frightening word of all. He then did the only thing he could.

Basil found the Sheikh in his cavern, occupied with the many difficulties of the Goldberg Variations. His piano sounded as glorious as ever, though somehow, having been violated, not quite the same. He was extremely irritated to be interrupted then something of Basil's wild distress began to penetrate. It took time but eventually the Sheikh came into possession of the salient facts, the most significant of which was that both Annabella and Vivienne had disappeared without trace. Eventually, the two, father and son, were left with nothing but disconsolate silence. Neither could find anything further to say for what seemed like hours. At last Basil stirred.

"Pater," he said hesitantly. "Your reception for Annabella... Did Aunt Jamina say anything about her afterwards?"

"No," the Sheikh said absently. "Why should she?"

"And that doesn't strike you as being jolly peculiar?" Basil went on.

"Why should it?" the Sheikh said again but with a guilty start, his mind now forcibly directed back to the only conversation he had had with Jamina about Annabella.

"Aunt Jamina hates my...friends," Basil said. "Always, huge jolly ructions. Jolly hell to pay. But not with Annabella. I've only just realised. Aunt Jamina made you have that reception. And she jolly well marched Annabella off for an inquisition. Then nothing. Not a word. Not to me. And not to you..." The Sheikh shifted uncomfortably.

"Not a word," Basil repeated. "And now Annabella vanishes. One second she is right beside me and the next she disappears. Into thin air."

"What are you saying?" the Sheikh asked, though he knew perfectly well. "Be very careful, very, very careful, before you go making accusations about Jamina."

"I'm right," Basil said slowly. "I'm right, aren't I? I'm jolly well right."

The Sheikh said nothing, though he was deeply disturbed, knowing rather more than Basil could guess.

They went at it for the better part of the night, Basil more and more convinced, the Sheikh more and more uncomfortable, impressed by his son's certainty on the one hand but equally unwilling to jump to conclusions about Jamina, his sister, without proof, even though he might fear the worst. Finally Basil completely lost his temper.

"You have a choice, Pater," he shouted. "Either you talk to Aunt Jamina, or I will."

"She'll demolish you," the Sheikh warned.

"Then..." Basil said invitingly, now determined to force the issue to a conclusion.

"She will deny it," the Sheikh said.

"A formal convocation, then..."

"She will still deny it."

"Lie to a formal convocation? Perjure herself...?"

"I don't really think we need quite to go to those lengths, not yet." The Sheikh was even more uncomfortable.

"It is my right..."

"And she is my sister. And your aunt."

"Not any more. Not after what she's done."

"You don't know that."

"I do," Basil said adamantly. "I abso-jolly-lutely do." There was a long, abrasive silence.

"One or the other," Basil insisted at last.

"Very well," the Sheikh capitulated with very bad grace. "I'll talk to her."

"And I'll come too."

"That won't be necessary."

"Or I will demand a convocation..."

Annabella and Vivienne were herded down another corridor and out into a walled courtyard. It was lined with a dozen or so crude cages constructed from broad oak slats and roughly roofed with hide which might provide some sort of shelter from the sun but which would be little enough protection against rain. The gate to the first cage on the left was standing open and the girls were shoved inside with scant ceremony.

"Well that went well..." Vivienne muttered, and then: "I'm starving... And dying of thirst..."

"Who are you?" a voice said to their left, a male voice. It sounded younger rather than older. "What did you do?"

"Nothing!" Annabella said, still in a fine temper. "We've done absolutely nothing! Who are you?"

"Maracatos," the voice said. "Maracatos of the Remi. A prisoner. We are all prisoners here. Condemned prisoners."

"They think we're spies," Vivienne remarked.

"But we haven't been condemned," Annabella objected.

"You will be," Maracatos said and added cynically: "Just now, the demand for sacrifices exceeds supply."

"Why?" Vivienne asked. She took a tentative step or two towards the slats of the cage nearest the voice. Through the gaps she could see an indistinct figure reclining in a patch of shade. It was very dark in contrast to the afternoon sun and she could see little of whomever it might be addressing them.

"War," Maracatos said cryptically.

"War?"

"Where are you from that you are so remarkably ignorant...? The moon?"

"We are strangers here," Annabella said by way of excuse. "Why does war mean sacrifices? And do you mean human sacrifices?"

"War is what a warrior lives for, dies for and is born again for. But to make certain of being reborn, it is well to be well with the gods..."

"You mean sacrifice someone?" Annabella said. "Buy reincarnation with somebody else's life?"

"I mean: get a Druid to do it for you. It must be done by a Druid."

"How do they do it?" Vivienne asked with horrified fascination. She could make out that Maracatos shrugged

"Take your pick," he said. "The threefold death is common. The blood spray is useful... But if times are really bad, there is the Wicker Man."

Annabella and Vivienne looked at each other with rising alarm. Wicker Man? Both decided they would rather not know.

"The blood spray..." Vivienne ventured.

"Those skilled in the art can tell the future from the way it falls," Maracatos said negligently. "First you are strangled to increase the pressure of flow from the heart, then your throat is slashed to release the fountain, then your head is crushed so the thrashing of your body does not distort the pattern."

"And you think this can tell you the future?" Annabella said with disgust. Maracatos shrugged again.

"Why not?" he said. Both Annabella and Vivienne found themselves lost for words. Their morale was pretty much at rock bottom and they turned to each other for comfort, huddling together on the bare ground.

The shadows of dusk were deep in the courtyard when two jailers appeared bearing food. One guard stood poised with a spear at the ready while the other unlocked the gates one by one and deposited bread and water on the ground inside the cells.

Annabella and Vivienne fell on the loaf. They could hear the sounds of movement from next door and on down the line as the other prisoners roused themselves.

The food helped and Annabella, somewhat renewed, turned again to questioning Maracatos.

"How do you come to be here?" she asked. "Why are you a prisoner?"

"I was careless... I was captured..." The voice was definitely that of a young man.

"But you're a Gaul, aren't you?" Annabella said, puzzled. "Why would they make you a prisoner?"

"I told you, I am of the Remi." There was unmistakable pride in his voice. Annabella and Vivienne looked at each other.

"We don't understand," Annabella said at last. "Aren't the Remi Gauls, too?"

"Certainly," Maracatos said. "But we keep faith, not like these southern scum. We are loyal to the Romans. We always will be... We made peace and we don't turn and stab them in the back, the moment it suits us..."

"Where do you come from?" Vivienne asked, joining the conversation. "Where are your lands?"

"To the north. The great plains to the north. We are horse people. The best horse people in the world. And our oppidum, our capital Durocortum, is the best oppidum in the world..."

"And you're the best boaster in the world..." Vivienne remarked without stopping to think. There was a strained silence until Maracatos burst into laughter, genuine laughter.

"It's true," he said when he could speak. "Gauls are the best drinkers, the best fighters, the best lovers and the best boasters in all the world..."

"How were you captured?" Annabella asked curiously.

"Ambush. I was sent with a message to the Romans. I was on my way home. I was tired..." Maracatos shrugged invisibly.

"Aren't you too young to be sent off on your own through the enemy?" Vivienne asked incautiously, having learned nothing from her previous faux pas.

"What do you mean, too young?" Maracatos bristled. "I am a man. I am a warrior."

"Why didn't they just kill you?" Annabella said by way of diversion.

"My father is one of the chief men of Durocortum. Vercingetorix thought to bring pressure, and through my father pressure on all the Remi."

"But...?" Vivienne said.

"But my father is an honourable man," Maracatos said, an unreadable tone in his voice.

"I'm sorry," Annabella said for want of anything better.

"No reason to be," Maracatos said. "In his place, I would have done the same and I'll just have to be more careful not to get caught next time around."

"Next time around?" Vivienne said. "You really believe that? Reincarnation...?"

"Of course," he said. "How could I not believe it...? It's not unknown to volunteer for sacrifice, you know." Annabella and Vivienne rolled their eyes at each other. A related question occurred to Annabella.

"What's with the heads?" she asked. "Why do they keep people's heads in there?"

Maracatos stood up and came to stand close to the bars separating them. They could now see that he, too, in what they were coming to accept was characteristic of the Gauls, was tall, well over six feet, and young as he was – Annabella guessed 18 or 19 – built accordingly. He remained there, contemplating them for some time in the failing light.

"You look filthy," he said. "Like Romans."

"So sorry," Vivienne said, nettled. She was unaccustomed to men being anything but complimentary.

"Why do they keep those heads?" Annabella persisted. Maracatos shrugged.

"To preserve the power of the people they belonged to," he said with something of the air of instructing a child.

"We're filthy because something chased us through the forest," Vivienne protested petulantly. "And no one will let us wash. Don't you people know about washing?" It was Maracatos's turn to be offended.

"Gauls wash morning and night," he said. "It is the Romans who don't wash." Suddenly, big and all as he was, nonchalant and all as he strove to be, Maracatos sounded about twelve years old. He moved away from them and a minute or two later they could hear him whispering to whomever it was in the cage on his other side.

They came for Annabella and Vivienne long after dark. Torches suddenly flared in the courtyard. There was the sound of heavy footsteps, harsh voices. The gate to their cage was flung open and they were dragged out unceremoniously and frogmarched off into the night.

Their escort of brawny Gauls took them straight out of the temple compound and on down a thoroughfare leading towards the centre of the oppidum. They passed houses, some showing a gleam of light, but mostly the buildings were shops, shuttered and dark. They began to hear the rumour of a crowd.

"I don't like this Annabella," Vivienne managed to gasp. "I don't like this at all. I'm frightened..."

"You think I'm not?" Annabella replied with some difficulty as they were being hustled along. This time, no one showed the least concern for their feet. Annabella's missing finger was pulsing hard now, pulsing with fear.

"Silence!" one of the guards said raising the haft of a spear threateningly.

They rounded a corner and came to an area packed with people who fell back on their arrival to form a corridor. Vernogena was waiting for them, flanked by a number of priests, including the plump Druid of their first encounter. They were lit by the flare of torches and standing beside some sort of low-walled oblong, perhaps 10 metres long by five metres wide. As the girls were brought closer, they saw light was being reflected from the polished black surface contained within the walls. A wisp of breeze set the reflections dancing and they realised they were looking at water in an open cistern.

The crowd murmur hushed to an expectant silence.

Vivienne was held back slightly and Annabella was forced to her knees with her arms hauled up high behind her so that she had to strain to see. Vernogena stepped forward.

"You are charged with lying to the Chief Druid," Vernogena began in a ringing voice.

"I'm not lying...!" Annabella interrupted, again, on the instant, furious.

"Silence!" But Annabella was not to be stopped so easily.

"...This is just what you'd expect from a bunch of uncivilised savages..."

"Silence!" the Druid repeated, rapidly losing her own temper. "You will be silent!"

"Or what?" Annabella shouted back, breathing heavily. "Vernogena... Born of a tree, thick as a tree..." The play on the Druid's name had been irresistible. Equally, it was unforgivable. The crowd gasped. Vivienne was stricken. Annabella was usually the restrained one, the sensible one, yet here she was carrying on like some apprentice fishwife.

"Sacrilege...!" voices came from the back. "She commits sacrilege..."

"Gag her," Vernogena commanded.

There was a moment of futile resistance, but in short order Annabella's hands had been bound behind her and a rag thrust into her mouth. There was a long pause as Vernogena took stock. Finally she drew breath:

"You have been charged with lying to the Chief Druid," she repeated, biting off the words. "This will be put to the trial. Cernunnos will judge." The crowd sighed.

"Proceed!" Vernogena ordered.

Annabella was dragged to the side of the cistern. Two more ropes were produced. One was used to bind her feet and then tether them to a large circular millstone with a hole through the centre that somebody rolled forward. The second rope was looped around her waist. Her mind was in turmoil the while. At the deep primal level it throbbed with a fear that spread through her body, setting her missing finger to pulsing urgently, turning her bowels to water, her legs to jelly. Even so, with the top of her mind she was also able to consider the situation with some sort of intellectual curiosity. What would be the effect of al iksir? She didn't believe she was about to die. After all, Hassan-i Sabbāh had lived untold years in the boiling mud of the Baluchistan volcano. Nevertheless, how he had been able to endure was as much a mystery now as ever it had been. How she might survive, as she was reasonably sure she would, was equally unknowable.

The crowd till then had been mostly silent and contained. Now, suddenly, it was rapidly degenerating into a lynch mob and beginning to bay for blood. People were pressing in a tight ring right around the cistern, leaving only a small area clear for the prisoners and the priests. Individuals were cat-calling and the clamour quickly solidified into a guttural chant.

"Spy! Spy! Spy...! Drown! Drown! Drown...!"

Vernogena made a signal and from somewhere a carnyx sounded. She raised her arms, and then her voice:

"Cernunnos! Cernunnos! Cernunnos! You are summoned to judge. To reveal the truth. Show us what is in this woman's heart. Will you have her float and confirm her guilt? Or in her innocence, will you have her sink. O Cernunnos! To you is the judgement."

At another signal from Vernogena, the carnyx sounded again. Annabella was raised high by the priests. The great stone was lowered into the water which rippled malevolently and then with a resounding cry from the mob and a large splash, Annabella was dropped in after it. For a fraction of a second, she seemed to float, buoyed by her clothes. Then, her face a rictus of horror, she was drawn inexorably down beneath the surface. There was silence now except for the sound of Vivienne sobbing wordlessly.

Pain. Here was pain. Only pain. The burning, nerve-shredding pain of a body starving for oxygen, every fibre shrieking for relief, for air, for life.

Or death.

If not life, there must be death.

The body was dying. It couldn't not be dying.

Her brain must capitulate. It couldn't not capitulate.

She must die. She must. Now! Surrender. One last inhalation. One last breath. One last lungful of water to end the agony.

Annabella swallowed.

Now! Let me die now.

Please. Please!

Al iksir...

Pain. Pain! Pain unimaginable. Pain unendurable. Pain unending.

Living. Still living. Living forever.

No! No!

Dying then, dying. Dying forever.

The mob gave a collective sigh and began to reconstitute itself into a crowd of individuals variously satisfied, indifferent, ashamed. At a nod from Vernogena, a priest moved forward and began to haul on the rope still tied to Annabella's waist. Slowly he heaved it in. Finally her body broke the surface, lying face down in the water. He drew it to the side of the cistern, bent down and, grasping her shoulder, rolled her over. For a moment he stared uncomprehendingly, then he began to shriek.

Annabella's intense blue eyes were wide open, perhaps not so surprising, but they were also aware, focused and boring deep into his soul. She tried to spew water through the gag and it poured out her nose.

Vivienne broke from the lax grasp of her captor, rushed forward and seized Annabella, struggling to free the gag.

"Help me!" she demanded of the world at large. "Help me!"

Nobody moved. The crowd had congealed into frozen disbelief.

"Help me!" Vivienne howled, on the edge of hysteria. Somewhere there was a stirring then people began to move aside as Suicca pushed her way through, reluctantly followed by her mother.

Together with Vivienne they managed to lift Annabella, still weighted down by the stone and now her sodden clothing, high enough to drag her over the cistern wall. Vivienne tore the rest of the gag away and began to struggle with the swollen knots still binding Annabella. She was pushed aside by Gesataia who pulled a small iron dagger from her belt and began to saw at the rope.

"How can this be?" she muttered to Vivienne. "How can she possibly still be alive?"

Stuck for any sort of sensible answer, Vivienne was reduced to saying: "I don't know... I really don't know..."

But Vernogena was in no doubt.

"Witchcraft!" she shrieked, making the sign of Cernunnos. "Witchcraft!" Later, she would again wonder if this...witch with the staring blue eyes could have anything to do with the girl of the blue eyes the God had said he was seeking. She eventually concluded with relieved satisfaction that if this were indeed the case, then Cernunnos would have his chance on the morrow.

Annabella and Vivienne were back in their cage in the temple compound, bruised, buffeted, breathless from the manhandling of the mob, on the one hand frightened to touch them but on the other disposed to treat them excessively roughly because of it. The cage, for the moment at least, was a blessed refuge.

Annabella was shaking violently from cold and reaction, crouched in a huddle in a corner, her eyes black pits. Vivienne stared at her helplessly in the faint glow from a cresset somewhere and was on the point of stripping off the remains of her own dress in an attempt somehow to warm Annabella, however futile the gesture might be. She was reaching behind for the zip when a voice stopped her.

"Give her this," Maracatos said. His hand was poking through the slats, holding out his tunic. "At least she's clean now..."

"Why...?" Vivienne began but then took the offering gratefully and turned to Annabella. Not caring over much about the niceties, she stripped off Annabella's remaining rags and pulled the shirt, still faintly warm, over her head, chafing and rubbing to restore circulation. Slowly Annabella's shaking turned to shivering, then faded to the occasional shudder.

Vivienne turned back to Maracatos.

"Thank you," she said. "Thank you for helping. But aren't you afraid of us, like all the others?" Unseen, Maracatos shrugged.

"I'm to be sacrificed," he said. "Remember? Witchcraft can't touch me when I'm dead."

"It wasn't witchcraft," Vivienne said crossly.

"Well, what was it then?" Vivienne could only shake her head.

"She didn't float?" Maracatos persisted. Chatter among the mob had given him a fair idea of what had occurred.

"No..."

"So she wasn't lying?"

"No."

"And she didn't drown?"

"No."

"How can that be possible and not be witchcraft?" Vivienne hesitated. What could she say that wouldn't make matters worse?

"An evil man..." she said at last, almost whispering. "A magus...forced her to take al iksir. It gives eternal life..." There was a long, long silence as Maracatos attempted to digest the import of her words. Vivienne turned again to Annabella who was watching her now, her eyes enormous.

"I don't understand," Maracatos said.

"Nobody does," Vivienne answered for Annabella. "She didn't drown, despite their best efforts, because of magic – but somebody else's magic, not hers. She's not a witch."

"Well that won't stop them."

"Stop them what?"

Maracatos paused and before he could say more, Annabella spoke.

"You're going to ask what happened?" she said to Vivienne in an unreadable voice. "Don't...!"

"No, of course not," Vivienne said gently. "Not if you don't want me to..."

"I was dying," Annabella said, now speaking low and fast. "I really was dying, except I couldn't. I wanted to. It hurt so much. I was desperate to die. But I couldn't. It just went on and on. Forever. The dying went on and on... It wouldn't stop. Vivienne... It wouldn't stop! The dying never will stop. What can I do? What can I do...? I can't bear it. Not again. What can I do...?"

Annabella fell silent then. Vivienne could feel her shoulders trembling and pulled her in close, trying to soothe, to comfort. At last she quieted but still Vivienne held her, ignoring the cramping in her shoulders, the numbness in her arm. Finally, when it seemed Annabella had mercifully fallen asleep, Vivienne eased herself clear and went to stand next to Maracatos's cell.

"What will they do?" she whispered.

"Tomorrow is the full moon," Maracatos whispered back, choosing to answer obliquely. As he spoke Vivienne realised that the jail yard outside was in fact quite bright. Indeed, she could catch glimpses of Maracatos's gleaming torso through the slats.

"You'll catch cold," she said inconsequentially. "Without your shirt..."

"I'm all right," he said. "It doesn't matter. It won't be for long."

"What do you mean... Not for long? What's the full moon got to do with anything...?"

"It is the time of sacrifice. I will die. You both will die. Others..."

Annabella woke with the dawn. She was wearing some strange garment. Then she remembered, the boy in the next cage had given her his shirt. Vivienne was curled beside her, her breath rasping slightly. Panic engulfed her then as she came fully awake. She was back in the cistern, drowning, begging for the dying to end, begging to be allowed to go...

Al iksir was the great lie, the great fraud. It was not the elixir of eternal living but the elixir of eternal dying, eternal damnation. Annabella's parents had wondered once why Jābir ibn Hayyān – Geber – who had transcribed the formula for al iksir in *The Book of Stones* had apparently never taken it himself. Annabella knew. She knew now. Geber, the wise man of his age, had been sufficiently wise to recognise al iksir for what it truly was: the Janus potion, two-faced, double-edged, eternally deceitful.

The thought of what Hassan-i Sabbāh must have suffered for so long in the boiling mud of the volcano in Baluchistan was beyond comprehension. Insane before ever taking al iksir, it was small wonder that Hassan-i Sabbāh had become the demented fiend of his final days. For Annabella the fate now staring her in the face was equally beyond comprehension. Hassan-i Sabbāh's vengeance, she was forced to realise, was truly complete, and in leading him to Leviathan, she had actually granted him the greatest of boons. An end. Quittance. Death finally. But how could she possibly achieve the same escape for herself?

Chapter 4

Orders might be orders, but that didn't change the fact that this last march had been a nightmare, a total nightmare. Picking their way across country in the moonlight had been bad enough, but then Biturix, the native guide, so-called, had insisted that it was becoming altogether too dangerous, that the closer they came to settled country the greater the probability of encountering superior enemy patrols. Accordingly, undoubtedly with malice aforethought, he had made them take to the forest. Oak trees? Who knew, but whatever they were they whipped and tore with casual, dispassionate savagery, impossible to avoid in the blackness under the canopy now the moon was down. And who knew what else might be hidden in here. Wolves... Bears without a doubt... Boars... Ure? An aurochs was by far the most dangerous of the wild beasts...

The tormenting forest seemed endless, gods-rotted endless, but at last the trees began to thin and there were glimpses to be had of the clear starlit sky. Finally, here was the edge. Dawn was breaking, revealing farmland stretching before them, grey and indistinct. Some way off to one side there seemed to be a stream. On the other, the ground rose steeply, bulking dark against the sky. It could only be the plateau that protected Gergovia.

Quintus Otho Petronus drew rein, raising his right hand as he did so, confident there was now sufficient light for the file of cavalry behind him to see the signal and not trample over the top of him. He was tired to the point of exhaustion and thoroughly out of sorts, torn and scratched in a score of places. Even before the hell of penetrating the forest it had been a long hard ride. His men were equally tired and dispirited, which was just as well. At the start of this mission they had been close to outright mutiny, having been forbidden the delights of sacking Avaricum and instead dispatched on the instant into the dangerous hinterland to shadow Vercingetorix and report on his fleeing army. They had been at it for weeks and thoughts of mutiny or, more likely now, desertion tended to ebb and flow according to the amount of energy the men might have at any given moment.

Quintus eased his aching back then beckoned to Biturix. Allegedly he was a still loyal Aedui. Quintus, however, had no intention of ever letting Biturix get behind him.

"Decurion?" Biturix said in his barbarous pig Latin.

"How far to the oppidum?" Biturix scratched at his beard in the most disrespectful possible manner. He shrugged unhelpfully.

"How far?" Quintus insisted.

"Three mile, four..."

"Roman miles?"

Biturix spat, which Quintus took as an affirmative. He turned to his duplicarius.

"Take two men. Set up a surveillance post where you can watch the road. Don't get caught. You know what they do to prisoners."

The duplicarius muttered a curse under his breath, something Quintus thought distressingly unmilitary, and nodded resignedly. He designated two reluctant

volunteers and, leaving their horses, they followed Biturix, disappearing into a dip in the ground. Quintus watched until they reappeared and then led the rest of the turma back into the forest, far enough to be undetectable to anybody who might happen to be passing. Selecting the least uncomfortable of the tree trunks on offer for himself, he delegated care of his horse and settled down for a desperately needed nap.

The distant noise of Vercingetorix's army on the march penetrated clearly into the forest some time around mid-morning. Creeping back to the edge of the trees, Quintus was able to follow the sound from right to left until it faded as the troops rounded the shoulder of the plateau and began the climb. Sometime later his duplicarius, Biturix and the two troopers reappeared. They looked shaken.

"How many?" Quintus demanded. The duplicarius grimaced.

"Twelve legions," he said. "Maybe fourteen..." It was pretty much what Quintus was expecting, but he whistled quietly all the same. Somewhere between 60,000 and 70,000 men...

He detailed a strong patrol and sent it off with Biturix to find Caesar and relay the intelligence. Vercingetorix and his whole army, give or take, were confirmed encamped in Gergovia, finally brought to bay after the long chase along the Allier River.

Then, leaving pickets on watch, he led the rest of his men far back into the forest to set up some sort of bivouac and to await the unfolding of events as comfortably as possible. At one point they were forced to skirt a deep and precipitous ravine for some distance. It had sides so sheer and the bottom was so dark that it was impossible to make out that it was carpeted with bones, human skeletons. Quintus certainly paid it no particular attention. There was no reason he should.

He spent the day brooding. His career, such as it was, had stagnated and with little family influence behind him back in Rome, it looked very much as though it might continue to remain as torpid as pond scum. Family pull had been just sufficient to contrive his secondment to Caesar's army but beyond that it would not stretch. What Quintus needed was a coup de main, something to bring his undeniably superior qualities to the notice of his superiors. But thus far, his superiors had been sufficiently unimpressed that all opportunity for such a coup had resolutely been denied him. It was a dilemma, a seemingly insoluble dilemma. How to distinguish himself, how to stand out from the ruck when fate seemed determined to keep him on detached duty where ipso facto he remained invisible?

Vivienne woke late, exhausted by the events of the previous night. For some little time she was mazed and confused. Why was she lying on the bare ground? What were those bar things silhouetted against the light? Where was she?

She lifted her head and saw Annabella crouched in the furthest corner, hunched protectively like some small beast at bay. Her face was white and drawn, her eyes hooded.

Memory slammed into Vivienne like an axe handle to the back of the head. Oh God...!

She crawled across to Annabella, prised free one of the hands with which she was clutching at her elbows, and gentled it in her own. It was ice cold. Vivienne couldn't think of a single thing to say.

A voice came from one side. It was Maracatos.

"They will bring food, soon," he said. "It will help."

It did.

At first, Vivienne had to coax Annabella like some unwilling infant just to take a mouthful of water, but then she began to eat and, with some food inside her, to function, at least a little.

When it was plain that she had had sufficient, Vivienne opened her mouth to speak but Annabella forestalled her.

"Please," she said in English. "I don't want to talk about it. I can't talk about it. Not ever..."

Vivienne bit off what she was going to say. Annabella subsided back into her protective huddle and Vivienne could think of nothing further to help ease her pain.

"What language was that?" Maracatos asked after a respectful pause.

"English," Vivienne said without thinking.

"English?"

"The language we speak in Britain...Will speak in Britain..."

"Will? What do you mean will?"

Vivienne paused. What should she say? Should she say anything? Then she shrugged. Things could hardly be made any worse.

"You wouldn't believe me..." she said.

"Try me," Maracatos said. "At least it will pass the time." Again Vivienne paused, for so long that Maracatos was on the point of turning away.

"We come from the future," she said at last. "A long time in the future. Two thousand years..." Maracatos stared at her.

"You're right," he said eventually. "I don't believe you."

Vivienne shrugged, but then suddenly it seemed important that he should. The rags she had removed from Annabella the night before were still lying where she had dropped them. Inspiration came to her. She scuffled through them, found what she wanted and went across to Maracatos.

"Look at this," she said through the bars. "Have you ever seen anything like it." She held up the still surviving zipper from the bodice of the dress and demonstrated its function. She passed it through the bars and let Maracatos examine it, the tiny, intricate teeth, the slider, the miraculous way the one caused the others to interlock.

"Gently," she said as Maracatos played with it. "It's not very strong... But then I suppose it doesn't matter if you break it... Couldn't matter less..."

"But it does matter," Maracatos said wonderingly. "This is...amazing..." He ran his finger down one side, feeling the serrations. "The..."

"Teeth," Vivienne supplied.

"...Are so small but so...identical. Gaul has the best metal smiths in the world but they could not begin to make something like this. It must be rare beyond price." He fiddled admiringly with the tiny hook and eye that provided security.

"No," Vivienne said. "In the world I come from they're as common as...buttons..." The thought gave her another idea. She riffled through the discarded clothing again. "Look at this... I know you have buttons, I saw them on your shirt...tunic. But I bet you've never seen one this small." She nipped it off with her teeth and passed it across. Maracatos took it reverently.

"So small," he said finally, holding the tiny black button up to the light. "What is it made from. I have never seen the like of this..." He moved his thumb and forefinger gently across it, feeling the slick smoothness.

"It's just plastic," Vivienne said. "Nothing special."

"Not special...!"

"Keep it, if you like."

"I may keep it?"

"If you like it," Vivienne repeated. "And the zipper. Give it to your girlfriend."

"Girlfriend?"

"A girl you like, who likes you. Who might want to live with you, marry you..." Maracatos stared at her.

"There is no one," he said eventually.

"But I expect there will be," Vivienne said and then realised her stupidity. Maracatos smiled gently at her embarrassment.

"Will you be my...girlfriend?" he asked shyly. "Just for the day... For the rest of the day...?" He held out his hand through the bars. Hesitating for a moment, Vivienne took it. It was strong, virile, callused by long hours wielding weapons, a good hand. Something, a current, seemed to pass between them. Maracatos made to start back but Vivienne held on and refused to release him. At last she let him go.

"Give me the button," she said. "I want to do something for you." Questioningly, Maracatos handed the tiny object back, careful not to drop it. Vivienne again went to Annabella's castoffs and after a struggle, managed to draw out a long black silken thread. She laced it through the button and then knotted it, at last handing it back to Maracatos.

"To go round your neck," she said. The young man blushed endearingly, and then looped Vivienne's offering over his head.

"Now I'm properly your girlfriend," she said.

The food had indeed restored some vitality to Annabella but on balance this made things worse, not better, only sharpening her focus, her obsession, with the knowledge haunting her. The thought of what must inevitably come – endless dying – was impossible to bear but equally impossible to escape.

At first, she heard nothing of the exchanges between Vivienne and Maracatos, but slowly the sense of what they were saying began to seep into her consciousness.

Somewhere in her mind there was even the merest glimmer of wry amusement. Then Vivienne made her offering to the condemned man and all at once Annabella was triggered into a paroxysm of tormented grief.

Until now she had been able to suppress, to put a bulwark between herself and the overpowering sense of bereavement at her summary separation from Basil, more than likely never to be resolved. Vivienne's gesture to a lonely young man – a frightened young man however bravely he might be conducting himself – stripped her defences absolutely bare. Now she was exposed not only to terror of the future but also to the catastrophic loss of the past, of all that was most dear, her soulmate.

She dissolved into primal despair.

Vivienne rushed to her and tried to hold, to comfort, but Annabella beat her away, flailing and writhing, rendered uncontrollable by a hurricane of emotion. Vivienne persisted, however, eventually trapping one arm, then the other and holding on for dear life as Annabella stormed and raged, rocked and heaved, locked in the grip of wordless anguish.

It went on no one knew how long. Maracatos watched helpless, his own distress the greater for his impotence. Vivienne fought with all her strength to limit Annabella's hysteria, to save her from beating herself into a pulp. It was the sort of fit that the worst sufferers of the grand mal might experience – frenzied in its intensity; ferocious in the force unleashed; blackly fearsome in the depth of grief revealed. Vivienne had no thought of what she else could do but to hold on, to ride it out and hope to bring Annabella to the other side.

It passed, eventually, as all storms do. Slowly the upheavals became shuddering, the shuddering shivers, and eventually they too stilled. Again Vivienne riffled through the remains of Annabella's dress until she found a relatively clean corner. She held it out.

"Blow," she commanded. Annabella did, clumsily, uncoordinated, like some dutiful three-year-old. Her face was blank, drained, empty.

"Sweetheart," Vivienne said, her voice so gentle, so loving. "We'll get through this... We'll be all right..." Annabella made no response. She seemed to have sunk to some place so deep within herself that Vivienne, fighting back her own despair, had to wonder if she would ever surface again.

She eased Annabella, unresisting, back against the wall, tried to make her comfortable and then sat with her arm about her shoulders, holding her close. In time Annabella's eyes closed and if not actually asleep, she was at least quiescent.

Vivienne rose and went to stand at the front of the cell, holding the bars and gazing sightlessly out into the sunshine.

My, my, my... We are feeling jolly sorry for ourselves... The voice was like an electric current arcing through Annabella's brain. Shocking. Galvanising. Thrilling.

You've found me, she said wonderingly and then, switching instantly to anger: *You took your time. Where have you been?*

Um...

Um what? Don't you um me...

Um...

Um what for goodness sake?

Um... You don't get it?

Get what? Talk sense, Basil?

Um... There was a long, long pause.

You're not actually here, are you? Annabella said at last.

Um...

Are you?

Um, no. Not as such...

Meaning... Meaning I'm inventing you. Meaning... I've gone crazy?

I wouldn't go quite that far... Not crazy... At least not crazy crazy...

Just hearing things... Voices... You'll be wanting me to do an axe murder next...

Abso-jolly-lutely not. I'm from the government and I'm here to help you... Listen, beloved, you can sink into despair again because I'm not real or you can jolly well accept me as I am, accept my help, accept what your mind is offering you and get on with things...

"Your friend is very upset," Maracatos whispered. He, too, had come to stand at the front of the cages, staring out at freedom.

"Yes," Vivienne said, and then: "I'm so worried. I've never seen her like this. She's the strongest person I have ever known, ever heard of... And I've never seen her like this."

"Will she be all right?"

"I've no idea," Vivienne snapped, her own distress sharpening her words. "But it's not going to matter, is it? Not after tonight?" Abruptly she was confronted with her own mortality, her own looming death. Who could say what Annabella's fate might be, but one thing was certain; there was no doubt about her own impending end. She staggered a little, shaken by the sudden awareness that in a few short hours, she at least would be dead.

Maracatos reached out a comforting hand and took her by the elbow. Vivienne resisted a moment then turned so that with both of them pressed up against the bars Maracatos's arms could encircle her.

They stayed like that for a long time. At last Maracatos whispered:

"You are so beautiful... You are so beautiful, Cernunnos must surely grant you a new life."

Quintus could sense the men growing restless. They were less tired now and fed, after a fashion. How long they might have to wait for orders was unguessable and Quintus began to worry that the turma might start to slip out of his control. Literally, through the forest to some sort of illusory freedom. And before going, someone might just think to slip a knife into his back to ease the passage of their passing. He shifted his shoulder blades and pressed them closer to the tree behind.

Overhead, through glimpses in the canopy, the sky was darkening rapidly. Down on the ground beneath the trees, it was already black night and Quintus was uncomfortably aware that it promised to be an exceedingly long one. He wondered if he dared to let himself sleep...

Sometime later – how long, he had no idea – he woke with a start. A legionary was shaking his shoulder. Silently, Quintus cursed himself and then thanked Jupiter that he still could. Perhaps thoughts of the fustuarium might deter his men from murdering him but Quintus doubted it, even though he had once witnessed such an execution and the memory still made him sweat. The victim had been bound to a post set into the ground and the two executioners, hefting hardwood cudgels, had taken up position on either side. First one then the other would swing with maximum force. They had started with the wretched man's feet and worked their way up, striking so hard that the crushed and splintered bones of his body glinted white in the sunlight where they were forced through the skin.

They had been skilful, those executioners. They were careful that the condemned legionary remain conscious for the whole, excruciating time. Even now, Quintus could hear the screaming, and the sudden silence when the last merciful blow to the head had finally finished the job.

But the men of his troop... If they had ever been present at a fustuarium themselves, they undoubtedly would have forgotten the horror of it by now; and if not, they would be quite unable ever to envision how being beaten to death might really feel. Quintus was convinced that with the possible exception of the duplicarius and one or two others, his men were absolutely incapable of anything so ambitious as imagination. And even if the punishment might rate as some sort of deterrent, the possibility of being executed in a singularly unpleasant fashion at some distant point in the future would scarcely weigh against present impulse.

"What?" Quintus hissed, recognising one of the men he had posted on guard at the edge of the forest. Unknown to Quintus, the man had been forced to make a long, slow detour to reach them.

"Sir, people..."

"People...? Where from...?" The sentry pointed vaguely in the direction of Gergovia.

"People..." Quintus repeated, at a loss. "How many people?"

"Hundreds, decurion. Thousands..."

Quintus leaped to his feet, seized with panic, then his training cut in.

"You, you and you," he said singling out three of his more reliable men, "come with me. The rest of you get the gear and the horses organised. Be ready to move on the instant."

He and his detail followed the sentry, again skirting the ravine they knew to be there, concealed in the shadows. They had not gone more than a couple of hundred paces when they blundered into the second of the two sentries Quintus had posted. He had abandoned his position in fear of his life. A full moon had now risen and in the faint light filtering down to ground level he looked as white as a ceremonial toga.

"What?" Quintus whispered. The man said nothing, just shivered and stared longingly past them to the safety of the deeper forest.

"Show me," Quintus demanded, still in a hoarse whisper. The man looked about to bolt. Quintus seized him by the elbow, swung him about and forced him to retrace his steps.

They had been given boots, or rather soft leather ankle moccasins with a central seam and adjustable lacing. Something to be thankful for, Vivienne supposed. Better at least than being forced to walk barefoot down the long weary road from Gergovia to the forest. Even so, the rough surface was sufficiently painful on her wounded feet to keep her mind off what lay ahead. The full moon hung close in the sky, large and threatening, picking out the countryside in stark relief, the sort of moon that set dogs howling, wolves prowling and men mad.

It seemed that the whole of Gergovia was following on behind the official party – the Druids, their victims-to-be and their guards. She, Annabella and the other prisoners were unfettered but ringed by a tight circle of brawny warriors, heavily armed. There was no possibility of escape.

In due course the road levelled out and they came again to the path which led to the forest, and to the clearing from which so recently they had fled in such panic. Until now Annabella, though functioning again after a fashion, had been withdrawn and unresponsive, absorbed within herself, but as they came closer and closer to the Grove, Vivienne could see her eyes begin to dart rapidly about, assuming a look of repressed fear, a look Vivienne had never seen before. Was it fear of what was to come? Or fear of the unknown being they had previously fled? Or both? Vivienne didn't know. She reached out a hand and tried to take Annabella's but she pulled it roughly away. Vivienne suddenly felt lost and abandoned, totally alone. A minute or two later Maracatos, sensitive to her feelings, slipped his own hand under her elbow. It was immensely comforting and she squeezed it gratefully.

The procession crossed the boundary from pasture to forest and picked its way through the trees. They came to the clearing much sooner than Vivienne had expected which was a measure of how far they had been driven in circles by whatever it was that had pursued them yesterday, only yesterday. And just moments before that, she and Annabella had been seated in a box at La Scala a couple of thousand years away, perfectly comfortable, perfectly safe. The thought made her want to weep.

The prisoners were led to the head of the clearing to be marshalled by the plump priest, waving his arms officiously and investing himself with a great deal of self-importance. Eventually they were corralled into a tight group standing behind the sacrificial altar – Vivienne was now certain this was the only thing the great stone slab could possibly be. The crowd of people following behind began to arrange themselves in semi-circular rows embracing the altar, the priests and their soon-to-be victims.

It took less time than seemed possible for the congregation to come to due order. It was a ritual to which they were obviously well accustomed. Silence fell, broken only by the distant churring of nightjars hunting insects out over the pasture beyond the trees. An owl hooted.

A man stepped forward from the front rank. He was typically Gaulish in stature, tall and broad. He had sweeping moustaches and wild unbound hair. He stood regarding the priests for a long minute, then turned about and raised his arms high. The congregation roared.

"Vercingetorix..." Maracatos murmured in Vivienne's ear. The man at last dropped his arms and turned about again to face the altar. Vernogena stepped forward and as she moved, the crowd sighed and began a melodic chant which rose and fell and which was endlessly repeated:

O Cernunnos, Cernunnos,
Come show us your light.
Come show us your horns.
Come show us your might.
Come drink of the blood.
Come eat of the flesh.
Come grant us the future.
Come grant us new life.
O Cernunnos, Cernunnos...

I suppose, ghost Basil began somewhat hesitantly. I suppose you've jolly well worked out just who this Cernunnos is, or rather what he is?

Are you going to go on doing this? Annabella demanded. *Just turn up whenever you feel like it?*

I think it's more of a case of me turning up when you feel like it... Annabella digested this and finally was forced to conclude, reluctantly, that a figment of her imagination was probably better than nothing, even if it did mean she was definitively schizophrenic, bipolar, just plain nuts, or all three together.

Cernunnos? she said at last.

He's a ghul. Not the Stag Lord. Not the Two-horned God. Just a ghul with good shtick... Gets lots of corpses without having to do much of anything. Annabella shifted suddenly, bringing a look from Vivienne. Of course, Annabella thought. A ghul. Just a ghul. Had they been in the desert, there would never have been any doubt. The question now was how powerful a ghul Cernunnos might be. Annabella still had vivid memories of Lilis, for instance.

The chanting reached a crescendo and the plump Druid, over-acting shamelessly, gestured at the guards surrounding the victims to part, allowing one of the captives to move forward, apparently voluntarily. He strode steadily forth, proud, unafraid and mounting the altar, stepped to the centre. He was joined by three of the vates. One held a garrotte, one a long polished knife and the third a stone hammer. The victim knelt, holding his arms wide, offering his throat. The chanting swelled, and swelled again. In smooth, practised rhythm, the first vates whipped the garrotte about the man's throat, constricting the arteries. When the victim's eyes began to bulge and just before he would no longer be able to hold himself still, the second vates passed his

knife across the bared flesh releasing a great geyser of blood to shoot high in the air then to patter down on the altar. The third vates waited for the fountain to reach full height and brought his hammer down from on high crushing the man's skull. The flow ceased on the instant, leaving only a slow welling from the gaping wound in the man's throat. The body was allowed to slump down backwards, finally to be rolled over the edge of the altar and left to lie a crumpled heap. The crowd sighed again and abruptly the chant stopped.

Vernogena made to mount the great sacrificial altar preparatory to examining the blood pattern with the chief vates. She never got there. Her raised foot was left suspended, forgotten, as a piercing shriek came from her left, somewhere just inside the ringing forest. It was followed instantly by panicked shouting. A moment later five figures burst from the trees and raced straight towards her.

Quintus had watched the thousands in the congregation assembling with mounting dread. It could only be a matter of moments before they were discovered. Several times he was about to signal his men to steal away, but resisted the temptation. Inevitably, if they tried to move back, one of his idiots would break a twig or clash his armour and then they would never escape. However fearful he was of discovery, he watched the execution of the first victim with stolid indifference. For a Roman soldier on campaign, death was an everyday occurrence and often a great deal more gruesome. This was nothing worth remarking on.

The body was rolled off the edge of the stone slab and discarded. The woman, the high priestess or whatever she was, made to step up, and then all hell broke loose. Lucanus Marcius, the most reliable of the men accompanying him, screamed – a high-pitched girlish scream, the sort of scream that only unalloyed terror could produce. Lucanus was staring behind him. The rest of the patrol turned as one, then all of them, shouting hysterically, broke cover and raced out into the clearing straight into the teeth of the enemy – whose only reaction was stunned surprise then hysteria on their own account.

The Romans fled headlong straight towards the altar, bowling aside the woman and the other attendants, hurdled the slab and disappeared into the forest on the other side of the clearing. They were pursued by a quivering apparition which never quite resolved into a recognisable shape but which gave a confused impression of muscular limbs, a glowering visage and menacing antlers.

It stopped short when it saw Annabella and made to round on her. She regarded it steadily, unflinchingly.

"Cernunnos...!" Annabella addressed him. Her voice fell into one of those crystalline moments of silence that can only be generated by numberless people simultaneously holding their breath. The name rang across the clearing.

"Cernunnos!" Annabella repeated. "I know you. You're not a god, you're just a ghul. You're a fraud... You don't frighten me." The creature hesitated for a split second, marked again Annabella's intense blue eyes, plain in the moonlight, then resumed its pursuit of the soldiers. The blue eyes would keep even though they had already escaped him once. Iblis would understand that hunger was the greater imperative.

Cernunnos! That one word, its indisputable truth, was enough to trigger general mayhem: Romans spying on the Sacred Grove... On the sacred ceremony... Desecrating the altar... Assaulting the Chief Druid... Enraging the Stag Lord by violating his sanctuary...

The portents were disastrous, something with which no man or woman in their right mind would dare to be associated. Instinctively people began to rush for the sheltering trees and flight instantly degenerated into a panic-stricken stampede. Run! Run! Run for your lives!

It was though a dam had burst, engulfing everything before it with a torrent of people, clawing at each other, trampling over the fallen, frantic to escape the Grove and the dread presence of Cernunnos rampant, Cernunnos enraged, whose imminent reappearance must doubtless herald catastrophe.

Annabella and Vivienne stood fast, watching in amazement the instant collapse of what moments before had been a highly structured and choreographed ceremony. The priests ran. Vernogena ran. Vercingetorix ran. The guards ran, fighting for precedence with their prisoners, whose possible escape they were supposed to be preventing. The whole world ran. Maracatos also ran...but stopped. He glanced over his shoulder at the two young women standing apparently unafraid and slowly, uncertainly, returned.

Annabella waited, then speaking quietly and firmly, said: "This way." She led them at an angle to the direction the Romans had taken but at the same time deeper into the forest to avoid the horde of Gauls flailing their way towards the open countryside and what they perceived to be safety.

You realise that was a mistake? A big mistake...hu-jolly-mongous...

What are you talking about?

The ghul. You challenged him.

So what?

And got away with it.

Meaning...?

He has to bring you down now. He can't allow himself to be out-faced by a slip of a girl. Bad for business. And jolly bad for his jolly ego...

How did she know this, Annabella wondered, keeping up a fast but deliberate pace? However real Basil might sound, she knew she was in fact just talking to herself. So how could she know any of this stuff?

The only answer she could find was unsatisfactory but would have to do. She supposed it could only be an accumulation of bits and pieces of knowledge acquired from the real Basil and squirrelled away over time, surfacing now as coherent conversation.

Quintus tried desperately to think. Crashing through the forest, tripping over roots, blundering into branches, panting, gasping, throat burning, panicked, disoriented, now some way behind the others, nevertheless, still he tried to think. He was a legionary.

He was an officer. He was paid to think, especially in a crisis, and think he would if it killed him. Though more likely whatever it was that was chasing them with such diabolical purpose would be the death of him.

There were screams from in front of him. Men... His men... Gone... Vanished... The ravine... They had been driven into the ravine... Quintus swerved frantically and only just in time avoided the blackness yawning in front of him. Stop? Go back? Help them? No! Dead, they could only be dead... Such a fall... Keep on... Keep running...

He heard a horse neigh, more over to the right, and automatically veered towards it. It meant help. Reinforcements. Stout Roman arms wielding sharp Roman swords. He glanced behind him. The glowing apparition was still there, now heading at an angle to cut him off from the troop. Quintus somehow found reserves enough to increase his speed, enough to sprint clear, for the moment anyway. A small shaky voice somewhere high up in Quintus's mind whimpered: "What if the rest of the men panic? What if everybody flees? What then...?"

They did.

Quintus burst in to the campsite, trying to shout orders but only managing to gasp hoarsely. He was staring wildly, his uniform dishevelled. The men in camp were jittery, alarmed by all the noise, the shouting of the Gauls, the screams. And they were totally disorganised. Nobody had thought to set up a defensive formation. Nobody had done much of anything, though some of the horses were again saddled at least. They, themselves, were fretting, stamping and rearing, on the verge of bolting...

The apparition, having paused a moment, came ghosting through the forest towards them, circling, as though to drive the rest of them back to the ravine as well... Whatever discipline there might have been vanished on the instant. Men shouted, howled in terror, began to run. Going into battle against Gaulish warriors was one thing, but fighting Gaulish ghosts or gods, or more likely demons, was quite another.

A horse flung its head up, at the same time trampling backwards. One end of the picket rope carelessly made fast to a tree tugged loose and all the horses were suddenly free. The pandemonium was complete.

It was every man, every beast for himself...

Chapter 5

Jamina never suspected that Basil, her ne'er-do-well nephew, had chosen to place his residence in the desert deliberately to avoid her as much as possible. She, herself, being a right-thinking Marid – unlike Basil – preferred to live on the water, in this case Lake Tana, the headwaters of the blue Nile in the Ethiopian Highlands. Over time, centuries beyond count, she had enlarged a simple papyrus reed raft into an elaborate floating castle, complete with turrets and spires, ramparts and parapets, corbels, battlements and bartizans, that might or might not be visible floating out in the centre of the lake. Not entirely humourless, Jamina sometimes thought of herself as the castle's resident battle-axe. The fishermen inhabiting the shores of the vast body of water and who were sometimes afforded a glimpse of Jamina's fantastical fabrication would go to any lengths to avoid going anywhere near it. The rumours of what happened to those unfortunate enough to blunder close did not bear repeating.

Jamina being Jamina there was, of course, no front door. The Sheikh and Basil had to hover above the lake surface or moat, depending on your point of view, in front of the formidable portcullis on which was a sign. It read:

We are not/never receiving.

As they watched the "not" faded away, leaving only the "never".

"Jamina!" the Sheikh roared. "Open this damn gate!"

The "never" began to flash in fiery letters.

"Jamina," the Sheikh said, now speaking quietly but oh, so dangerously. "Either you open up or I'll swamp this stupid castle of yours with the biggest damn tidal wave you ever saw."

Abruptly the portcullis began to rise, creaking theatrically as though it really were a great weight of iron rather than a confection of reeds, and the Sheikh led the way within.

Jamina met them in the outer bailey. It was clear she was in no mood to be trifled with. It was clear she was furious.

"How dare you threaten me!" was her opening gambit. "In my own home... I am your sister."

"How dare you not welcome me!" the Sheikh instantly responded. "I am your Sheikh." Had they been anything other than wisps of smoke it would have been apparent that they were both glaring at each other, breathing heavily.

"Where is Annabella?" Basil demanded. Jamina said nothing.

"What have you done with Annabella?" Basil insisted.

"Who?"

The Sheikh intervened.

"I'll handle this," he said, and then: "You know very well, Jamina... Annabella Crabtree, Basil's intended. What have you done with her?"

"What makes you think I have done anything with that little minx?"

"The fact that you're calling her a little minx, for starters," Basil said.

"I will not be spoken to in that tone of voice," Jamina blared. "Harun, control your son."

"I said, leave this to me..." the Sheikh began testily to Basil.

"How can I?" Basil interrupted, his voice breaking. "How can I...? That old bitch has stolen Annabella..."

"What! What did you call me? How dare you?" The wisp of smoke that was Jamina was swirling in agitation.

"How dare I?" Basil said, now speaking coldly and precisely. "I should have done it jolly well aeons ago. You are a miserable, meddling old bitch..."

"Get out!" Jamina shouted in a passion. "Get out of my home."

"Now just a minute..." the Sheikh tried.

"And you! You get out too...!"

"We're not going anywhere until you tell me what you've done with Annabella," Basil shouted.

"Shut up!" the Sheikh roared, goaded beyond endurance. "You will both be silent."

And for a moment, there was indeed silence except for the rustle of the hordes of disturbed water rats nesting in the reeds of Jamina's castle.

"Now," the Sheikh said, using his most magisterial voice. "Jamina, where is Annabella Crabtree." Jamina, however, remained stubbornly silent.

"Answer me!"

"I have no idea," Jamina said eventually. "And furthermore, I couldn't care less. I hope never to set eyes on her ever again."

"That does it," Basil said venomously. "I call a formal convocation..."

"You will not," the Sheikh interrupted. "I will not have family dirty linen washed in public. And I certainly won't have family members subject to the rulings of a convocation. Far too unpredictable. Far too dangerous. Jamina, where is Annabella?" But Jamina swept grandly about and proceeded to depart the bailey. Just before she disappeared into the interior of the castle, she turned.

"Convoke and be damned!" she shouted. "And much good may it do you."

A rat which had chosen just that moment to poke up his nose found himself flying after her.

"She won't come," Basil said viciously, looking about for another rat.

"Oh yes, she will," the Sheikh replied. "She knows what will happen if she doesn't."

Maracatos heard the horse coming. He called to the others and there was time to spread out, arms held wide. The animal checked momentarily then came on, but it had slowed enough for Maracatos to be able to fling himself at the beast's head and seize the bridle. He stood firm, using his size and strength, as the horse plunged and fought. All the time he murmured soothingly in the horse's ear and in less time than seemed possible, the horse was standing still, quivering, eyes rolling, but still.

"Whoa," Vivienne said. "How did you do that?"

"Remi are horse people," Maracatos said dismissively. "I told you..."

"Horse whisperers..." Annabella said. Vivienne turned to stare at her.

"I'm back," Annabella said. "You can stop worrying..." Vivienne gave her a quick hug.

"Thank God for that," she said. "I was so..."

"Um..." Maracatos began, interrupting with supreme tact.

"Quite," Annabella cut him off. "If Vivienne and I ride... Our feet... Could you run alongside, do you think?" Had there been time, Annabella might have wondered how such a peremptory order from a female, for order it was, would be received. She was not to know that Gaulish men were perfectly accustomed to the demands of strong women.

Without wasting time on replying, Maracatos boosted Annabella into the saddle. There were no stirrups and Annabella found her thighs naturally fitting into the strange pommels there for the purpose, with extra security being provided by the pommels at her back. A moment later Vivienne was up behind her. They both crouched low to avoid the sweeping branches as Maracatos led them onward.

As near as she could judge, Annabella led them directly away from the plateau, calculating the Gauls would retreat there from the Grove. She was also reasonably sure that at some point they must emerge from the forest and strike the road which presumably cut its way through. The unknown factor was the party of Romans to whom this horse must belong. She could only hope that they and Cernunnos would keep each other occupied while she, Vivienne and Maracatos made good their escape. Where they could go and what they might do once they cleared the forest was, just at that moment, a problem too far.

It had to happen. Quintus caught his foot in a root and crashed to the ground, his breastplate winding him something terrible. Somehow, he kept sufficient presence of mind to tuck into a ball and keep on rolling. He ended deep in a bank of brambles, but that was fine. For the moment, anyway. The demon ignored him, passing him by, apparently less interested in stopping for a stray than in herding the remaining men of the turma in ever decreasing circles back towards the death trap of the ravine. Quintus lay still, desperately trying to suppress his distressed breathing as the sounds of rout diminished into the distance.

At last, when it seemed safe, he began to ease himself back into the clear, cursing as the thorns scratched and tore at him. He had no idea what to do next. Should he attempt to find his men? Surely the height of folly in the circumstances? Surely if not already dead, they soon would be? Surely whatever else might be expected of him, a legionary could safely decline to engage with gods, ghosts, devils or demons? What, then?

He stood uncertainly for an indeterminate length of time and then glumly set off in what he conceived to be the direction of the road, his mind wrestling with the question of how he could possibly explain the total loss of his command – men, mounts and weapons – if and when he ever managed to find Caesar and the army.

"Which way?" Maracatos inquired. They had emerged from the trees to find themselves in a shallow valley with a road winding along the floor. The moon was on

the way down now but clear of the forest the light was still almost as bright as day. Annabella considered.

"That way is North, I think," Maracatos amplified. He pointed to his left. "Where my home is..."

"And the Romans...?" Vivienne murmured. Maracatos shrugged.

"I am an ally," he said.

"But do they know that?" Vivienne said. "And what about us?"

"Well, we didn't do very well with the Gauls, now did we?" Annabella said gently. They moved on in silence.

Are you jolly well thinking what I'm jolly well thinking?

How on earth would I know?

You know what's going to happen.

I do?

You've read all about it, written by the man himself...

I have?

You have. You know you have. In that Latin class... When you were so bored... Commentarii de Bello Gallico... You knew all about Avaricum before they told you, yesterday. You know about Gergovia, too, what's going to happen here...

What are you saying...?

What do you think?

"I just thought of something," Annabella said into the silence. "I think I know how to handle this."

"Handle what?" Vivienne demanded. "The Romans...? You don't mean the Romans...? Annabella, can't we just go somewhere away from everybody?"

"And do what...? Look at you. Look at me. Look at poor Maracatos... We have to get help somewhere... Clothes... Food... And the Gauls, well we tried them... Which leaves the Romans."

Quintus heard voices, arguing it sounded like, arguing in that dreadful Gaulish gibberish. He crept forward. There was a big man, naked to the waist. Clearly a Gaul. And there were two women, mounted on a horse. One was dressed in blue rags and the other was wearing what looked like the man's shirt, her legs bare. With a start, Quintus recognised the horse and barely managed to suppress an exclamation. It was his horse.

Without stopping to consider further, he drew his sword and strode forward. The three strangers heard him coming and turned to stare. They were all young, he saw.

"Get off my horse!" he commanded. "Get off my horse this instant." He realised as he spoke that inevitably they wouldn't understand Latin. He moved forward and grasped the young woman sitting behind the saddle, his saddle, intending to pull her down. Instead, he subsided gently onto the road. He had lost his helmet sometime during the wild chase in the forest and the rock that came swinging down on the back of his head met no resistance.

"Now that wasn't smart," Annabella remarked into the sudden silence. "Not smart at all. We want the Romans' help... Not to go around bashing them on the head." Maracatos look sheepish.

"But he was going to hurt Vivienne..."

"Not helpful," Annabella said crisply. "Not helpful at all." Vivienne, however, rewarded Maracatos with one of her best smiles.

"Well, no use crying over spilt milk," Annabella continued. "We'd better tie him up so we can get a decent start..."

When Quintus duly regained consciousness some small time later, his head pounding abominably, it was to find himself quite alone and securely bound hand and foot with his own boot thongs. It was the final humiliation.

"Annabella," Vivienne whispered quietly quite some time later. "What was that thing in the forest?" She was speaking in English. Despite her low voice, Maracatos detected the strange words and turned to regard them quizzically, as they sat one behind each other on the horse's back.

"I'm not sure," Annabella said.

"Rubbish. I know you, Annabella. I know when you're fibbing..." Annabella said nothing.

"What was it?" Vivienne insisted.

"I'm not sure," Annabella repeated and then continued reluctantly: "I think it was a ghul."

"A ghul...?"

"I think."

"Not a god?"

Jolly well definitely not a god...

"A ghul."

"But they're only in deserts and places..."

"What makes you think that?" Vivienne fell silent.

"Annabella," Vivienne whispered at last. "Ghulan are just as bad as gods. Worse..."

"Some," Annabella said.

"Lilis..."

"Only some," Annabella repeated.

"Those scorpion things you fought in the desert..."

"They were 'ifrīts..." Annabella said. "At least I think they were." They both fell silent.

"What's that?" Vivienne sat up, cocking her head.

The moon had gone down long since and they had stopped to rest. Maracatos had hobbled the horse and turned him loose to graze. He was the fortunate one. The three humans were hungry, thirsty and thoroughly dispirited. They had taken it in turns to

stand watch while the others tried to sleep. Dawn had broken bringing a little rain and they were now damp and even more thoroughly miserable.

The whisper of sound increased. It was like nothing Vivienne had ever heard, faint but increasing in intensity quite quickly as it came nearer. Crump...crump...crump...

"Is that what I think it is?" Annabella asked, looking to Maracatos. He nodded.

"What?" Vivienne said. "It's not thunder..."

"No..." Annabella said. "The army."

"The Roman army," Maracatos added. "It always sounds like that. The legions shake the earth. You'll feel it when they get closer."

"The army...?" Vivienne repeated anxiously. "What are we going to do? Annabella, what are we going to do...?"

"Wish them the top of the morning and hope they invite us to breakfast."

"But you have a plan...?" Vivienne insisted. "Tell me you have a plan..."

"Sort of," Annabella said. "Much as I ever do..." And beyond that she would not be drawn. "Perhaps we should get the horse back, now," was all she would say.

The closer the army came the more Vivienne's eyes enlarged until they seemed to be taking up half her face. Maracatos, who had never seen Vivienne alarmed, truly alarmed, watched covertly with some astonishment. It made her look very beautiful, even more beautiful, he decided. And it was hard to be critical of her apprehension. The sound of the march was now awesome, bespeaking untold force and irresistible power. Maracatos was right. Indeed the ground was seeming to shake as the juggernaut drew closer. It was a phenomenon that neither Annabella nor Vivienne had experienced before. The Crusader army in Outremer with which they had had a passing acquaintance was an undisciplined rabble in comparison to the Romans, a rabble to whom marching in step was a concept beyond imagining.

The three of them drew well back from the side of the road, Maracatos holding the horse's head tight. However, curiously, as the Romans drew ever nearer the pounding of the marching legions began to be overlaid by the jingle of harness and the unmistakable sound of horses. And it was a phalanx of cavalry which first came into view around a distant corner, with screening patrols well out to either side of the road to protect against ambush.

Annabella and the others were apparently invisible. The main body proceeded down the road in front of them, the screen on their side of the road passing behind them. The initial squadrons of horsemen was succeeded by ranks of light infantry and archers and then the vanguard proper which included the standard bearers with the eagles, their colour parties and the engineers. Still they were ignored. Nobody so much as glanced at them.

The heavy infantry appeared, the men marching in ranks eight abreast. In the clear light, the dust having been laid by the earlier rain, they seemed unstoppable, armour and weapons flashing in unison as they tramped along. It was a brave sight and to anyone not an ally, quietly terrifying. Annabella watched with detached interest. She couldn't imagine how Vercingetorix and his Gauls could possibly resist such a

disciplined force, but, as she was aware, resist the Gauls had and to some considerable effect.

Again it seemed as they were passed by rank after rank, contubernium after contubernium, century after century, legion after legion, that they were to be totally ignored. But then someone with a rather larger plume to his helmet – an officer, Annabella presumed – pointed at them and issued a command. One whole rank, a contubernium of eight men, peeled off and a moment later the three were surrounded, pila pointing at their throats.

The decanus, like the rest of his squad, like the rest of the army and in complete contrast to the Gauls, was a compact man of medium height, though tough, hardened and undoubtedly ruthless. He motioned wordlessly with his spear point and the three were forced along to where the officer was waiting. He inspected them slowly and with an arrogance that immediately raised Annabella's hackles. He condescended to speak at last.

"That is a Roman horse," the centurion said. "That is a cavalry saddle. That is a cavalry brand. The penalty for theft of army property is death. Take them away..." Maracatos was struggling with the rapid, colloquial Latin, leaving it up to Annabella to respond.

"And what...?" she said. The centurion lifted a disinterested eyebrow and deigning no further reply turned away.

"And what?" Annabella repeated hotly. The centurion indicated a nearby copse.

"Do it there," he commanded the decanus. Vivienne squeaked. There could be no doubt about what the centurion had in mind. Also, she was uncomfortably aware of the lascivious interest of the rest of the squad. The remains of her evening gown did more to reveal than conceal, never mind that Annabella's slim legs were still alluringly bare. The squad leader smacked the haft of his spear with his right hand.

"Sir!" he said smartly.

"If you have us killed," Annabella said, "you'll never take Gergovia." There was a sudden silence. Eventually, reluctantly, the centurion turned back to her.

"What do you know about Gergovia?" he demanded.

"I know where the weak point in the defences is," Annabella stated baldly. "But you'll never find it without us." The centurion considered her speculatively from under the brow of his helmet. At last he spoke.

"If you know that, why would you tell us? You're Gauls... You're trying to lead us into a trap."

"My friend here is Remi," Annabella said indicating Maracatos. "The Remi are your allies and as you should know have stayed faithful throughout the rebellion." She touched Vivienne on the shoulder. "We are British, nothing to do with the Gauls. They tried to sacrifice us last night but we escaped. They tried to kill us..."

The centurion stood regarding them. At last he made up his mind.

"Keep them here," he ordered the decanus. "And keep your men civil or I'll have them on the tripod." He too had noticed the sidelong glances being thrown at the two young women. He strode off. The column had been advancing all the while and there was now not long before Caesar and his command group would draw level.

Quintus, too, heard the army approaching long before the advance guard actually reached him. There was time and plenty for his shame and mortification to increase to the point of suffocation. He struggled mightily to free himself but that big bully of a Gaul had known his business. Quintus was trussed like a pig bound for market and in the end could only subside to await his doom with an apple in his mouth and his skin already turning to crackling in anticipation of the decortication that would descend upon him. He wondered seriously if he could really suffocate himself, hold his breath long enough to kill himself, but several attempts only turned him purple and increased his humiliation even further. He didn't even have the resolve to hold his breath to the point of blacking out, never mind achieving Stygian darkness and the fell ferryman.

Worse, he was found by elements of his own unit. The subsequent interview with his commanding officer was quite the most uncomfortable 20 minutes of Quintus's life to date. By the end of it, Quintus was contemplating his promised banishment to the farthest reaches of the Black Sea with eager anticipation. Anything to get him out from under the gimlet eye of Naevius Fabius.

But Quintus also promised himself one thing. He didn't know how he could possibly bring it about but the three young people who had reduced him to this pathetic and pitiable state would pay. If it was the last thing he ever did, they would pay. In full.

Annabella supposed there were worse ways to travel than in the baggage train of Caesar's Gallic army – in the baggage train of the Crusader army, for instance, now that she came to think about it – but this was sufficiently unpleasant that it was very difficult to think at all. Also, her main concern was to bring to mind everything she could possibly remember of Caesar's own account of the present campaign. She had voluntarily read his history of the Gallic wars in the original Latin in an attempt to ease the boredom of having to sit through endless declensions and conjugations at school. Thanks to Basil, she was already able to read and speak the language as fluently as a native Roman and a great deal better than her teacher.

Also and most fortunately, Annabella, as the daughter of two academics, had been genetically gifted with a quick intelligence and a fine memory. It made the present situation rather more hopeful and gave some promise of her being able to manipulate their way clear. Clear to what was another much more difficult question to resolve but one thing at a time.

Abruptly, from the distant head of the column came the clarion call of a Gaulish carnyx followed immediately by the blare of a Roman tuba. The whole army ground to an abrupt halt.

"What is it?" Annabella said reflexively. "What's happening?"

"That's a cavalry call..." Maracatos said after a pause. "I would guess cavalry from Gergovia are testing the Roman strength... Just to let them know the place is defended..."

The column remained stationary and gave no indication of ever moving again.

"Hurry up and wait," Maracatos said inconsequentially. "That's the army for you..."

They waited some more.

Eventually, the centurion they had first encountered came bustling back down the line, a pair of legionaries at his shoulders.

"You three!" he shouted while still some little distance off. "Come with me. Look sharp!"

"Hurry up...!" Maracatos muttered.

They were hustled back down the line towards the front. A group of important-looking officers were standing off to one side apparently studying a role of parchment.

"Wait here," the centurion ordered. Maracatos rolled his eyes and Vivienne stifled a giggle.

Eventually the group discussion ended. A taller man, taller than the average Roman, at least, but not so tall as the average Gaul, turned towards them. Beneath his helmet he had pale skin and black eyes. His legs and arms, where exposed, were finely muscled and bespoke the confident strength of a fit and active man. A red cloak was draped partly over one shoulder and down his back, and he was still holding the rolled parchment. Maracatos could only guess who he was. To Vivienne he looked vaguely familiar. Annabella had no doubt: Gaius Julius Caesar in the flesh. The centurion pushed her forward with a shove to the small of her back, making her stagger.

"You say there is a weak point?" Caesar demanded.

"Is that a map?" Annabella said, her voice firm and unabashed.

"It is," Caesar said making no move.

"If you let me see, I'll show you..." Annabella said. After a considered pause, Caesar held it out. She took it and spread it on the ground. Crouching, she pointed. "You should make your camp here, by this hill..." she said. Caesar bent to stare over her shoulder and the other officers craned to see.

Are you sure that's the right spot? Basil said.

Quite sure... But one of the other officers dared to intervene.

"No, Caesar," he interrupted. "The camp should be here." He used the point of a sword to indicate an area to the north of the plateau, near to the main access road they were presently following towards the oppidum and diametrically opposite Annabella's hill. There was a chorus of agreement.

"Here, it must be here!" Annabella said adamantly into a moment of silence. "This gully down the side of the hill here is the back door to Gergovia. It gives access to food supplies and to water – they have only a spring or two and cisterns on top of the plateau... Take the hilltop and you control the gully."

"In which case, why would the hill be weakly guarded?" the officer with the sword demanded.

"Double bluff," Annabella said. "They reason that if they strengthen the defences it will attract your interest. They don't want that. They want you here, round the front, where their defences are strongest..." She pointed to the place the officer had indicated to the north. "...So they can keep on using the back door. But you will put your main camp here, below the hill..." she said again, her finger stabbing the map to the south-east. "...And tonight, you will take the hilltop..." A chorus of comment interrupted her.

"Silence," Caesar commanded. "And then...?" he continued to Annabella.

"You will make another camp on the hilltop and you will have your men dig a trench connecting the two."

"I will, will I?" Caesar said, nettled.

"Yes, you will," Annabella replied with absolute confidence.

Unless that history of his is all a pack of lies... Basil remarked.

Shut up, Annabella commanded in her turn. *He wouldn't lie about the good stuff, only the bad...*

You hope...

A moment later, a runner arrived to inform Caesar that the Gaulish cavalry had been chased off, that the skirmish had been concluded without casualties and that the army could again advance.

Caesar turned again to Annabella.

"Why should I believe you?" he demanded.

"No reason in the world," Annabella said calmly. "But it's what happened."

"What do you mean, happened?" Annabella smiled enigmatically.

"I'm a seer," she said after a moment. "I see the future, I see the past."

Chapter 6

Vernogena passed the rest of the night in lonely vigil. She was profoundly troubled. She believed implicitly in the gods of her calling and that Cernunnos should personally have taken it upon himself to destroy the ceremony – a sacrifice of signal importance, the prelude to what might well be the decisive encounter between Rome and Gaul – could only mean that she was held in deepest disfavour. Agonise as she might, she could find no possible explanation for such sudden rejection.

At the first hint of dawn, she made up her mind. Taking up a dark wrap she slipped out of the temple compound and made her way to the entrance of the oppidum. The sentries, recognising the Chief Druid, silently obeyed her muttered command, allowed her to pass through the gates and watched knowingly as her figure faded into the early morning gloom. There was only one place the Chief Druid could possibly be going. The Grove. Though they were not to know that Vernogena, having failed to find any sort of explanation within her chamber, had determined to seek one from the God himself. Perhaps Cernunnos would come to her. Perhaps he would speak.

The light under the trees was still pitch black, but Vernogena trod the well-known path with quiet certainty. She knew exactly when she had reached the clearing and followed the smell of fresh blood to the altar. The absence of any accompanying smell of death told her that the corpse from that first inauspicious sacrifice had been removed. She came to a halt, bowed her head and waited.

The ghul thought to be Cernunnos, now satiated with human flesh and the feeding frenzy done, had come to be equally troubled – indigestion of the mind, as it were, starting as a faint sensation then spreading till it was all-consuming.

Blue eyes. Twice now he had failed to capture the girl with blue eyes, blue eyes so intense, even in the moonlight, that surely his master's displeasure must be extreme were he ever to discover his minion's incompetence on the first occasion and on the second, his base dereliction of duty in pursuit of his own appetites.

The ghul thought to be Cernunnos quailed at the prospect. It was with relief that he perceived the Great Woman of Gergovia entering the Grove. He let her wait a proper interval.

"Blue eyes," came the rustle through the leaves. "We seek the girl with blue eyes."

Vernogena sank down beneath the weight of sudden, unbearable guilt, her mind a maelstrom.

Blue eyes. The witch had blue eyes – such blue eyes – and Vernogena had prevaricated over their significance. A shimmering appeared before her, an impression of horns. She rubbed at her own eyes but the vision was still there a moment later.

"Blue eyes," the rustle insisted. "We seek the girl with blue eyes."

A glorious flash of insight – purest lightning – suddenly flooded the dark storm clouds crowding close within Vernogena's mind.

The witch and her blue eyes... It was plain now beyond doubt that she was the person being sought. Which meant the woman, surely aware of the fact, had surely

caused the chaos to save herself. It was so obvious! In desperation, the witch had brazenly demeaned and insulted the Stag Lord in front of the whole of Gergovia, enraging him to the point where he had rampaged in righteous fury through the sacrificial ceremony dedicated to his presence. And the witch evidently had indeed managed to escape. The sequence was now as clear as the adder stone suspended about Vernogena's neck, the adder stone which she was certain had first alerted her to the fact that the blue-eyed woman could only be a witch. Adder stones were infallible...

Clearly, it was the witch who had brought this disaster down upon them.

Clearly it was only the witch, the offering of her person, that would restore the natural order.

Vernogena rose smoothly from the ground and strode forth, emerging from the trees with her face to the rising sun and resolve high in her heart.

Inevitably the repercussions from the debacle in the Grove would prove difficult to manage. For the rest of that night, the appalled citizens of Gergovia had pretty much gone to ground, shocked and wishing only to get through the hours of darkness unscathed by Cernunnos and his rampant displeasure. However, with the new day opinions began to form. Once formed, people began to share them and in the sharing they took on substance, eventually hardening to the consistency of fundamental truth directed very specifically at the two principals involved.

Vernogena:

It had to be said, could not be denied, that as presiding Druid she was clearly responsible for bringing the disaster down upon them, an omen so fell, so dire that one could only tremble at what the future might hold.

Vercingetorix:

Any warrior who kept his sacrifices in credit might reasonably expect to be reincarnated, nevertheless it behoved one to be choosy about submitting one's self to the process of actually dying and after such a dreadful warning, who could be reproached for declining to follow a leader now so blighted.

Gergovia was not a happy place. Beneath the smiling surface of an autumn day, Gergovia seethed and bubbled.

One man, however, taking the temperature of the town at large, was not at all displeased. On the contrary, he sensed opportunity and the more he eavesdropped on the conversations about him in the streets, the more stimulated he became. At last he turned about and retraced his steps to the temple compound and was not the least bit surprised on passing through the gates to be informed that Vernogena required his immediate attendance. Even the subsequent wait – pointedly lengthy – before being ushered into her presence quite failed to dampen his sunny mood.

Watching Licnos ooze into her chamber, his habitual air of plump well-being positively glowing, Vernogena was instantly put on her guard. Just because Druids were supposed to be holier than thou did not mean they were not given to politics of an unforgiving and unrelenting ferocity amongst themselves. She and Licnos had long been adversaries and it was only by dint of superior campaigning – if you were being

kind, blackmail if you weren't – that she had finally surpassed him to gain the position of Chief Druid of Gergovia. She was quite aware that Licnos had neither forgotten nor forgiven.

"Revered Madam..." Licnos began, oil positively dripping from his voice. "Such misfortune for you. Such a disaster. I can't imagine what you might have done to provoke such terrible omens..."

"Not me, Licnos," Vernogena shot back. "You! As designated marshal of the sacrificial offerings, you are wholly responsible." Licnos staggered slightly at the vehemence of Vernogena's counter-attack – something not lost on her – and stumbled over his reply.

"S-surely not..." he began.

"The witch!" Vernogena cut him off. "While I read the auguries, your one task was to control the captives, particularly the witch. Your job, a simple task, was to restrain her. You failed. You allowed her to insult the God. And we should not be the least surprised at what followed. The question now is what you propose to do about it," she added, deftly turning his flank.

Licnos should not have been surprised at the injustice of it all but was reduced to speechlessness, nonetheless. It went some way to explaining how Vernogena had managed to leapfrog him to the position of Chief Druid.

"She must be recaptured," Vernogena stated categorically. "She must be recaptured immediately. *You* must recapture her immediately..." Licnos, however, was now allowing a faint smile to inform his face. Vernogena broke off.

"What?" she demanded after a moment, disconcerted.

"Regrettably, that will not be possible," Licnos said smoothly. "Even now, the Romans are before Gergovia. No one may leave the oppidum. The gates have been barred."

Having digested the reports of the first skirmishes, Vercingetorix returned to his gloomy speculation. The politics of the elite of his tribe, the Averni, were equally as vicious as that of the Druids. When first he had raised rebellion in support of the Carnutes original uprising against Caesar, Vercingetorix's own uncle, Gorbantio, had driven him forth from the city. That Vercingetorix had subsequently returned with an army of peasants to install himself as king was still a festering sore. It might seem to a casual observer that Vercingetorix was firmly in power but after the disaster of Avaricum, his crown was attached to his head and his head to his neck by the merest of threads. Now, thanks to that appalling business in the Grove, that most unfortunate of auguries, he could feel the thread stretching to breaking point, awaiting the merest snick from an importunate blade to sunder.

The business of building a camp was the Roman army's daily miracle. Always, without fail, every day when on campaign the Roman army constructed and retired behind formidable fortifications, thereby preventing surprise attack. It was a principal reason, despite a rare calamity or two, for the Romans long-time military superiority.

Over time, the Roman marching camp had evolved into a more or less standardised design. The usual outline would be rectangular, with rounded corners, the perimeter being protected by a system of barriers, backed up internally by the intervallum, a wide cleared area which prevented missiles reaching the tents and which allowed any point under attack to be reinforced in the shortest possible time. The body of the camp would be divided by two principal roads connecting the four entrances, one in each wall, and a fifth road crossing the long axis further down.

Annabella and Vivienne stood in the centre of the vast perimeter, which had been meticulously marked out by the mensores, the surveyors, sighting along the plumb lines of their groma, and watched proceedings with growing astonishment.

"It looks like it's raining dirt," Vivienne remarked at one point. And it did. Legionaries swarmed about the boundary, excavating fossae as deep as themselves and too wide to leap across. The earth they dug out was thrown up – Vivienne's rain – to form shoulder-high ramparts which were then topped by a timber palisade. Inside this more or less instant fortress, a tent city materialised seemingly in a matter of minutes.

By the end of the exercise, both Annabella and Vivienne badly wanted to applaud. Maracatos was rather more thoughtful. He had seen the ritual performed before but still found it distinctly intimidating.

The centurion who had originally accosted them marched up and saluted formally.

"Caesar has commanded that you are to lodge in the quaestorium. Come."

"The what?" Vivienne muttered as they dutifully followed.

"With the quartermaster," Annabella said.

They were shown to a regulation tent made from squares of leather stitched together, one of a solid block of such shelters making up the quaestorium.

"Don't try to leave," the centurion ordered. "There will be a guard. Food will be brought." With that, he about-faced and stamped off.

"Well this is cosy," Vivienne said, dropping to one of the three bed rolls they found inside.

"Beats sitting in a cage waiting to be sacrificed," Annabella retorted. She knew Vivienne quite well enough to be able to tell the difference between her irony and her sarcasm.

"Hey," Vivienne said, not the least abashed and making a discovery. "They've left some clothes here, too." She held up a couple of rough woollen army tunics, a tragic red in colour. She offered one to Annabella.

"Turn your back," Vivienne commanded Maracatos.

"And if I don't...?" Maracatos said mischievously.

"I'll scratch your eyes out..."

A moment later, the girls had slipped into the new garments.

"Here..." Annabella said to Maracatos. "You can turn round now... Here is your shirt. Thank you so much for lending it to me. It was really, really splendid of you." She noticed that Maracatos still had Vivienne's tiny black button around his neck. "It's not very clean, I'm afraid..." Annabella went on.

"But then it wasn't to start with," Maracatos said.

"So much for washing morning and night," Vivienne commented tartly.

"When I can..." Maracatos began, aggrieved.

"I was teasing, silly," Vivienne said with her sweetest smile, something not lost on Annabella.

"What do we do now?" Maracatos asked, embarrassed to realise that Annabella was regarding him with wry amusement.

"Wait," Annabella said.

"Wait for what exactly? "

"For Caesar to realise that I really am a seer."

"A seer? How can you be a seer?"

"Did I drown?" Annabella asked gently

Maracatos gave her a penetrating look and shook his head.

"That's how I can be a seer," Annabella said to end the conversation. The thought of trying to explain the actuality was simply too exhausting.

Vercingetorix watched glumly from on high as the orderly ants of the Roman army went about fortifying their camp at the foot of the plateau. With morale already at rock bottom thanks to the disastrous sacrifice, this was a particularly depressing spectacle. At last, Orceterix – a grizzled veteran who acted as something of a mentor in lieu of Vercingetorix's late father – drew him aside.

"We need a feast," he said gruffly. "Tonight."

Vercingetorix regarded him gravely and then nodded. A feast might indeed go some way to restoring a semblance of unity to his command, unity that would doubtless be sorely tested in coming days. Abundant food and even more abundant wine might do something to soothe the rumblings of the volcano he bestrode so uncomfortably, feasts being the sovereign Gaulish cure for everything. Lots of drinking, lots of boasting, fights – inevitably one or two to the death – and a thumping hangover improved one's outlook on life remarkably.

Had his father survived, things in the first instance might have gone differently. Together they would have made a formidable team. Vercingetorix's charisma and youthful exuberance combined with Celtillos's wise counsel in all probability would have brought the Avernians to revolution without the necessity for a coup, and more importantly the alienation of Gorbantio and his party of degenerates more interested in preserving their trade and their comforts than fighting for freedom from the Roman yoke. It pleased Vercingetorix that Gorbantio was only an uncle on his mother's side, more of a cousin, in fact, a distant cousin.

Vercingetorix through Orceterix put preparations for the feast in train and sent runners to deliver invitations – read, summonses to be ignored at one's peril – to the principal chiefs and nobles of his army.

The feast was working up from a dull roar to full-blown tempest when the second disaster of this inauspicious return to Gergovia struck.

A bloodied and breathless warrior burst into the hall. He spotted Vercingetorix some distance away through the bedlam, arm-wrestling the local champion, and made his way towards him, trailing silence in his wake. Vercingetorix saw him coming out of the corner of his eye and distracted, eased off. His arm was promptly slammed down into the table top, bruising his knuckles and wrenching his shoulder. He cursed automatically while never shifting his gaze from the soldier thrusting towards him – Vortrix, a good man. Then Vercingetorix paled and forgot all about the pain in his shoulder. Vortrix had been stationed at the back door, the hilltop guarding the descent into the valley, the route that nobody was supposed to know about, the path that was so secret it didn't even have a name, the path that was vital to surviving an extended siege.

It was a long wait. The next day's sun was high in the sky and Vivienne was rather wistfully imagining substantial elevenses when the summons finally came. They were officiously escorted to the praetorium and ushered into Caesar's command tent. Caesar, himself, was waiting for them.

"The hill *was* lightly guarded," he said without preamble. Annabella resisted the temptation to say, "I told you so".

"And your men are digging?" she asked instead, adding: "Thank you for the clothes." Caesar waved a dismissive hand.

"Yes," he said. "They are digging."

"Parallel trenches..." It was a statement not a question. Caesar narrowed his eyes.

"How do you know that?" he demanded. How could she know that? He had made sure to keep her confined to her tent and brought to him just now by a route that offered no view of the hillside. The girl had used the word trench previously, but only in the singular. She couldn't have seen the reality. It was impossible.

"I told you," Annabella said. "I'm a seer." There was a long silence. Caesar stood staring fixedly at Annabella as though trying to penetrate her mind. Annabella returned his gaze with a slightly quizzical expression. Vivienne and Maracatos glanced at each other apprehensively. It seemed to them that the game of predictions Annabella was playing was fraught with unpredictable danger.

"And what do you see happening next?" Caesar said at last. Implicitly, there was the beginning of acceptance in his question. Annabella paused theatrically.

"I see..." she said eventually. "I see the Aedui joining the rebellion." She was referring to yet another of the many Gaulish tribes, this one centred on the oppidum of Bibracte. Caesar started and then shook his head angrily.

"No," he said. "Impossible. I have too many hostages. And Aedui loyalty is beyond question. They wouldn't dare..." he added as an afterthought.

"Their loyalty is beyond question?" Annabella remarked rhetorically. "And yet you felt the need to take hostages...? They would dare," she went on. "They will dare."

"Whatever you say you are," Caesar informed her coldly. "Whatever you think you know, in this you're quite wrong. As we speak, Litaviccus is on his way here from Bibracte with 10,000 men to join the siege of Gergovia. Together we will destroy Vercingetorix and the Avernii."

"You won't," Annabella said calmly. And provoked into doubting himself, Caesar lost his temper.

"Guard!" he shouted and waited till two legionaries had thrust their way into the tent. "Get these people out of here! Take them to the slave lines."

"Well, that went well," Vivienne remarked crossly as they were being hustled along the Via Principalis.

"Silence!" the optio in charge of their escort commanded automatically.

"Why should I?" Vivienne said rebelliously.

"Or you can be whipped," the optio said. "Those are the choices a slave has. Silence or whipping..."

She's right, Basil said. That went really, really, really well. Abso-jolly-lutely fabulously well...

So what would you have done? Annabella demanded with some heat.

You know what's in store for you, don't you? Basil said, evading the question. *You'll be cleaning the latrines, that's what.*

They wouldn't dare...

Jolly well want to bet?

As they were marched along the main road through the camp, Vivienne and Annabella looked about them curiously at the regimented rows of leathern tents, each holding a contubernium of eight men, each with a small flap annexe housing the unit's slave and pack mule.

A growing aroma if one were being euphemistic, stench if one weren't, announced their destination and confirmed Annabella's worst fears.

Maracatos baulked.

"Oh, no," he began to protest. "I am a noble. I do not..." Before he could finish, one of the guards smashed him casually across the mouth with the butt of his pilum. Maracatos went down on hands and knees, shaking his head. Blood dripped freely into the dirt.

"I won't tell you again," the optio said. "You are slaves. You do whatever you're told. Or you suffer the consequences."

Annabella, careless of what the legionaries might think or do, went to Maracatos, took him by an arm and struggled to help him up. After a second, Vivienne went to his other side. She looked stricken. Annabella was certain sure that it was not on her own account.

It was bad. It might have been worse, probably would be, but Annabella was forced to admit that this was quite bad enough to be going on with. There was no running water – which made army latrines in permanent camps tolerably civilised – just vast trenches in constant use by thousands and thousands of men. The three were set to patrolling the trenches each with a dolabra, using the heavy mattocks to spread earth as required. It was a filthy business in every sense of the word. Eventually, they were signalled to one side and allowed to take a break.

"How's your poor mouth?" Vivienne immediately and solicitously demanded of Maracatos. She made him lower his head so she could inspect the damage.

Here we go again, Basil observed.

Yep, was all Annabella could think to say.

So much for jolly old heartbreak over jolly old Darius.

Jolly old Darius jolly well brought it on himself. You leave her alone.

Just saying...

"Are your teeth all right?" Annabella asked Maracatos, rather more practically.

"Yeth...looth..." Maracatos mumbled through Vivienne's ministrations.

They were allowed 10 minutes and then put back to work.

It was a long, generally appalling and thoroughly dispiriting day. At nightfall, they were allowed to leave the compound. They were given some rough food that they could barely bring themselves to eat such was their general state of nausea and then directed to an awning to spend the night on the ground with other slaves. They were an unsavoury looking lot, thoroughly unkempt and dirty with it. Curious eyes, desirous eyes, were cast at both the young women, who were both infinitely glad of Maracatos's large presence and overt protectiveness.

"What are we going to do?" Vivienne whispered at one point. "Annabella, what are we going to do? I can't stand much more of that place."

"We wait," Annabella replied.

"But for what?"

"For history to happen," Annabella said shortly. "And for Caesar to realise he needs me."

Predictably, given the portents of the unprecedented and devastating materialisation of Cernunnos in the Grove, the council meeting was going badly. The assembly was rapidly coalescing into two distinct factions, if Vercingetorix and Vernogena had sufficient clout left to warrant being called a faction at all. It was the two of them versus Gorbanitio and Licnos, each of the latter with a particular axe to grind, plus 20 or so of the principal men from the motley army Vercingetorix had managed to cobble together. Each of the chiefs, in addition, had thought it expedient to bring an unruly posse of supporters and henchmen to act as bodyguards at need.

The Gauls, stricken by a crisis of confidence, had spent the day watching from the heights as the Roman legionaries, thousands upon thousands upon thousands of them, excavated twin trenches which in an unbelievably short space of time came to connect the main camp in the valley to the stronghold Caesar had established on the crucial hilltop. When completed shortly before nightfall, the trenches then allowed safe access between the two camps, meaning either could swiftly be reinforced in the event of attack. Yet again, the Gauls could only shake their heads and marvel at the Romans' feats of extempore engineering that had to be seen to be believed.

"We should have counter-attacked while we still could," Cunorix, a veteran leader of some standing, harangued the meeting for the third time. "We should have counter-

attacked immediately." There was a tentative growl of approval from the audience crowding about, but only tentative.

"You know very well why we didn't," Vercingetorix responded angrily, again for the third time. The assault on the hilltop, following hard on the depredations of Cernunnos, had completely shattered any remaining morale. For all their self-proclaimed and much vaunted fighting qualities, Vercingetorix knew from hard experience that leading the Gauls into battle was ever a chancy business with success depending very much on the emotion of the moment.

There was an uneasy silence. Cunorix's bluster was comforting but there was no denying the truth of what Vercingetorix refused to let them forget.

Licnos, sensing his chance, moved forward to claim the focus of the meeting. Vernogena's stated intention of saddling him with the blame for the failed sacrifice rankled deeply and he had spent the hours since feverishly canvassing possibilities for retribution and revenge. At last, he had been infused with glorious inspiration. The idea was so shocking that at first he could only bring himself to inspect it with the edge of his mind, but the more he dared to examine it, the more enticing it became. The risks were huge but if he could pull it off, the rewards would be incalculable.

He had come to the meeting fully determined to make the gamble of his life. He had not spent 25 years of grinding study, of endless memorisation – Druids were forbidden written texts – to have some jumped-up priestess turn it all to dust.

"First causes," he proclaimed, exuding all the confidence of a practised public speaker and the smooth sleekness of the born politician. "Before we can properly address the matter of the Romans, we must first deal with the true cause of the crisis..." He paused tellingly. He had timed his intervention with precision. The meeting was chasing its tail and for the moment Vercingetorix was clearly incapable of breaking the circle. A new direction was welcome, necessary, and Licnos now had everyone's undivided attention.

"Without the favour of Cernunnos," Licnos continued, ostentatiously making the sign of the horns, "we cannot hope to succeed. We must propitiate the Stag Lord. We must return to the favour of the Two-horned God before ever we can think of defeating the Romans." Again Licnos paused, the meeting hanging on his words, the unspoken question heavy in the air. Licnos took a deep breath and struck for the jugular.

"There is only one salvation," he said with ringing certainty. "Only one possible salvation... The Chief Druid must offer herself for sacrifice. She must give herself to Cernunnos, to atone..."

There was a gasp from the meeting, not least from Vernogena. Licnos's audacity was breath-taking. Druid politics usually played out in the shadows but this move was totally uncloaked by any decent discretion. It was absolutely plain for what it was, a naked grab for power, but nonetheless powerful for that.

Vernogena was completely unprepared for such a vicious frontal assault. She had imagined that her earlier confrontation with Licnos had reduced him again to subservience. Now she was left floundering.

"I, atone!" she eventually managed, thrown by the attempt at not just character but literal assassination... Public execution... Her voice was unbecomingly shrill and she began to tremble, visibly. She strove to give the impression that it was outrage, not fright, even while her mind was racing. A simple counter-accusation against Licnos would be weak and leave her still vulnerable. She needed something decisive.

"Cernunnos was summoned by the witch," she cried, the strain plain in her voice. "It is the witch who must be found. If Cernunnos is to be pacified it is the witch who must be sacrificed..."

"The witch escaped..." Licnos began, momentarily disconcerted. It was a less than telling riposte and Vernogena moved to exploit it.

"The witch escaped in the confusion when you – you, sir – allowed her to demean and to enrage Cernunnos," Vernogena overrode him, the strength returning to her voice. "She must be pursued and brought to answer for her vile crime. It is she who must be offered to Cernunnos if ever we are to have peace again. And it is you who must be held accountable for her recapture." The crowd sighed and those who could appreciate the nuances actually applauded, sparking expressions of general approval. Suddenly Licnos found himself not only in full retreat but burdened with the tacit, if not quite the explicit, expectation of the council that he would make himself responsible for repairing the damage caused in the Grove. He cursed silently and strove to fade into the background, as it happened, assisted by Gorbanitio.

The latter had said little until now but, judging his moment, he too stepped forward.

"Peace!" he roared "If we would have peace, we never should have started this rebellion... I warned you. I said it would lead to disaster. The Stag Lord has turned against us. The Romans hold us in a vice. Yet we have the solution to hand..."

Suddenly it was now Vercingetorix under direct threat. Given the cue by Licnos, it was obvious where Gorbanitio was heading and what would happen if he got there, but just at this moment Vercingetorix was powerless to prevent it. The mood of the meeting had been against him from the start and was now solidly with his uncle. Within moments the decision would be made, irrevocably cast in molten iron... The Averni would sue for peace and inevitably, the first step in procuring it would be to hand Vercingetorix over to Caesar, in chains.

A hush settled on the meeting, that hush that precedes a momentous decision. Vercingetorix was all but resigned to ignominy and doom when two strange men, flushed and clearly most pleased with themselves, exploded into the meeting.

History happened sooner – mercifully sooner – than Annabella probably had any right to expect. Just after dawn a squad came stamping up to the awning. Annabella, Vivienne and Maracatos were prodded awake without ceremony and marched off towards the praetorium.

So, Basil observed. *Litaviccus has actually gone through with it. It wasn't just some cover story of Caesar's for bad management.*

So it would seem, Annabella replied. She was hugely relieved. Despite herself, despite a reasonable confidence in the veracity of Caesar's history, Basil's ghost had

put a large doubt in her mind. Undoubtedly, Caesar's account of the Gallic wars could only be completely self-serving but if the main points at least held true she had something to work with.

"How did you know?" Caesar demanded the instant they were shoved into his large and commodious tent.

"Latrines?" Annabella said viciously. "You put us to work in the latrines and you expect me to help you?" Caesar rocked back on his heels. The attack was completely unexpected and he struggled to contain himself. He might have expected that slave duty in the latrines might induce some respect for authority, but evidently not.

This excessively self-possessed young woman had induced him to lose his temper once, but now he couldn't afford to lose it again. She had proved herself prescient at least twice. She might well have had occasion to learn legitimately of the weak Gaulish defences on the hill above the camp, but she could not have known in advance that he would order two connecting trenches to be excavated to allow double the speed in moving men backwards and forwards, not just the single trench that anyone might reasonably expect. And she could not possibly have known that the Aedui would mutiny. Potentially then she might prove an invaluable source of intelligence... He bit back the scathing words that were about to bubble forth. Instead, he managed to speak mildly enough.

"Tell me what you know," he said, "and I will see your treatment improves."

"Decent food..." Annabella began ticking items off on her fingers. "Decent clothes... Water to wash... And medical attention for my friend, thanks to your bullies."

"Tell me what you know about the Aedui!"

Careful, Annabella.

Careful, be damned...

"Do I have your word?" Annabella demanded. There was a silent battle of wills obvious to the various onlookers. Suddenly Caesar capitulated.

"You do," he said. "You have my word."

"And no latrines? Ever again?"

"No," Caesar said this time without hesitation. Annabella paused as though to gather her thoughts. In fact she was well-rehearsed and knew exactly what she was going to say.

"Litaviccus has told the Aedui army that you have slaughtered your hostages – their family, their friends..."

"But I haven't done any such thing," Caesar protested, attempting to cover his confusion.

"Of course not," Annabella said patiently. "But Litaviccus has arranged for messengers to arrive who claim to have witnessed the executions. The Aedui are convinced. They're Gauls. You know the Gauls. Give them half an excuse and they'll race each other to turn against you..."

"Except the Remi," Maracatos couldn't help interjecting.

"Except the Remi," Annabella allowed. "But as it stands," she went on. "The Aedui army are convinced you have betrayed them by killing your hostages, their people, and all 10,000 of them are now raging for your blood." There was silence in the tent, a deep, concerned silence. Ten thousand men that Caesar had counted on as allies going to the other side could well turn the balance against him.

"What...?" Caesar began eventually and then stopped himself. "Everybody out," he ordered. "Except you..." There was a shuffling and a mutter of disquiet as the ancillary group of commanders and aides withdrew, herding Vivienne and Maracatos with them.

Caesar stood, glaring at Annabella, mortified to find himself in the position of supplicant to some vagabond girl, consulting her on matters of which she should know absolutely nothing. She stood regarding him with her unblinking blue eyes, contained and unknowable.

"What?" The one word was eventually forced from Caesar.

"Four legions," Annabella said. "With four legions and the hostages, to prove they're alive, you will turn them again to your side."

"Impossible," Caesar said. "You're suggesting I split my command... With Vercingetorix poised above me on the plateau, you want me to leave just two legions here, protecting the camps... Impossible!"

"One more thing," Annabella said calmly. "Litaviccus sent his brothers here as couriers, did he not? To keep the truth from you... You'll find they've already slipped away. They're gone. You don't have even them as hostages anymore. They knew the plan. They knew what was going to happen. They're in Gergovia right now laughing at you..."

Abruptly, Caesar roared for an orderly and sent him scurrying off. It took only minutes for a centurion – a woebegone and very frightened centurion – to report back that somehow – implausible, impossible, incredible as it seemed – Litaviccus's two brothers had indeed apparently disappeared from the camp. Doubtless they would be found immediately, if not sooner...

Caesar said nothing. He just stood in terrifying silence considering the situation.

Vivienne, despite being clean and despite the linen vest that now saved her delicate skin from the harsh wool of her tunic, was beside herself.

"You can't leave us," she said urgently. "Annabella you can't. We have to stay together. You can't go off by yourself..."

"It'll be all right," Annabella said. "I promise. Nothing will happen. The camp here will be attacked but we'll be back in time. I promise. They won't get in."

You think... ghost Basil interposed. You don't know that. You only know the Gauls don't win.

"But..." Vivienne began.

"What choice do we have?" Annabella said gently. Vivienne fell silent. There was nothing she could say. Not one single thing. It was Caesar's order and while Annabella might be able to play him up to a point, there was definitely a limit and they both knew they had reached it.

"Maracatos," Annabella said. "You've been extraordinarily kind to us. We are greatly in your debt. But I need to ask you... Look after her, will you please? For me..." Maracatos nodded slowly and seriously.

And for himself, Basil added cattily.

Chapter 7

From a vantage point high on the plateau, Vercingetorix, with great contentment, watched the legions march out. Four, he calculated, leaving only two to hold both Roman camps. The only possible explanation was that Caesar had notice of the Aedui's treachery, blessed treachery, and had been compelled to split his forces in an attempt to deal with the mutiny. Litaviccus's brothers, bursting into the council meeting at the crucial moment the night before, had spoken true, and from Vercingetorix's point of view in the nick of time. He began to make plans.

The Aedui army was known to be some 25 to 30 miles away, more than a day's march. Accordingly, he should allow Caesar plenty of time to get well on his way before launching an attack on the main camp. It would then take hours for even the swiftest rider to reach Caesar and he would be confronted with the choice of continuing on to deal with the Aedui or returning immediately to the rescue of his own men, leaving the Aedui poised to strike him in the rear. Either way, it was an intoxicating proposition and Vercingetorix was quite certain that he had the Roman camps and the remaining legions at his mercy.

Annabella had been given a horse, to her relief a worn old cavalry mount only interested in exerting the least amount of effort. She had made a final farewell to Vivienne and Maracatos and now waited with Caesar, a group of officers and the remaining Aedui hostages at the eastern entrance to the camp, the gate furthest away from the plateau. They watched as the advance guard issued forth followed by rank after rank of legionaries – 20,000 of them – marching light without baggage.

Caesar turned to Gaius Fabius, the legate to be left in charge of the camp.

"They will attack," he said quite unnecessarily. They had been through all the possible permutations several times already. "Whatever you do, you must hold." Fabius inclined his head.

"Of course," he said.

"Come," Caesar said to the command group about him and led them off.

Intelligence had put the Aedui army to the north of Gergovia and the Romans' route towards them lay back through the forest. After some little time, Caesar drew Annabella to one side, out of earshot.

"Is there anything more I should know?" he asked with a somewhat comical mixture of eagerness and disbelief. Annabella had been debating with herself, or rather ghost Basil, how much to reveal. It was a matter for delicate judgement. She needed to keep Caesar on the hook, which meant doling out information sparingly. On the other hand, too little would be to lose him and possibly the war.

"Speed is of the essence," she said. "It is vital." He looked at her searchingly.

"Speed?"

"Speed on the march..."

"You're stating the obvious."

"Am I?" Annabella replied, smiling enigmatically. Caesar regarded her for a long minute and then beckoned a centurion. After a pause for the order to pass, the pace of the march increased dramatically. The regular route step of the Roman army, 100 paces a minute, had changed to quickstep at 120 paces a minute. Annabella wondered how long they could keep it up. She would learn in time that with periodic short rests at the slower rate and travelling light as they were, they could effectively keep it up indefinitely.

Their route skirted the plateau which here gave the illusion of an island rising out of the surging green ocean of the forest, an ocean as dangerous and mysterious as the sea itself. Annabella, even surrounded by the might and power of Rome, could not help a frisson of disquiet. Cernunnos might only be a ghul not a god, but as yet his powers were still an open question. Annabella had no knowledge of the hidden ravine and Cernunnos's basic modus operandi for obtaining a meal in lieu of the sacrifices from time to time presented to him on a plate, as it were.

As the trees of the forest went past in regular procession, Annabella kept glancing to her left. At last ghost Basil spoke:

He doesn't like the light, he said. Hates it. Jolly well hates it. He'll be deep in the middle somewhere...

Fine by me, Annabella said.

You do understand, mistress mine, that you have a big problem there...?

I'm not your mistress and you're just a figment of my imagination proving that I'm schizophrenic and totally crazy, which is probably not surprising after the cistern but I'd really prefer you not to rub it in.

In point of fact, you are my mistress again, or have you forgotten certain relevant activity... And stop changing the subject...

I will if I want to. It's my head we're messing with.

Listen, lady mine, Basil said patiently. Cernunnos sees you as unfinished business. You've escaped him twice now. And you've challenged him...

I did no such thing...

That's not what he thinks, I promise you... And look there. I was wrong...

Again Annabella turned her head to the passing forest, trying to see between the trees. In a patch of shade so dark it might have been night, there seemed to be a shimmer, a distortion... Or was it just her eyes watering?

He's been looking for you, Basil said seriously. He's not hiding out at all... He's been looking for you. He's spotted you, and he's following...

Rubbish, Annabella said crisply, but a shiver ran down her spine nonetheless.

For his part, the ghul thought to be Cernunnos had indeed spotted the blue-eyed she-devil but protected by an army, as she was, he was powerless to do anything about it. For the moment.

The Romans met the Aedui host coming towards them as the afternoon was drawing in. Warned by his scouts, Caesar sent his cavalry circling behind and before

they were fully aware of the situation, the Aedui found themselves surrounded by a grim and determined force outnumbering them two to one.

Given that the Gauls in the process of revolting had plundered and massacred the party of Romans travelling with them, proof positive of their blatant treachery, they expected dire retribution. Litaviccus had no doubt of the fate he could expect and in the first moments of confusion managed to slip past the cordon and bolt for Gergovia together with a small party of henchmen.

For his part, Caesar issued strict orders that no Gaul was to be touched and set about proving to all 9,992 of those remaining that no Gaulish hostage had, in fact, been harmed by him or any other Roman and that Litaviccus had royally deceived the whole silly lot of them. The Aedui, wrestling with thoroughly guilty consciences and the possible consequences, were delighted to be so easily reconciled with honour, duty and Pax Romana, even if just at the moment Roma was rather more given to bellum than pax.

His enemies allies again, Caesar was about to order food and rest when he happened to glance in Annabella's direction. He raised his eyebrows questioningly. She shook her head firmly.

"Why not?" Caesar demanded, striding across to where she was waiting patiently beneath a tree.

"If you leave now," Annabella said in a disinterested voice, "that is to say, right now, and if you march as fast as you can, you will get back in time to save the camps. Just."

"The camps are well fortified. Two legions could hold out there for a month. There is time to rest."

Annabella said nothing. Caesar was about to turn away when he hesitated.

"What do you see?" His voice was slightly querulous.

"I see your army making a forced march. I see the camps being saved." Annabella repeated quietly. She shrugged.

Still Caesar hesitated, loath to put his men to what seemed an unreasonable trial. At last he came to a decision and began to issue a stream of orders.

Vercingetorix spent the morning and the better part of the afternoon marshalling his forces. Fortified Roman legionary camps were notoriously difficult to over-run and a long siege was out of the question. Caesar could be expected to return sometime towards dusk on the morrow and the camp would have to be in Gaulish hands well before then. Given the time constraints, there was really only one possible plan of attack: invest the main camp with every man he had who could carry a sword and leave the second camp on the hilltop to be mopped up in due course. Organisation, however, was never the Gauls' strong point and it took rather longer than Vercingetorix might have liked to reassign his men from the defences of Gergovia and to mass before the lower camp. On the plus side Caesar would now be so far away that there could be no chance of him getting back in time to interfere.

From about midday on it was clear to Fabius that rather than nuisance skirmishing – which is what he and Caesar rather unrealistically had been hoping for – he could expect an all-out assault and he made his dispositions accordingly. Perhaps his most significant move was to conceal a reliable centurion, Drusus Cassianus, with a fast horse well outside the perimeter. His task was to observe, gauge the effectiveness of Vercingetorix's attack, and if necessary to get a message to Caesar seeking help.

Watching the Gaulish preparations, Drusus was of the opinion that his services would definitely be needed and sooner rather than later.

Watching Annabella ride out of the camp in the midst of a Roman army to a very uncertain future, Vivienne felt a wave of acute depression. As an orphan, shunted from one cold and uncaring institution to another, she had become accustomed, of necessity, to the feeling of being completely abandoned and alone. However, ever since Annabella had entered her life she had felt part of a family. Now, again, suddenly, lost in a time and a world she didn't know, and deserted by the one person she had come to trust, she was assailed by that same sense of complete abandonment. No longer, however, did she have the resources to deal with it. Without a word to Maracatos, she turned and made her way back to their tent...

He found her there some minutes later, standing, just standing, with her back to the entrance, radiating desolation. Instinctively, he reached for her shoulders to offer comfort. A moment later, she had turned to seize him with desperate urgency. For long seconds, he surrendered to the yielding softness of her body, so full, so ripe yet so light and fragile, then he managed to disengage and step back.

Vivienne regarded him with a look of faint inquiry then reached for him again.

Theoretically, Vivienne and Maracatos were confined to their tent but much later, when they discovered there was no one left to stop them, they gravitated to the edge of the quaestorium. From the bustle of activity that greeted them, orderly but with an edge of suppressed frenzy, it was plain trouble was imminent.

"Vercingetorix..." Maracatos said.

"Vercingetorix what?" Vivienne prompted. Maracatos shrugged.

"He must be preparing to attack."

"Attack? Us?" Maracatos shrugged again. He resisted the temptation to shoot back something along the lines of, who else?

"When?" Vivienne asked, her eyes suddenly very round.

"Don't worry," Maracatos said incautiously with the inevitable tone of patronising male. "I will protect you..."

"Protect yourself," Vivienne snapped. "I've been in battles before..." Which was true as far as it went, though Vivienne had certainly never had to fight on her own account. Maracatos regarded her disbelievingly.

"The battle of Hattin," Vivienne said. "About 1200 years from now. I was there. I was in the middle of it when Saladin defeated the Crusaders." Maracatos's expression segued from disbelief to incomprehension.

"Never mind," Vivienne said impatiently. "But I do know what battles are like. And I don't like them," she added. "I don't like them at all." Again Maracatos resisted the temptation to speak his mind: how could a man be a warrior without the battles that made him one?

Since the abject humiliation of not only losing his command but his liberty, Quintus Otho Petronus had found that his punishment prior to being transferred to the Black Sea was to be ostracised and ignored. He was given no orders, no responsibility and was left to march about the camp ostentatiously bearing a clay tablet and trying to look as though he was engaged on an urgent errand, acutely aware of the knowing looks he attracted. The imminent Gaulish attack came as a blessed release. Every man, even Quintus, was required to man the walls. An impatient tribune sent him scurrying off to add his sword to the defenders at the porta decumana, which, facing westward, was closest to the plateau of Gergovia and likely to bear the brunt of the coming assault.

To reach his post, Quintus had to pass the quaestorium where, inevitably, he spotted Vivienne and Maracatos standing spectators to the proceedings. The shock of recognition made his stride falter, which in turn drew Vivienne's attention. She recognised the man they had left tied up beside the road and nudged Maracatos. Quintus made to turn towards them, then thought better of it. His chance would come later and he began to plan.

Watching intently, Maracatos saw the look of naked hate in Quintus's eyes suddenly veil and he made his own assessment accordingly.

"I need weapons," he said quietly to Vivienne.

"What? Why?" Maracatos hesitated.

"In case the Avernii get over the walls," he said at last. Vivienne looked at him closely and nodded.

"Well, we're in the right place," she said. "This is the quaestorium – the quartermaster. There must be spare weapons here somewhere..." Maracatos nodded in turn.

"You go that way, I'll go this," he said, indicating the rows of tents packed close behind them.

It was Vivienne who found the armoury, half-a-dozen large tents with orderly stacks of reserve weapons. It was deserted. Even the camps' slaves had taken up position around the inside of the walls, ready to retrieve Gaulish spears and other missiles and to feed them back to the legionaries for reuse.

"Here!" Vivienne called. "Over here..." As she waited for Maracatos to find her, there came the blare of carnyxes followed by throbbing as the thousands and thousands of Gaulish warriors began to beat swords on shields. Slowly the drumming built to a crescendo, terrifying at least to the uninitiated.

From his concealed vantage point, Drusus Cassianus watched the first hail of missiles arc over the palisade and then the rush of Gaulish warriors sweep towards the camp like the incoming tide over a sand flat. He spared one glance more and then made for his horse. From experience, he could assess that given the massed strength of

the Gauls and the determination of their initial charge the camps could hold only for hours, not days. It was already late in the afternoon. Caesar had been marching in the wrong direction for the better part of the day and for all Drusus knew might still be marching away from the camps. To find him and to bring him to the rescue in time seemed a forlorn quest, nevertheless, he turned his horse's head to the north and set the animal to a fast hand gallop, rather than a full gallop, to preserve him for the long ride ahead.

Impressive as the Gauls' charge had looked from afar, the first surging wave of warriors inevitably broke and shattered on the rock of the camp. A volley of pila from the Romans checked the first rush while the ditch and rampart did the rest. Here and there a Gaulish warrior did actually manage to scale the palisade only to be dispatched with a minimum of effort.

To Vivienne, who had been thoroughly unnerved by the drumming, it suddenly seemed that the camp must be impregnable and she sighed with relief. Maracatos knew better. Once the Romans had exhausted their reserves of spears and other missiles, then it would be down to hand-to-hand fighting and with only two legions – at the most, 10,000 men – to oppose more than 60,000 Gauls the eventual result appeared a foregone conclusion.

For the moment, Fabius considered the situation more or less under control. So far, by reusing Gaulish weapons hurled over the palisade with intent but little accuracy, stocks of missiles were holding reasonably well. Also Vercingetorix seemed only concerned with the main camp down here on the plain. Runners informed him that nuisance attacks were taking place on the second camp up on the hill but their only purpose seemed to be to occupy the defenders and discourage Fabius from concentrating his forces.

In Vercingetorix's place, Fabius would have made certain of retaking the second camp, a dagger aimed squarely at Gergovia, before assaulting the main stockade but the Gauls seemed determined to crush the entirety of the Romans by brute force as quickly as possible. Fabius supposed it was yet another case of Vercingetorix being forced to focus a fractured and divided command on one simple goal lest his army splinter completely. It might happen that Fabius would be compelled to abandon the second camp anyway, but for the moment both were holding. The questions were how long could they endure, when would Caesar return and would it be soon enough?

Caesar himself was now anxious and drove the pace of his returning legions mercilessly. Annabella's quiet certainty that this was the only way the camps could be saved had made a deep impression.

Darkness fell and he sensed it bring a slackening in his troops' morale. He rode to the head of the column, dismounted and sent his horse away, setting himself to make the pace for as long as it took. He knew the word would travel down the ranks: "Caesar is marching." He knew his men would now drive themselves to the utmost rather than admit weakness before he did. He calculated that if he didn't die of

exhaustion first they could be back in about three hours. Would that be soon enough? He could only hope that his seer saw true.

For her part, Annabella was confident the camps would indeed be saved and that Vivienne and Maracatos would be quite safe, until, that is, ghost Basil started to nag at her. The soothing motion of her horse beneath her, the thought-obliterating din of an army on the march around her, were rudely interrupted as he went on the attack.

Supposing Caesar was lying, he said.

What do you mean lying?

In his history... Supposing jolly old Vercingetorix gets into the camp before we get back...

Why would Caesar lie?

Gloss. To make himself look better. To feed the legend.

That's silly, illogical, Annabella said firmly. He admits defeats... Why would he lie about this?

Does he really...? Does he admit how bad his defeats really were... Bet he doesn't. A forced march and an easy victory counts as a brilliant strategic stroke. Arriving back to find his camps wrecked in time to save a few survivors doesn't. I bet Caesar admits defeat only enough to make his victories seem properly arduous and triumphant. Jolly old history is jolly well written by the jolly old victors.

It was a long speech for Basil, even ghost Basil, and gave Annabella considerable pause for thought.

You're just trying to get me worried, she said eventually, without conviction.

You should be worried... And there's something else...

What?

To worry about...

What? Annabella said impatiently.

Cernunnos...

He's just a ghul, Annabella snapped, even more impatiently.

Ghulan are vassals to Iblis.

The name, Iblis, dropped into Annabella's consciousness like a boulder careering down a mountainside and hitting the valley floor. On the instant, Jamina's voice was ringing in her ears: "Iblis is demanding you be returned to Waq Waq." She fell silent.

Hulloooo, ghost Basil said eventually. Anybody in here with me...?

You're talking about Waq Waq? Annabella said. Evidently, for whatever reason, Basil had not been privy to that particular memory.

I most certainly am, he said. Iblis regards you as an escapee from Waq Waq. And he wants you back. He's absolutely determined to get you back. You know that. And right now you don't have me to protect you...

But Waq Waq – me being there, I mean – hasn't happened yet, Annabella protested. That's way in the future. 1000 years in the future.

What makes you think that time in the Other World is jolly well linear? Basil demanded heatedly. Because it's jolly well not. And you know that. I distinctly

remember telling you that the first time I took you to my tower. How else do you think djinn and all the others like us can flit about to whenever we choose?

Annabella was again stricken to silence. Basil had indeed said something about time not being linear way back at the beginning and the subject had resurfaced once or twice. But she had never thought to question it. She had just taken time-shifting entirely for granted. At last she found her voice.

But why should Cernunnos say anything to Iblis about me? she asked in a tentative whisper.

You called him a ghul to his face, or what passes for his face. Nobody in this time knows he's a ghul. They all think he's a god. So by calling him a ghul you've jolly well marked yourself out.

That still doesn't mean he'll tell Iblis, Annabella said, her voice stronger.

And you challenged him...

I did no such thing, Annabella protested.

I keep telling you, that's not what he thinks. You branded him publicly. And – which is a sight more important – you threaten his nice little earner. If the corpses stop coming he's going to get beastly cross. Just the thought, just the possibility...

But that doesn't automatically mean he'll rush off to tell Iblis.

It does if he's frightened enough of you. Annabella grimaced, unseen by anyone else in the darkness.

Why on earth would he be frightened of me? she asked at last, but she already knew the answer.

Because... Basil said quietly. *Because you dared to challenge him. Put to the test, ghulan are snivelling little cowards. Think bad and they're jolly worse, every time.*

Well, Annabella said rather more firmly than she felt. *I'll just have to make sure we never come into contact again. That he's never put to any test...*

And jolly good luck with that...

Slipping fast through the quiet of the night, Drusus was astonished when the unmistakable sound of legions on the march began to make itself heard above the three-beat of his horse's hooves. He estimated that the army must still be hours away, so this was impossible, he told himself, some sort of hallucination. But as he urged the horse on the rumble of the army kept on growing until there could be absolutely no doubt. He came around the corner in the road to find himself bearing down on Caesar himself, leading the march. Caesar raised his arm and the column behind him ground to a halt.

Drusus dismounted a little stiffly and saluted. Caesar's face, pale in the waning moon, wore a look of deep concern. There could only be one explanation for the sudden materialisation of the centurion.

"How many?" Caesar demanded without any sort of preamble. The question was cryptic but Drusus understood him perfectly.

"All of them," he said succinctly.

"All of them?" Caesar probed.

"Yes sir. 60,000 of them less a few keeping the top camp busy."

Caesar wasted no more time on questions.

"March with me," he ordered. And on the instant the legions swung back into full stride with a new urgency. Drusus, already puffing with the pace, found himself being interrogated with forensic precision.

Fabius wearily passed his hand over his face, smearing the blood – not his, someone else's. The fighting was hard now and had been for hours. The Gauls had made several serious incursions over and latterly through the palisade but each time his men, his rapidly diminishing men, had managed to thrust them back. Fabius doubted they could do it again without help. It was now or never. He summoned a runner and sent him scurrying for the trenches that led to the top camp and his last reserves. It was a forlorn hope. There might just be time for them to race down the hill and into the breach before the Gauls finished regrouping and renewed the assault.

Fabius could feel that this time Vercingetorix might very well be successful. He could also feel men watching him and cursed his temporary surrender to fatigue. He straightened his back, cleared his throat and began to give a series of crisp, confident orders. Every leader required to be an actor and Fabius knew his business through and through.

The Gaulish carnyx sounded their deep, throbbing war cry and the Romans along the western wall which had borne the brunt of the fighting braced themselves.

Still watching from the edge of the quaestorium, Vivienne and Maracatos looked at each other.

"Can they hold again?" Vivienne asked. Now that the crisis of the battle seemed to have arrived she was surprisingly calm, surprisingly resolute.

"I don't know," Maracatos said. "I would've said they couldn't hold last time, but they did..."

"What can we do?" Maracatos shrugged.

"Try not to get killed..."

In the flaring light of torches and blazing tents Quintus could see their lips moving but their words were lost in the general din. Using his prerogatives as an officer, he eased himself along the line of defenders until he was directly opposite them. He was limping from the superficial wound in his leg but promised himself that whatever happened he would not die without first attending to business.

The line broke just through sheer weight of numbers. The pressure of the Gauls forcing their way towards and through the breach simply became irresistible. Stab and thrust as the Romans might there were simply no room for the bodies to fall. Living pressed against living, separated by a barrier of the dead and eventually, inevitably, the Romans were forced to give ground. One step became two, became ten and then the dam, stretched to breaking point, finally fractured.

A trickle of Gauls surging through the rupture rapidly became a flood and the Romans on either side of the break then had no choice but to pull back and regroup lest the stream of enemy pouring through swing round and engulf them from the rear.

Thus given licence to retreat, Quintus seized the moment and sprinted for the quaestorium.

The sudden sound, the thrilling sound of cornu followed by tuba from outside the walls – outside! – floating over the clamour of battle stopped him in his tracks. Caesar! Caesar had returned! Already the Gauls were swarming back out through the breach to meet this new threat. Caesar had divided his relief force in two, sending each wing sweeping round the camp in opposite directions; a classic pincer movement that smashed into the Gauls on either flank.

Quintus started running again. It was still now or never. He saw a flicker of movement coming from between a row of tents and swung towards it. That big brute of a Gaul stepped out into his path. Quintus in a moment of shock had time to realise the man was armed but though suddenly in two minds carried on with his rush. He swung wildly at the big Gaul's neck, felt the blow parried and turned aside and then the double-edged blade of the other's purloined gladius take him in the belly. The sensation of the steel sliding through his entrails was slow and sensuous for just a fraction of a second then it was all searing agony. Quintus felt the point emerging from his back. He shrieked then and went down, clutching at the hilt of the sword buried in the pit of his stomach.

The scream coming from an unexpected direction turned heads. An optio and two others came running, intent on dealing with this threat in their rear. Maracatos, now unarmed and defenceless, stood calmly awaiting his meeting with the gods. Then Vivienne stepped between him and the onrushing Romans, her arms spread wide.

Chapter 8

Given Jamina's intransigence and Basil's dogged insistence, the Sheikh was left with no alternative but to begin the lengthy process of summoning a formal convocation. Such was a rare event in the Other World and excited a deal of comment and speculation, not least because it involved two principal members of the Sheikh's own family.

The rite of convocation was almost as ancient as the djinn themselves and had evolved as the ultimate instrument for settling disputes. The Tahalra volcanic field in southern Algeria once contained a strange geological feature, a long curving slash in the ground, lined with molten lava flowing from the active strombolian volcanic cone at one end. Near this, a small riven gully crossed at right angles, as though a cross-guard forming a hilt with the volcano the pommel, so that from above the whole appeared as the blade of a flaming scimitar. It was known as the sword of Gibil, the primordial fire god, first worshipped by the Sumerians of the human tribes.

A djinni invoking convocation is required to hover above the volcano and state his grievance before his assembled peers, who have all time-shifted back to this aeon and whose communal power focused on the cone will determine the truth or otherwise of his cause. A djinni can meet his end in one of three ways. If he has taken a form, he is vulnerable to whatever that form may be vulnerable. Alternatively, being made of fire he can be extinguished as fire is extinguished and as once Basil so nearly was but for Annabella. Or, finally, a djinni can be subsumed into and thus consumed by a greater fire.

Veracity will keep the volcano quiescent. However, the smallest lie, the smallest dishonesty, the smallest shading, concealed however cunningly, will trigger the massed perception of the assembled djinn. Their power concentrated within the caldera of the volcano will then spark instant eruption, visiting equally instant doom on any litigant at all economical with the truth.

Convocation then was fraught with peril for anyone rash enough to invoke it or for anyone so charged, explaining why djinn, on balance, tended to be extremely well-behaved, at least amongst themselves.

That Sheikh Harun Al Yazid, may he live forever, should be faced with two of his intimate family members determined to bring their differences to such a trial was a matter for wonder amongst the rest of the Marid.

Drusus, now in charge of protecting Caesar's seer with a small detachment, stood viewing the rout of the Gauls from the exact spot that he had watched their initial charge hours before. This time the issue was never in doubt. The legions carved into the main body of the enemy like scythes harvesting corn and seemingly within seconds, certainly no more than a minute or two, the Gauls were streaming away from the camp up the hillside and towards the safety of Gergovia.

He waited some more, time for most of the enemy either to disperse or to be dispatched, and then tentatively led his charge towards the camp. Caesar had put

unusual emphasis on the necessity to preserve the woman's safety and Drusus would be glad to pass on the responsibility to someone else. He halted again until, finally deeming it absolutely safe, he made for the eastern gate, well away from any last skirmishes that might still be taking place.

Annabella was deeply concerned.

I warned you, ghost Basil said. I told you this would happen...

They'll be all right, Annabella said firmly.

You hope...

Drusus led them through the entrance and on down the Via Praetoria. This end of the camp was evidently quite undamaged but the further they penetrated towards the quaestorium the more obvious the signs of severe fighting became. They came to the tent the three of them had been allocated. It was empty.

You see...? Basil began.

Don't start, Annabella snapped. Just don't start... Where can they be?

She led her little party of followers onward, questing left and right, finally coming to a stop at the intervallum, the cleared space between the last of the tents of the quaestorium and the ramparts beyond. It was littered with dead and dying. Squads of legionaries moved about, bringing aid to their own wounded and despatching the last of the Gauls.

Annabella was shocked at the scale of the carnage that stretched before her. Clearly the camp had been on the point of being overrun. Clearly Caesar's legions had returned only just in time. She fought to suppress a mounting sense of panic. Where was Vivienne? What had happened to her? Suddenly, Annabella was forced to confront the possibility that Vivienne might be dead. Always she herself had been the one most in danger. Never before had she had to deal with Vivienne being the more exposed. At that moment, Annabella was brought to realise just how dear Vivienne had become to her, how much they had endured together, how empty life would be without her. She felt tears of fright beginning to start.

Over there... Basil said. What's that?

A detail of four legionaries was standing facing inwards, spear points angled down. Annabella could see a flash of unfortunate red between their legs, tragic red. She began to run, leaving her escort nonplussed.

Vivienne and Maracatos were both lying face down on the ground, all but pinned physically by the spear points. Annabella pushed between two of the guards.

"Let them up!" she demanded. "Vivienne... It's all right. I'm here now. Get up!"

"I can't..." Vivienne said, and indeed a spear point was now pricking her between her shoulder blades. "Annabella...! Where have you been? They're going to execute us..."

"What!" Annabella exclaimed and turned to shout at Drusus. "Order these men to let my friends go! Right now...!"

The centurion sighed and reluctantly approached. He motioned to the four guards, who stepped back a pace or two. Annabella dropped to her knees and helped Vivienne to sit up.

"What on earth has happened?" she demanded, her anxiety causing her to speak a great deal more forcefully than she intended.

"Don't you yell at me," Vivienne flared back. "It's not our fault... It's your fault for leaving us..."

"But what happened?" Annabella repeated, struggling to moderate her voice.

"That soldier we left tied up in the road the other day... He saw us. He flipped and tried to kill Maracatos..."

"And...?"

"Maracatos killed him."

There was a heavy silence and one of the guards looked significantly at Drusus.

"A decurion, sir," he offered. Drusus looked grave. "We are to hold them until the lictors can come..." He gestured broadly at the intervallum where the work of tidying up was proceeding apace.

"It was self-defence," Annabella interrupted. She turned to Drusus. "It was self-defence... You can't execute them for self-defence. Tell these men to let them go," she demanded, more in hope than expectation. Drusus shook his head.

"They killed a legionary," he said. "An officer..."

"But..."

"There is no but. There can be no but. They will be executed."

Annabella rose and squared her shoulders.

"No!" she said, her eyes blazing. "They will not be executed! Take us to Caesar."

"I can't do that," Drusus said. "The general is far too busy to be bothered with this sort of affair."

"If you allow my friends to be executed, then you will have to execute me with them," Annabella said viciously. "I'll make sure of that. And what will you tell your precious Caesar then? That you killed his seer because you didn't want to bother him...? His seer who saved this camp and all your necks along with it..." Drusus shifted uneasily.

"Bring them," he said at last and turned back towards the praetorium.

A message was sent into Caesar's command tent but Annabella and the others were required to stand waiting for at least an hour. At last they were ushered within to find Caesar and Fabius seated at ease and sharing a flask of wine. Caesar frowned when he saw them and rose.

"I can do nothing," he said to Annabella pre-emptively. "They killed an officer. They will be put to the fustuarium." He began to make a gesture of dismissal but was brought up short by Annabella in a towering fury.

"So much for the great Caesar!" she stormed. "So much for his justice! So much for his gratitude! I have saved you and your army several times over. If it weren't for me, right now two of your legions would be destroyed, your camps overrun and your

baggage taken. The rest of you would be running for your lives with Vercingetorix and the Aedui – don't forget the Aedui – all out to finish you off once and for all. Without me you'd be all washed up and very probably dead..."

Caesar held up his hands, palms out, as much as in self-protection as to stop the tirade.

"I still can do nothing," he managed to insert as Annabella was forced to pause for breath. "I cannot set a precedent that would put every single officer in my army at risk of a knife in the back..." Annabella snorted.

"So much for your vaunted Roman discipline and loyalty!" she snarled. "And if you think I'll ever help you again... Think again. I can tell you the day you die, Caesar. I can tell you where you die, I can tell you how you die... How you die and who kills you..." Annabella's voice echoed in the sudden, unbreathing silence freezing the tent. She stopped. Caesar was regarding her, stricken. Slowly his features smoothed out.

"Tell me!" he demanded with burning intensity. Other than he and Annabella, the rest of the people in the tent were standing in petrified tableau.

Annabella said nothing but kept her blazing blue eyes locked on Caesar's.

"Tell me!" he demanded again, this time with a hint of fear in his voice. Still Annabella stood. At last she spoke:

"I will say this, Caesar," she said in the coldest, most impersonal tones she could muster. "Only this... Beware the Ides of March."

Caesar stepped back from her as though she had slapped him across the face.

"Tell me everything..." He said, his voice suddenly husky. Annabella said nothing but finally lowered her eyes.

"I must know." Caesar was speaking now with unashamed entreaty. Still Annabella said nothing.

"I will give your friends a court martial. A fair trial. More I cannot do..."

Annabella raised her eyes.

"I swear," Caesar said.

Take it, Basil said.

Annabella considered. It was time at least. Basil, whoever ghost Basil might be, was undoubtedly right. It was the best offer she could expect to get, reasonably or unreasonably. Another memory flashed across her brain. Time, plus events to come might be enough. She lifted an eyebrow interrogatively.

"When we take Gergovia," Caesar said. "It can't be before."

Annabella nodded, hiding her satisfaction, and opened her mouth to speak into the still frozen silence.

"You will die on the Ides of March," she intoned, "seven years from now. You will be stabbed to death in the Forum."

The witnesses to the scene sighed unconsciously. Caesar dropped his head and a moment later motioned everybody out.

Annabella was taken back to her tent in the quaestorium. Vivienne and Maracatos were hustled off to the camp's carcer, the small prison reserved for serious defaulters pending sentence of execution and execution of sentence.

Well this is a jolly fine mess... Basil began as Annabella wearily dropped to her pallet.

They're alive, she said. And we have time now...

Only until Caesar wins.

Gotcha, Annabella said tiredly. Caesar never takes Gergovia. Vercingetorix beats him.

Are you sure?

Abso-jolly-lutely sure, Annabella said with irritation. Caesar admits losing 700 men, including 46 centurions... Thousands of Romans are wounded. It's a disaster. He has to retreat... He has to retreat in a big hurry.

That doesn't jolly well sound right, Basil insisted.

Oh, leave it... Annabella snapped. If Caesar confesses to losing 700 legionaries you can bet it was a damn sight worse than that. You're the one always saying he cooked his book... I'm going to sleep...

Isolated in a tent in the middle of a Roman Army encampment in quite the wrong period of history without Vivienne or Maracatos and with only ghost Basil to keep her company, Annabella found herself sinking into depression. The future was very black. Even if she did manage to rescue the others from sentence of execution she had no idea of where they could go or what they might do, never mind how she and Vivienne might find a way back to their own time.

Depression was fast degenerating into despair. Even ghost Basil – her psychotic imagining – seemed to have deserted her. She was only saved from herself by the tramp of booted feet. A spear point lifted aside the flap of the tent.

"You are summoned," a voice barked from outside. And such a summons could only proceed from one source. Hastily, Annabella set about pulling herself together and arming for another battle of wits.

Caesar was alone in his tent pensively studying a map. He ignored Annabella as she was ushered within, leaving her to stand, contemplating his back.

So rude, Basil said. I wish I were really here...

And what would you do? Annabella said, amused.

Jolly well teach him some manners, of course...

We haven't done any levitation for ages... Annabella said. Memories of past such escapades brought a smile to her face. Caesar turned at that moment.

"You find me amusing?" he inquired, dangerously. Without haste, Annabella rearranged her expression.

"I find it amusing that you apparently need to try to impress me by being rude," she said in a neutral voice. Not for the first time, Caesar was taken aback by her directness.

"By which I take it you're not impressed?"

"Not in the slightest," Annabella said firmly. "I know who you are and I know what happens to you. As they say where I come from, I wouldn't be you for quids."

"Quids?"

"Gold," Annabella said. "I wouldn't be you for all the gold in Gaul, which they tell me is what this war is really all about. You're trying to steal their gold and take it back to Rome to buy power. I'm certainly not impressed by that." Nonplussed, Caesar sought to break the train of the conversation by rattling the map.

"You're going to tell me there'll be a battle tomorrow," Annabella said, pre-empting him. Caesar regarded her narrowly.

"Yes," he said. "There will be a battle. We will take Gergovia." Annabella said nothing but allowed herself to smile enigmatically.

"What?" Caesar demanded.

"You mean you will attempt to take Gergovia," Annabella remarked innocently.

"What?" Caesar repeated urgently. "What do you see?"

"I see my friends imprisoned under sentence of death," Annabella shot back.

Caesar turned away in frustration.

"I've told you," he said over his shoulder. "Discipline demands it. I repeat, I've done what I can..."

"In which case I've told you all that I'm going to," Annabella said implacably. Caesar swung round.

"I could force you," he said bluntly. "There are ways. Many ways."

"And could you believe anything I might say? Could you gamble your army, your future, the future of Rome on any words you might be able to get me to say under torture...? I think not," Annabella finished for him. "Even if my muse should survive the torture..." she added for good measure. Caesar's shoulders dropped a fraction.

"You will tell me nothing?"

"No," Annabella said with the sound of a door slamming. "Nothing."

"At least tell me who kills me?" The entreaty in his voice was naked and raw.

Annabella just stared at him wordlessly.

The quiet night watch within the camp was interrupted by a bustle of activity. Men, horses and mules were mustered and marched out towards the north, with no attempt at concealment, rather the reverse. The night disguised the fact that the bulk of this force was made up of non-fighting men, grooms and muleteers. They were followed by one of Caesar's six legions.

"So it begins," Annabella said aloud. She had been woken from a light sleep by the bustle and activity.

What begins? Basil demanded.

The battle for Gergovia, of course. This is a feint. Caesar will draw the Gauls away to the North with this lot, then launch an attack from the top camp at the walls.

What happens? Basil asked.

Caesar gets the Aedui to hit Vercingetorix in the flank which is enough to let one of the legions breach the walls. But there's a snafu...

A what-u?

A fubar?

What?

...Confusion. They go too far and that lets Vercingetorix get back in time to catch them exposed. After that, for Caesar it's all retreat, and defeat.

Dawn saw the five remaining legions form up and take to the connecting trenches leading to the top camp, just as Annabella had predicted. The main camp was now peopled exclusively by slaves and the merest skeleton crew of sentries. No one seemed to have the slightest interest in her.

Allowing time for the last of the troops to get far up the hillside, Annabella emerged from her tent and began to drift about the camp apparently aimlessly. The slim figure slipping through the half light went quite unremarked and certainly no one detected that she had found the same armoury tent that Vivienne and Maracatos had raided, nor that, as well as a sword, she had elsewhere managed to purloin sufficient food for three or four days at least. She stashed this temporarily in her tent before again taking to drifting about the camp.

The horse lines were her next concern. She feared that Caesar would have sent off every available mount to the north, but there were still a number of animals there, engaged with their nosebags. Officers' horses, Annabella presumed. She picked out three: a big gelding standing at least 16 hands for Maracatos and the two smallest for herself and Vivienne. There were saddles balanced on a rail but Annabella drew the line at attempting to saddle the chosen mounts herself. Instead, she circled back to her tent, divided the food into three bundles, returned to the horse lines and left the supplies sitting innocuously beneath the saddles, the food concealing the gladius.

Finally, she began to edge her way circuitously towards the carcer. It turned out to be a stout stockade enclosing a small area. There was one sentry leaning against the barred entrance, contemplating the blackened toenails poking through the open toes of his heavy boots. Annabella supposed he was there in case the inmates should take it into their heads to attempt to scale the walls, which led her to wonder how many inmates there might actually be. She sidled round to the back of the stockade made from the same timber baulks as that used for the outer palisade. Through a crack she could make out only two figures, Vivienne and Maracatos. Any other defaulters must have been released to fight. That simplified matters.

"Pssst!" she hissed. Vivienne started and looked about uncomprehending.

"Over here!" Annabella whispered impatiently. "Behind you..." The penny dropped and both Vivienne and Maracatos crawled towards her. Before they could begin to ask questions, Annabella spoke urgently.

"I'm going to get you out and we're going to escape," she said. Vivienne opened her mouth to speak.

"No," Annabella whispered. "No questions. The guard will hear. Just be ready."

Vivienne and Maracatos were left to stare at each other with wild surmise.

"Escape?" Maracatos murmured at last. "How can we escape?"

"I don't know..." Vivienne began.

"Escape... From a Roman legionary camp. It's impossible," Maracatos insisted.

"You don't know Annabella..."

"If we try it, we'll be killed..."

"We're going to be killed anyway?" Vivienne said quietly. "Or had you forgotten? If Annabella says we're going to escape, I believe her... Stay here if you want, I'm not."

They fell silent.

"How is she going to get us out of here?" Maracatos said at last, but there was an outbreak of shouting before Vivienne could answer. The dominant word was "incendia!" Fire!

Seconds later they heard running footsteps departing just outside as the bored sentry was inevitably drawn to the action. Moments later the gate to the stockade swung open.

"Quick!" Annabella ordered and waited impatiently as the two collected themselves and hurried out. She carefully shut and fastened the gate behind them before leading them as casually as possible to the horse lines.

"Don't talk," she commanded Vivienne, who seem to want to chatter. "Wait..."

She gestured at Maracatos.

"Those three," she said, indicating the horses she had chosen. "Can you saddle them...?" But Maracatos was already moving to the rail with the waiting tack.

"Here," Annabella said to Vivienne, retrieving the bundles of food. "Help me with these."

"What is it?" Vivienne asked. Annabella shrugged.

"Whatever I could find... Bacon, cheese, bread, some grain..."

The horses were ready.

"We should lead them to the gate," Annabella said. "We'll attract less attention..."

"Which gate?" Maracatos asked, somewhat deferentially. He was apparently coming to Vivienne's view that Annabella could be trusted to know what she was doing.

"The east gate," Annabella said, heading as she spoke towards the porta praetoria. Passing through yet another row of tents, they could see the opening in the palisade in front of them. Beyond it was the titulum, the half-moon-shaped earthen mound that protected the opening in the walls. They could also see guards stationed in the gaps between the walls and the ends of the titulum.

Of one accord, the three stopped and looked at each other with concern. There were rather more men than Annabella had banked on.

"We'll have to charge them," Annabella said and hope we can get through.

"Surprise, and all that..." Vivienne looked at her doubtfully and was about to speak when Maracatos stopped her. He was grinning and turned to Annabella.

"You're not the only one who can make a diversion," he said. "Take your chance when the time is right."

And without waiting for explanation, protest or argument, he swung himself into the saddle and put his mount at the full gallop straight at the titulum.

The guards heard the horse coming of course but as they began to turn, they were already too late. Maracatos collected his mount, set it at the mound and in another two strides was sailing over the top of it.

In automatic reaction and with no thought as to what it might mean, the guards – all of them – raced around the titulum in pursuit, leaving the gate quite unguarded.

Vivienne and Annabella glanced at each other with identical expressions of glee and with Annabella leading trotted decorously through one of the gaps and out into the open countryside. Before them, the guards had given up their futile pursuit and were standing in a huddle staring after Maracatos's rapidly vanishing rear.

The two girls kicked up their mounts and were also well clear of pursuit by the time the hapless guards realised they had not only been overflanked but outflanked.

Chapter 9

Basil was beside himself. A convocation required 100 per cent attendance of the brethren and to persuade such a disparate body of highly individual spirits to abandon the pursuits of the moment and agree to assemble at an appointed time a geological aeon ago could take weeks. As it happened, because of the highly unusual nature of the dispute, or rather the principals involved, and the consequent high degree of prurient curiosity, the far-flung members of the clan were much more disposed to be cooperative than they might have been. Even so, an unconscionable number of days had passed and many more would follow before the matter of what Jamina might have done to Annabella could be put to trial.

In the meantime, Basil dissolved into a barely coherent mess of guilt and anxiety. That it had taken so long for him to realise who must lie behind Annabella's disappearance was a matter for the most severe self-reproach. That in taking so long he had exposed Annabella to who knew what degradation, danger and disaster was a matter for deepest anxiety.

The Sheikh for his part was equally stricken with guilt. In the first place, he was full of self-reproach that he had ever allowed his sister to assume the position of arbiter of his son's morals. Over the ages, she had simply worn him down. She was so strident and so insistent that in the end the water had won and the stone, worn away by importunity, had crumbled, as stone always does. It had been weakness on his part, undeniable weakness, weakness that might now cost him Basil.

And in the second place, though he had determined to say nothing to Basil of Iblis's ultimatum for fear it would push Basil completely over the edge, keeping such a secret was deeply repugnant.

All at once he resolved to take matters in hand.

The portcullis to Jamina's castle rose as he approached and she was standing in the outer bailey when he entered.

"What?" she said baldly.

"We need to talk," the Sheikh replied.

"So talk." The Sheikh exploded.

"Jamina, this intransigence of yours will send Basil mad. Is that what you want?"

"My intransigence? Your intransigence..."

"What on earth do you mean?"

"You have refused, consistently refused, to take responsibility for his upbringing and development. Worse, you have allowed him to run riot century after century in the most dissipated and dissolute fashion."

"In your opinion. Only your opinion. And your opinion is of no account. You are not the sheikh."

"More's the pity. I can tell you things would be very different if I were."

The Sheikh paused. "I don't understand," he said, lowering his voice and trying to be reasonable. "Are you behind Annabella's disappearance? And if so, why?"

"Harun, you are a fool. Almost as big a fool as Basil." The Sheikh reacted sharply but managed to hold his temper, just.

"So you did do it?"

"I didn't say that," Jamina countered. "I said you are a fool."

"Where is she?"

"I don't know."

"Where is she?" the Sheikh repeated, a thunderous undertone to his voice.

"I said, I don't know."

"And you're prepared to swear to that on the Sword of Gibil...? What have you done, Jamina? What have you done to that poor girl?"

"Nothing," Jamina said complacently. "Whatever has happened, she brought on herself."

"You do realise that if the Sword doesn't destroy Basil, that this will?"

"Then so be it," Jamina said in a low voice. "Better that than the Marid come to be ruled by a human who has taken al iksir. Better that than war with Iblis." The Sheikh was shocked and was unable to speak for some little time. Jamina watched him carefully and at the psychological moment struck.

"You would do nothing," she said. "You agreed it was the proper solution yet you would do nothing...knowing that I would; that you could keep your hands clean, your precious honour intact, while I did the dirty work. So don't you come here, Harun, all puffed up with self-righteous indignation and think to lecture me."

"I also said she must be protected at all costs," the Sheikh roared in fury.

"But you didn't mean it. I know you, Harun. I know when you're lying to yourself. Now, get out!"

But despite her ostensible confidence in the unassailable rightness of her position, Jamina, nevertheless, was shaken by the Sheikh's visit. His several mentions of the Sword of Gibil had brought the possibility of her own demise into stark relief. Death by immolation was no part of her plan. Until now she had been unconvinced that the Sheikh would actually go through with summoning a convocation. Suddenly, the actuality was all too real.

Jamina, not to put too fine a point on it, began to panic.

The Sheikh, equally, was totally dismayed and deeply conflicted. Had he, in fact, given tacit licence to Jamina to deal with the Iblis ultimatum? Surely not. Surely he had given no sort of indication that she should act unilaterally. But could he be certain? And what had Jamina actually done? What act of betrayal had she perpetrated in his name? What calamity had she caused to befall Annabella?

And even as he asked the question, the Sheikh became very certain that despite her denials, Jamina had indeed descended to the diabolical. Which left the most crucial question of all. What could he possibly say to Basil?

The situation in Gergovia was evolving rapidly – first the abortive attack on the Roman camps and now the Roman counter-assault on the oppidum – but Vernogena's attention, her obsessive brooding, was fixed on the two matters of most immediate concern: the blue-eyed witch demanded by Cernunnos, and the naked treachery of Licnos which was still making the acid in her stomach seethe and bubble. Yes, she had successfully managed to deflect his attack and to extract some small advantage in the process but that didn't mitigate the fact that he had dared to make the attempt in the first place.

As the morning wore on, she finally came to a decision and sent for him. He was nervous and ill at ease, she was pleased to see, as well he might be. She dispensed with preliminary sparring and proceeded straight to the bludgeon.

"The decision of the Council was clear," she said coldly. "You are charged with recapturing the witch and however inconvenient your absence may prove for myself, I may not stand in the way of such a ruling. At the earliest opportunity you will take a suitable party of men and you will scour the countryside."

At face value his punishment was less than he might reasonably expect, but Licnos was quite aware that his future now hung by the thinnest of threads. If indeed he should manage to recover the witch then all might still be well. The probability of failure, however, was remarkably high, in which case Vernogena, using the imprimatur of the council, would ensure his ruin, if not his actual demise on the sacrificial slab.

Again Licnos cursed himself for what was now clearly a most ill-conceived attempt to dispense with Vernogena once and for all. The entrancing prospects of success had been so tempting they had quite blinded him to the consequences of failure. Now everything depended on him finding the witch.

They stopped at the edge of the forest. There were no signs of pursuit.

"Well, Vivienne said. "I guess we owe you a vote of thanks..."

"Indeed we do..." Maracatos seconded.

"...But what on earth do we do now?" Vivienne went on. Annabella shrugged.

"Search me," she said. Her thinking had not got beyond saving Vivienne and Maracatos from the fustuarium. There was silence. Maracatos looked from one to the other waiting for either to speak, but eventually it was left to him.

"We go north," he said. "North to my people, my country. You will be safe there."

Vivienne and Annabella turned questioningly to each other but as neither had the least notion of an alternative, they could only nod.

"Thank you," Vivienne said gratefully. "Thank you, thank you."

"But it is a long journey, difficult, dangerous," Maracatos cautioned. "We may not get there."

"How long?" Vivienne asked.

"Long," Maracatos said. "At least 500 Roman miles." Vivienne drooped a little.

"When you say we go north," Annabella asked, "do you mean directly north?" Maracatos grimaced.

"We can't," he said. "First it is the country of the Averni, then the Aedui, then the Mandubii – all enemies."

"Then we should go west," Annabella said firmly, pointing towards the plateau of Gergovia and beyond. Maracatos shook his head unhappily.

"That is bad country," he said. "Mountains, forests... Very slow, very difficult to get through, if you get through..."

"What do you mean?" Annabella said.

"It's where the lawless go... There is only one way to my country. We must go first east and then north when we strike the great rivers. If we follow them north we will skirt Bibracte and Alesia..." The name, Alesia, sent a shiver down Annabella's spine.

"Outlaws?" Vivienne said, surprised. "You have outlaws?"

"Of course," Maracatos said. "Where there are laws there are always those who are lawless."

"We're not going anywhere near Alesia," Annabella said.

"Why not?" Vivienne wanted to know.

"It doesn't matter...we're just not," Maracatos shrugged.

"We'll stay as far away as we can," he offered. "But past Alesia is the only way home."

"Anyway," Vivienne said. "We can't stay here..."

South, ghost Basil said. *There's always South...*

South to what?

How should I jolly well know?

Thank you, Basil. So helpful...

"All right," Annabella said reluctantly. "But I mean it. We have to stay absolutely as far from Alesia as we can. And must we go through the forest...?" She pointed. Maracatos shrugged again.

"It spreads all the way to the river, the Allier," he said. "The road is the only way."

Still Annabella hesitated. There came the faint sound of carnyx drifting on the breeze, followed by tuba.

Don't you do it, Basil said. *Don't you go in there...*

Annabella ignored him.

"Come on," she said, making up her mind. "Before somebody else decides they want to use the road."

The instant her horse crossed the boundary of the first trees, Annabella knew that ghost Basil was right. She shouldn't venture into the forest, even on the road...but what choice did she have?

"Listen," she said to the others, stopping her horse. "This is all wrong..." The others also stopped and turned to face her.

"What do you mean?" Vivienne demanded. "Why...? I thought we'd made a decision."

"It's too dangerous," Annabella began.

"You mean Cernunnos?" Vivienne interrupted.

"That, too... The Romans will be beaten today and they'll be coming this way just as fast as they can. Vercingetorix will be hot on their heels..."

"You mean..." Maracatos said.

"I mean that if we go this way, effectively all of them will be chasing us. We have to go south."

"South!" Vivienne exclaimed. She had been allowing herself visions of Maracatos's comfortable home and supportive family.

"South...!" Maracatos echoed.

"And another thing I've just remembered," Annabella said. "There's a German army – cavalry – coming down from the north to fight for Caesar. If we go that way we'll be caught between everybody..."

"And just how exactly do you know all this?" Maracatos demanded suspiciously. Annabella regarded him wearily.

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you."

"If you want us to go south," Maracatos said with some heat, "then convince me."

"Do you believe we really come from the future?" Annabella asked him. Maracatos made a gesture that might have meant anything. Annabella took a deep breath.

"I have read all this in a book," she said. "At the end of all this fighting, Caesar wrote a history, *Commentarii de Bello Gallico*. Political propaganda in other words..."

"Propaganda?" Maracatos interrupted, determined to understand everything.

"He wanted power and to get it he had to impress the Roman citizens. He wrote the book to tell them how clever and how brave and how cunning he was. And the book became famous. It survived for hundreds and hundreds of years. It still does survive in our time. I've read that book and I remember a lot of it, the important stuff. I know what happens here at Gergovia because Caesar wrote it all down, and I know what happens afterwards, right to the end of the wars... We can't go north. Not yet. Not till the siege of Alesia is finished."

Maracatos sat his horse looking thoroughly sceptical.

"It's true," Vivienne said. "I haven't read the book but I've seen Annabella's copy. I had one myself... I know it exists. And if Annabella says this is what's going to happen, then it will."

"You said you know how Caesar dies," Maracatos objected. "That can't be in this book, not if Caesar wrote it... He can't have written about his own death. How do you know how he dies?"

"He was assassinated," Annabella said. "It started another war. It's famous... History... Everyone in our time knows how Caesar died."

Still Maracatos hesitated and then with extreme reluctance nodded agreement.

Very wise, ghost Basil remarked as they emerged again from the trees into weak sunshine momentarily piercing the clouds. And jolly lucky Cernunnos never realised you were almost back in his clutches.

Annabella said nothing but the vaguest spark of an idea lodged in the debris at the back of her mind.

"We'd better hurry," she said. "We need to be well away before someone who matters realises we're gone, or before the fighting finishes. They put their horses to a modest canter.

The Roman camp was well out of sight now, hidden by a rise in the undulating ground. They found a gentle valley with a small stream heading generally south and automatically followed it, making good time along the easy going. The further they went the safer they began to feel and relaxed accordingly, which was their undoing.

A hare exploded from its set, right under the hooves of Vivienne's horse. The gelding shied and reared with the shock, and Vivienne, caught unawares and no sort of horsewoman at the best of times, was thrown heavily. She hit the ground with an audible thud, her head smacking hard into a most unfortuitous rock.

Annabella and Maracatos looked at each other in shock. Their horses, too, had expressed extreme displeasure but Annabella had managed to control hers after a struggle and Maracatos automatically. He slid to the ground, followed a moment later by Annabella.

Vivienne was deeply unconscious, her body as limp and pliable as the tunic she was wearing. Blood was flowing copiously from a nasty gash just above her temple. Maracatos was about to strip off his shirt and tear it up for bandages when Annabella stopped him.

"You'll need it," she said. "And there's no telling when we can get you another one." She took down one of the food bundles and scavenged a bandage from the cloth she had used to wrap it up. She tore that in half, folding one part to make a pad and using the other to bind it in place.

The sun had disappeared again. There was a cold breeze and a threatening spatter of rain.

"Will she be all right?" Maracatos asked.

"I don't know," Annabella replied. "Hitting her head on that rock was bad. I'm no doctor but I'll bet she has concussion."

"Concussion?"

"What happens when you hit your head hard," Annabella said. "It can kill you or do other bad things." Another swirl of rain passed over them.

"We have to find shelter," Annabella said. "She has to be kept warm and out of the weather. Could you go and look for something, do you think? I don't want to move her more than we absolutely have to."

"What sort of shelter?"

"How should I know," Annabella snapped impatiently. "Anything. A cave... A haystack... Anything..."

Maracatos swung up onto his horse and headed off down the valley, travelling fast. Annabella had only just lost sight of him when he came on a cart track angling down from the direction of Gergovia and continuing on along the stream. He followed it hopefully and after another mile or so came to a farmhouse set in a fenced yard and surrounded by fields of ripened crops. It was a low stone building divided in two, with a steeply pitched shingle roof. One end was a byre for the farm animals. The other end, judging by the window apertures, had two or three living rooms. It was a design

eminently familiar to Maracatos. There was no smoke coming from the chimney and no sign of life.

He dismounted and tethered his horse to the fence. The byre was empty and the rooms unoccupied. The whole of the farm, people, animals, bag and baggage, had obviously been removed to Gergovia for the duration of the Roman incursion. Wasting no time on further inspection, Maracatos remounted and galloped back the way he had come.

Vivienne was still deep in coma. She was lying on a scant bed of hay that Maracatos had managed to scrape up from the floor of the byre. Her head wound was now washed and freshly bandaged, the bleeding more or less stopped. There was a sputtering fire in the chimney piece but the room remained chill and damp.

"She looks dead," Maracatos said worriedly.

"Well she's not," Annabella replied. "Not yet, anyway."

"Don't you care?" Maracatos flared. Annabella lifted her eyes and regarded him steadily.

"I care very, very much," she said. "She is my sister. She has saved my life. And you wouldn't believe what we've been through together. Don't you dare think that I don't care."

"But..."

"Wailing and gnashing my teeth won't help anything," Annabella snapped. Maracatos fell into an embarrassed silence.

"How long will she be like this?" he asked at last.

"I have no idea," Annabella replied tartly and then softened. "It could be hours. It could be days. It could be for ever. Even the best doctor couldn't tell you."

"I..." Maracatos began.

"What?" Annabella prompted.

"I don't want her to die..."

"And you think I do...?" Annabella replied, furious.

"No, no, I didn't mean that... She's just so beautiful..."

Annabella regarded the young woman lying all but lifeless on the rough bedding, and saw her properly for the first time in she knew not how long. It was true. One tended to think of Vivienne as spectacular, all thrusting bosom and pale gold hair, quite overlooking the fine bone structure and the graceful carriage. She truly was beautiful.

Suddenly Annabella began to weep, silently, but the tears pouring down her face. She had been confronted with the prospect of Vivienne's mortality all too recently. Now here might be the actuality. The memory and the moment, along with everything else that had happened to them of late, combined to release an outpouring of raw emotion.

Maracatos shuffled awkwardly and then dropped to his haunches beside Annabella. He put a tentative hand on her shoulder but she shook it off. There was only one being who could comfort her and who knew where or when he might be.

There was no essential change in Vivienne all the rest of that day. From time to time she would stir restlessly and Annabella and Maracatos would watch anxiously, hoping it might be the prelude to her regaining consciousness, but she never did and they were both uncomfortably aware that Vivienne remained completely unaware of everything. Annabella had even tried pricking her quite hard but there had been absolutely no response.

Outside, in a taste of the winter to come, the weather drew in with a rising wind and increasing passing showers. Maracatos made it his mission in life to keep the fire burning as brightly as he could but wet wood, the uncovered window apertures and general drafts meant the room grew progressively colder. They did their best to keep Vivienne warm with whatever coverings they could find but they had little enough to offer. Any sort of firewood, never mind dry, was also in short supply.

As the evening advanced Annabella and Maracatos ate sparingly and settled down for a long uncomfortable night, putting Vivienne as close to the fire as was safe. Annabella snuggled up on the outside, trying to keep Vivienne warm with her own body heat.

The fire smouldered and went out, unable to cope with the wet wood. At some point Vivienne's meagre covering slipped off and at the same time, Annabella, restless herself, unconsciously drew further away. The rain stopped, the sky cleared, the wind increased and it grew even colder.

Elation, ecstasy, euphoria. None of the usual superlatives could describe the great tidal wave of emotion that swept Gergovia that night after the retreat of the Romans, leaving five thousand dead on the field of battle, ten thousand, even as many as fifteen thousand... The devilish Caesar had been outfoxed, outmanoeuvred and outfought by the splendid Vercingetorix, truly one of the great generals of the age.

No one could quite believe it. One minute the Romans were over the walls and threatening to sack Gergovia itself, the next Vercingetorix had charged to the rescue and the Romans were fleeing in disarray, their camps abandoned, the siege broken and Caesar left with only one option. He must now head north and attempt to reunite his own legions with the four he had months before detached under his second-in-command, Titus Labienus, and sent off to engage the Parisii and the Senones.

The failure of Caesar's strategy at Gergovia was the sort of setback that could turn the whole war into a disaster for him. So nearly had the plan worked but the confusion of the battlefield had brought it undone. The crucial order had gone astray and instead of retreating to draw Vercingetorix down from the heights and out into the open to be dealt with summarily and comprehensively, the legion attacking the walls after making the breakthrough had charged on towards the oppidum, only to be massacred itself. Accordingly, the whole army had been forced into wholesale retreat.

Now, sensing weakness and blood, wavering Gaulish tribes would inevitably come down firmly on the side of Vercingetorix and rebellion. Caesar, his force split in two and separated by hundreds of miles, could well find himself isolated, outnumbered and

facing total destruction. To the Gauls, final overwhelming victory now seemed inevitable.

Dawn brought Annabella and Maracatos simultaneously awake. Annabella stretched and her hand touched Vivienne's bare arm. A moment later she was sitting upright, all concern.

"She's freezing," Annabella said worriedly. She was not to know that in her own time hypothermia would be regarded as one of the very few possible treatments for coma, though whether or not actually beneficial would remain an open question. "We have to get her warm. Can you do something about the fire...?"

Vivienne stirred slightly at Annabella's touch but neither she nor Maracatos noticed. Maracatos nodded, rose and was almost out the door when he stopped short and swung round.

"Where am I?" Vivienne asked. Her voice was slurred and barely comprehensible.

"Vivienne?" Annabella murmured, not daring to hope.

"Where am I?" Vivienne repeated in the same slurred tones. "What...happened?"

"Your horse threw you," Maracatos exclaimed joyfully. Vivienne winced.

"Not so loud," Annabella hissed. "Quietly..."

"Sorry..." Maracatos whispered abashed. "I'll try to find some more wood..."

"God," Vivienne said. "My head feels like a Gaul's after a three-day feast." She had been growing steadily stronger as the morning progressed and was now sitting up, her back propped against a wall. The bandage round her head had slipped slightly over one eye, giving her a rakish, dissipated air. Maracatos simpered sympathetically. Outside the sun was now shining although it was still quite cool, as if the day was trying to make up its mind whether summer had returned or whether it really was time to call it autumn going on winter.

"Teach you to fall off your horse," Annabella said with an expression that belied the astringency of her words.

"It wasn't my fault..." Vivienne began to protest.

"Of course not," Maracatos said. "It could happen to anyone. Why, I remember..." He suddenly fell silent. There was a sound outside. Footsteps. Maracatos was halfway to his feet, his sword out of the scabbard, when a figure appeared in the doorway, indistinct against the backlighting. There was a wordless exclamation and then a voice, a woman's voice.

"You! What are you doing in my house?" It was Gesataia. A moment later Suicca's head also appeared. She was instantly furious.

"How dare you?" she stormed. "After what you did at the sacrifice...?"

"I didn't do anything," Annabella said quietly. Through the window she could see Bag-o-bones standing phlegmatically in the shafts of a cart piled high with household goods and furniture. There was a chicken coop perched on top. There was also a cow and some sheep, already busily grazing.

"You angered Cernunnos!" Suicca shouted.

"You're not being honest," Annabella snapped. "It was those Romans who angered Cernunnos, not me. And your people have just defeated the Romans, have they not? So what are you complaining about? Cernunnos was obviously still on your side..."

"How do you know the Romans have been defeated?" Gesataia demanded. "More sorcery...!"

"We saw it happen," Annabella stated baldly. It was a brazen lie but justified, she felt, in the circumstances.

"Perhaps," Gesataia said suspiciously. "But it still doesn't explain what you're doing in my house.

"Vivienne was injured," Annabella said. "We needed shelter..."

"And with all the men away fighting," Maracatos put in at the psychological moment, "we thought perhaps you might welcome help with the harvest. It's so late already." He gestured, meaning to indicate the fields of spelt outside that would spoil if left much longer.

It proved a decisive intervention, though nothing was resolved without a great deal more discussion and general bad cess from Suicca along the lines of:

"We don't need any help..."

"We can do it ourselves..."

"I don't want them..."

"Tell them to go away..."

Finally Maracatos smiled at her quizzically and her opposition suddenly melted.

Chapter 10

This time the Desert of Death gave the illusion of life. A sand devil would form, chase down the dunes until out of sight, to be followed by others at irregular intervals. It lent the bleak landscape an air of spurious frivolity.

Again Jamina was required to wait from dawn until almost dusk. At last, when there remained barely enough light for the disembodied shadow to be discerned at all, Lilis made her appearance. The two beings of the Other World approached each other with extreme caution. When still some distance apart, they came to a halt, each waiting for the other to speak. At last, when Lilis had all but faded from view, Jamina was forced to cede the advantage and break the silence.

"The girl has been made...available. Do you have her?"

"No."

"Yet you search?"

"The word has been passed. Where should we search? When should we search?"

"That I cannot tell."

"Then to find her will take time."

"Time I do not have. The al Yazids seek to put me on trial. I will perish."

"The Sheikh?"

"The son..."

"Then bring him here."

"He is strong. He fought Iblis."

"He has not fought me."

The last of the light faded and vanished, and with it Lilis, now just gloom on gloom.

Jamina departed, her mind in turmoil. Could she really, in cold blood so to speak, have Basil...murdered?

Her nephew?

Her disappointing nephew?

Her nephew who was determined on a path that inevitably would lead the Marid to doom and destruction?

Control by a human?

War with Iblis?

Put like that, was it not her duty to resolve the situation once and for all?

Maracatos's offer of help with the harvest in exchange for bed and board was one of those ideas that seemed like genius at the time but which rapidly lost all attraction in reality, or so Annabella reflected rather bitterly as she examined her hands. Unused to hard, grinding labour they had quickly become blistered and extremely painful.

Gesataia's farm had four large spelt fields which had to be harvested by hand. The wheat then had to be gathered, threshed and winnowed, and the resulting grain stored

in a large underground silo. It was all backbreaking work and for just five people, with the regular farm chores thrown in for good measure, seemingly endless.

At the end of the first day, both Annabella and Vivienne more or less collapsed, so tired that eating the evening meal seemed an effort too far, and they both slept as though dead until rudely shaken awake at dawn for the torture to begin all over again.

Another day passed and on the third they had stopped for the mid-morning break when Maracatos spotted a group of five or six horsemen as they crested the brow of the hill that sheltered the farmhouse and proceeded on down the track towards it. Instinctively he crouched and motioned the girls and Suicca down.

"Who are they?" Annabella murmured.

"I don't know," Maracatos said.

"Could they be hunting us?"

"I don't know that either."

"What if they are?" Vivienne said, anxiety plain in her voice.

"If we're careful," Maracatos said, "we should be all right out here."

"But the horses," Vivienne said. "They'll see the horses..."

Maracatos could only shrug.

Licnos recognised the woman who came to the door. She had been there the night the witch had been drowned in the cistern, or so everyone had thought. In fact, hadn't she helped to pull the witch out of the water? There were horses grazing down by the stream. Three of them. Unusual for such a modest establishment. Licnos felt a pleasurable tightening of his bowels.

Watching the group approach, Gesataia was in little doubt of what they were seeking. She had no particular objection to the two young women been hauled away – so far, anyway, it was a toss-up whether the work they did was worth the food she had to feed them – but the man, Maracatos, was a very different matter. Without him and with all the other men away fighting, she and Suicca would be hard put to bring in the harvest and without the harvest or the better part of it at least, they would be equally hard put to survive the coming year.

Moving unhurriedly, she crossed the yard to the woodpile Maracatos had begun to assemble for the winter. She stopped on reaching the chopping block with the axe leaning against it. She was holding it across her shoulder when Licnos rode in, followed by the unsavoury crew he had been allocated as escort.

"Where is the witch?" he demanded without any sort of preliminary. Gesataia looked at him blankly. She had small regard for Druids, particularly fat ones who had never done an honest day's work in their lives.

"The witch?" Licnos repeated. "The one you pulled from the cistern..." Gesataia shrugged. Licnos, secure in his own masculinity, quite overlooked the fact that the woman facing him was wiry from a lifetime of manual labour, her bare arms muscular and strong.

"How should I know?" Gesataia said. "I haven't seen her since that night."

"You're lying," Licnos said, dismounting. Gesataia hefted the axe and Licnos eyed it warily, suddenly conscious that he might have made a serious error in getting too near.

"I'm not lying," Gesataia said calmly. "I don't need to. I have no idea what you're talking about." She took a step forward, bringing Licnos to within a handy distance. Yes, the other men could make short work of her but she would do considerable damage to the priest first. She calculated he would be uncomfortably aware of the fact. Stupid man, she thought, letting me get close, not using his men. But that was a priest for you. Useless!

Licnos tried to move back to widen the gap between them, but came up short against his own horse, which trampled restlessly. He stumbled forward again, eyes fixed on the axe – an axe, it was quite clear, the woman was well accustomed to wielding. He could sense the contempt building in his nominal followers, all of whom were fiercely resentful of the fact that they were not back in Gergovia enjoying the fruits of victory.

"Those horses..." Licnos tried. "Down by the stream..."

"Mine," Gesataia snapped.

"They look like Roman horses."

"And if they are, what's that you?" One of the men behind snorted. Another laughed scornfully.

"How did you get them?" Licnos demanded, reddening.

"None of your business, priest. But if you must know, I found them running free after the battle, which makes them mine."

"Roman horses should be turned over to the city," Licnos said before he could stop himself.

"Don't be ridiculous!" Gesataia sneered. Licnos's men dissolved into outright mirth. They had little time for priests themselves, and watching the Druid being bested by this feisty farm woman was some small compensation for having to ride around the countryside poking and prying.

After that, there was nothing for Licnos to do but remount as best he could and retreat with what little dignity was left to him.

It went without saying that both Vercingetorix and Vernogena were riding extraordinarily high. Gorbanitio was again banished to the outer fringes of influence where he could only observe proceedings with sour disapproval.

The feasting was excessive even by Gaulish standards and, much as he might want to and however great his authority of the moment, Vercingetorix was glumly aware that he would have to let the celebrations run their course before he could hope to set off in pursuit of the Romans, whatever tactical advantage was slipping through his grasp in the meantime. Caesar might have been able to say *"carpe diem"* but Vercingetorix could only mutter *"festina lente"*, or the Gaulish equivalent, with as much good grace as he could muster.

Eventually, however, the Gauls – sick, sorry and with nearly as many casualties from the feasting as the recent fighting – did arrange themselves into some sort of order and sally forth.

Unfortunately for Vercingetorix and his cause the delay would ultimately prove collectively and personally fatal.

There was good news. The Aedui again changed their colours and formally joined the rebellion, accepting Vercingetorix's authority as king. There was bad news. Caesar's legions had escaped across the Loire and the ford was now impassable. There was good news. Caesar was now marching east in an attempt to link up with Labienus and was exposed to interception by Vercingetorix's cavalry. There was terrible news. Rather than confronting Caesar, the Gaulish cavalry had itself been ambushed and cut to ribbons by a levy of German horsemen, previously raised by Caesar and brought south as an insurance policy.

It was a complete and most sudden reversal of the situation. Vercingetorix was now the general whose only option was retreat. Reluctantly he turned his army of some 80,000 men towards the fortified oppidum of Alesia and safety.

As time went by, Annabella and Vivienne slowly became accustomed to the rigours of life on a primitive farm so that the journey to the end of each day became something less than a life-and-death struggle. Both Maracatos and Suicca had seemed to thrive on the labour all along and it was noticeable that Suicca quickly abandoned any remaining enmity for rapidly increasing amity, at least where Maracatos was concerned.

It was lunchtime and they moved to a little dell by the stream to eat the bread and sheep's milk cheese that Gesataia had brought out for them before returning to the farmhouse. Maracatos removed his shirt, sluiced himself with water to get rid of the dust and grit of threshing and sat himself in a patch of sun to dry. His glistening torso was smoothly muscled and where not burnt by the sun his skin was creamy white. Of the three young women, even Annabella was not totally oblivious. Both Suicca and Vivienne were acutely conscious of the beautiful young man seated between them, and they were equally conscious of each other.

Maracatos leaned forward to reach for more bread. The button that Vivienne had placed on the thread around his neck in the cages at Gergovia swung forward.

"What *is* that?" Suicca demanded. "Why do you wear it?" Maracatos hesitated fractionally.

"It's just a token," he said and hastily retreated into a overly full mouth.

Vivienne said nothing.

Suicca returned to the subject at the evening meal.

"Tell me what that thing is you wear around your neck," she said in a tone that subtly married flirtation with demand.

"What's it to you?" Vivienne intervened.

"I just want to know," Suicca snapped. "If a man wears something around his neck, there must be a reason..."

"It's just a token," Maracatos said, repeating his earlier evasion.

"But a token of what? And what is it, exactly? I've never seen anything like that before."

"Leave him alone," Vivienne said. "It's none of your business." Suicca stared at her.

"Don't you talk to me like that," she snapped. "If I want to ask him a question, I will... And that's none of *your* business." She turned to Maracatos. "Can I see your token? Will you show it to me?"

"It's...private," Maracatos said with a hint of desperation.

"Not very," Suicca said, reverting to coquettishness. "Not when you take your shirt off."

Vivienne nudged Annabella, who seemed lost in a brown study. Annabella looked at her blankly. The spark of the idea that had lodged in the tinder of her mind before ever they had arrived at the farm was suddenly starting to glow and Annabella was only concerned to breathe it into full flame.

Gesataia turned from the pot she was stirring on the fire.

"That's enough, Suicca," she said. "You're embarrassing the poor man. He's blushing..." Suicca glared at Gesataia, which was quite lost on her as she had already turned back to the pot.

A moment later Suicca was on her feet and gliding round behind Maracatos. Before anybody realised what she was up to, she had thrust her hand down the front of Maracatos's tunic. Maracatos grabbed for her arm but he was too late. Suicca withdrew her hand triumphantly bearing the button. The thread snapped as she moved away.

Vivienne was outraged. She flew at Suicca, reaching for the little black object dangling from her hand. Suicca backed away, tripped over a stool behind her and went down. And before anybody could stop them, the two young women were rolling round on the floor, kicking, scratching and biting in a full-blown free-for-all.

Annabella and Maracatos leaped to their feet but stood uselessly, flapping their hands and shouting at the two to stop. Only Gesataia, witness to a hundred brawls in the feasting halls, reacted with any purpose. She seized the pail of water standing by the fire and with remarkable aplomb proceeded to pour it over the struggling combatants on the floor. They separated, spluttering.

"Suicca, you disgrace yourself," Gesataia said calmly. "Give him back his token. And you will apologise. Then you will get more water..." But Suicca was not yet done.

"I'll give it back if he tells me what it is," she said obdurately. There was the silence of stalemate.

Vivienne got to her feet, straightening her clothes.

"I'll tell you what it is," she said. "It's my token. I gave it to him. He wears it for me."

Suicca stared at her, her mouth working. Then she snarled wordlessly, hurled the button to the floor and hurled herself out of the house.

Um... Ghost Basil said into the ensuing silence. *This is not good.*

Why? Annabella said absently, still absorbed. *They'll sort it out... There's something I need to talk to you about,* she went on.

I'm all jolly ears.

Not yet. I haven't finished thinking it through...

Well, when you have... It's not as though I'm jolly well going anywhere without you, you know.

For Gesataia, the harvest took precedence, the harvest was all. No harvest, no food for the coming year. It was that simple. And it was clear no men would be spared from the army to help at this critical juncture, so having been gifted three able bodies by the gods she was not about to let her daughter defile their beneficence. She insisted Suicca apologise both to Maracatos and to Vivienne and even went so far as to stand over her while she did it.

For all three young people it was a most uneasy encounter. Annabella, watching from one side, could clearly see the anger smouldering in Suicca's eyes as she said the words to Vivienne that her mother required, words that were marks only of more trouble to come.

Nevertheless, as the next days passed it seemed that the quarrel had been smoothed over sufficiently at least for the work to proceed with only a minimum of friction. Suicca spoke only in monosyllables to Vivienne – which suited Vivienne just fine – but as the wheat still to be harvested steadily diminished, she devoted more and more attention to Maracatos.

For his part, he found the situation increasingly difficult. On the one hand, he nursed an open yearning for Vivienne. But on the other, given the delicacy of their general situation, he could not afford to be at all cavalier with Suicca. Gesataia might need them, but only up to a point and, if ultimately forced to it, would doubtless come down on the side of her daughter. Besides, secretly, he was allowing himself a certain complacency at being the object of competition.

Eventually came the time when one more day in the fields would finish the harvest. Gesataia was quite forthright. That night over the evening meal she announced:

"Tomorrow the harvest will be finished. Tomorrow evening we will celebrate. The day after you will leave."

Annabella, Vivienne and Maracatos were expecting it. They had discussed the situation and realised that once the harvest was in, they would simply become useless mouths to feed. After much debate, Annabella had reluctantly agreed that so long as they stayed well away from Alesia it might now be possible for them to reach Maracatos's homeland unmolested. Maracatos had promised that he would lead them in the widest possible arc around the oppidum.

The only person surprised by Gesataia's edict was Suicca. She stared at her mother in shock and then began to protest.

"But there is still work," she said querulously. "You know there is..."

"Not enough," Gesataia said firmly. "Not for three people." Annabella intervened.

"It's all right," she said. "We have to move on anyway. It's time."

"But not Maracatos," Suicca pleaded with her mother. "Maracatos could stay. We need Maracatos..."

Her words were greeted with silence of varying hues. Gesataia was firm and unyielding, her lips pursed. Vivienne was moderately outraged. She was quite aware of Suicca's interest and intentions but found her temper rising nonetheless when so openly confronted with them. Maracatos, though secretly gratified, was deeply embarrassed and hung his head. Only Annabella was unconcerned.

The harvest came to its appointed end early in the afternoon. The last stalk was reaped, the last ear threshed and winnowed and the last speck of grain safely stored in the silo. They all stood about as Gesataia ceremonially and hermetically sealed the top with clay. The grain would be left to consume all the oxygen in the granary, giving off carbon dioxide as a result, then to preserve itself indefinitely in a perfectly stabilised atmosphere.

All of them then trooped up to the house to enjoy a large alfresco meal which included roast mutton and wine. The sun went down to be followed shortly afterwards by the rising of a perfect harvest moon.

Annabella and Vivienne helped Gesataia to carry the platters and leftovers into the house. When they returned outside it was to find Suicca and Maracatos had disappeared. The two young woman regarded each other with very raised eyebrows.

"Help me find them," Vivienne said in a steely voice.

"No," Annabella said firmly. "It won't do any good. You'll just end up in another fight and if Maracatos has got any sense, he'll just decide that he's sick of the whole lot of us. I would in his shoes."

"But what if he decides he prefers her?" Vivienne protested. Annabella smiled with genuine amusement. After a moment so too did Vivienne, with just a hint of self-satisfaction.

Suicca had used a shameless lie to entice Maracatos away from the others. His horse, his Roman horse, had looked sick nigh unto death just before dinner. She hadn't wanted to spoil the celebration but now, however...

She led him to the small home field where the livestock were held at night. The big gelding was standing erect and alert. He pricked his ears when Maracatos called and came trotting across.

"He's not sick..." Maracatos began but got no further. Suicca pulled his head down into a passionate kiss. It went on for a long time but ended abruptly when Suicca accepted that the wooden unresponsiveness Maracatos managed to produce was not going to change.

"I don't want you to go," she said in a small voice. "I want you to stay here with me..."

Maracatos stepped back and shook his head unhappily.

"Why not?" Suicca demanded.

"I...I made a promise," Maracatos mumbled.

"Who to? To that Vivienne?"

"To both of them..."

"But they're just foreigners."

"I gave my word."

"And you like that Vivienne better than me." It was a statement, not a question. It was also undeniable. Maracatos said nothing, which was all the confirmation Suicca needed.

She continued to argue but Maracatos remained unshakeable and after a minute or two turned on his heel and walked off back to the house, leaving Suicca to stir unrequited need, grievance and the fury of a woman scorned into a roiling cauldron. Eventually, she too went back to the house and then through the motions of going to bed although she was quite unable to sleep. She lay there seething until well after midnight when finally between a toss and turn she was struck by a blazing idea. There was an easy way to get rid of the witch and her slutty friend in one fell swoop, and so separate out Maracatos for herself.

Chapter 11

Often, unbidden, the most distressing moment of his life would flare again into Basil's consciousness; that moment at La Scala when he had realised Annabella, his true and eternal love, had vanished.

And the horror of each recurrence was as potent as ever it had been. It still hit him in the centre of his being like the blow of an executioner's axe and again, somehow, he would have to fight his way through despair black as death to some sort of continuing life on the other side. One thing kept him going and one thing only. Shame. Shame that he had allowed whatever had happened to Annabella ever to happen.

In his darkest moments, he tasted the notion of deliberately lying to the convocation, of deliberately causing his own end, of suicide. The only thing that held the urge in check was the knowledge that he would be arraigned first, before any other result might be arrived at, before knowledge of Annabella's fate, if knowledge there was ever to be, might be revealed. Which, in turn, might mean that he would be abandoning her at her time of greatest need.

It was at just such a moment of despair that from the top of his tower he spied a wisp of smoke ascending the path up the mountain.

There were only two possibilities: the Sheikh or Jamina. The Sheikh would never have bothered to wind his way all the way to the top. He just would have appeared. Jamina then, giving warning of her approach, time for Basil to compose himself. He went out on to a balcony and waited.

Over the weeks that followed the battle for Gergovia, Licnos had quietly tailed off his search for the blue-eyed witch. It was clear to him that she was long gone from the area and it seemed with the passing of time that Vernogena was also disposed to let the matter slide. There had been no further communication from Cernunnos in the first place, and in the second, the triumph over the Romans had meant the council had lost interest in finding scapegoats, temporarily at least, meaning it would now be difficult to expose Licnos to meaningful censure.

Then there came the sudden defeat of Vercingetorix's cavalry by the Germans. It was a profound shock. What had seemed irresistible momentum towards inevitable victory over the Romans all at once was not only stopped dead but alarmingly reversed. In the volatile world of Gergovian politics, the pendulum accordingly swung rapidly back towards the Gorbantio faction.

Vercingetorix's victory at Gergovia had seemed impressive at the time and a turning point, but now in the sober light of subsequent events what lustre there might have been quickly tarnished. When one actually analysed the exact dimensions of the Roman defeat outside the walls, it suddenly seemed greatly less significant. The body count was not ten thousand or even five thousand. It was not even one thousand. In fact only 700 legionaries and 46 centurions had been killed. Worse, Caesar's retreat evidently had not been forced upon him as a strategic necessity, but was revealed to be

only a tactical ploy, evidenced by the fact that he had apparently led Vercingetorix slap, bang into the German ambush.

Suddenly people began to remember the disastrous omen of the sacrifice in the Grove and to translate its significance to a longer timescale. Suddenly they found that Vercingetorix's latest defeats were all too predictable. Suddenly Vernogena was again the focus of rising fear and blame. The common people might still regard her with a certain, albeit diminishing, reverence but the noble families, which had only ever paid lip service to Vercingetorix and his peasant army, were becoming more and more vocal in their opposition to a course which seemed doomed to catastrophe.

The motives of Gorbanitio's increasingly outspoken faction were unashamedly transparent. Gorbanitio wanted just one thing: Vercingetorix gone and as a result, the Romans no longer rampaging around wreaking havoc with his lucrative trading routes which stretched to Greece and beyond. And as a first step in his campaign to re-establish autocratic control over Gergovia, he determined to remove Vernogena, who by association was the last symbol of Vercingetorix's short-lived reign over the oppidum. And because of the general opprobrium reattaching itself to Vernogena, there would now scarcely be anyone to protest.

Gorbanitio called a council meeting ostensibly to consider the news that Vercingetorix had been forced to retreat towards Alesia. First, however, he summoned Licnos and presented a proposition that the latter was only too happy to accept. It was the chance he had been waiting for, the opportunity to remove Vernogena once and for all and to assume her office.

Again he waited until the inconclusive debate about what should best be done had more or less run its course then rose and gathered all eyes in the room.

"Military measures are one thing," he intoned in his unctuous speaking voice. "However, at this critical juncture we must marshal the whole panoply of our available resources..." He paused to allow the faces of his audience to become properly inquiring and noted with anticipation that Vernogena had instantly assumed an expression of angry suspicion.

"We *can* defeat the Romans," Licnos continued. "We have proved that. But we can only be sure of continuing on to final victory over these barbarians with the aid of our gods. The next and decisive battle will be at Alesia. It is therefore necessary – indeed vital – that Vercingetorix's revered Chief Druid go there to intercede directly with the deities on the spot. For the sake of all Gaul..."

There was a murmur of surprise that rapidly changed to an irresistible chorus of approval. The look of fury on Vernogena's face was something that Licnos filed away for his future delectation. It was a superb moment, perhaps the most exquisite and triumphant of his whole career. Gorbanitio rose and held up a hand for silence. Licnos regarded him complacently, certain that Gorbanitio would now fulfil his part of the bargain and propose Licnos assume the position of acting Chief Druid in Vernogena's absence, an absence that Licnos was confident he could prolong indefinitely. The council eventually quieted.

"I must congratulate Licnos on his most excellent and valuable suggestion," Gorbanitio began. Licnos forbore to smirk, just.

"I would wish to add only one thing," Gorbanitio continued disingenuously. "In these dire times we must make every effort, strain every sinew to avert disaster. Nothing can be overlooked. Licnos must accompany Vernogena to Alesia to add his weight to our entreaties, his expertise to the sacrifice."

This time there was a storm of spontaneous applause and it was now Licnos whose face wore an expression of impotent anger. The betrayal was outrageous beyond belief but also complete and unassailable. Gorbanitio had read his audience perfectly. In despatching the two principal Druids along with their entourages to intercede at Alesia, the council would be seen to be acting with decision – at no cost to itself – yet simultaneously it would be removing the last vestiges of the Vercingetorix regime. Furthermore it would create something of a vacuum that any one of the remaining members might aspire to fill, in alliance with Gorbanitio, of course. It was apparently a lovely piece of opportunism, wrought with all the finesse for which Gorbanitio was justly famous. Had the remaining council members been fully aware of just how exquisitely Gorbanitio had manipulated the situation, their admiration would have doubled. As it was, it did behove one to remember that Gorbanitio was not infallible. They were only in this present mess because his initial moves against Vercingetorix had proved so signally miscalculated.

Gorbanitio had one last finishing touch to make. He remained standing, holding the floor, until the meeting again quieted.

"And of course," he said, "it would be remiss of me not to note that speed is of the absolute essence. Our representatives must be safely in Alesia before it is sealed off by the Romans. They must leave tomorrow at the latest."

There was another chorus of agreement and approval and so Gorbanitio neatly closed off any possibility of the Druids delaying their departure until it was too late.

The two principal Druids of Gergovia, chief and deputy, were equally distraught and equally furious at the different treacheries that had been practised upon them. Having lost the prize of the primacy, Licnos might justifiably have claimed to be the more disappointed, but then Vernogena, having being stabbed in the back – again – by one of her own had the more rational grievance.

They returned to the temple in frozen silence. Once inside the residence, Vernogena halted and, not caring what busy ears might overhear, said:

"That is twice. Be very sure, there will be no third time."

"You can't threaten me," Licnos blustered in reply.

"Oh, but I can," Vernogena returned quietly. "And you would be unwise to think it just a threat."

Licnos sneered wordlessly, but found fear mixing with his anger for all that.

It was still well before dawn the next morning when Suicca arrived at the gates of Gergovia. She called up to the three guards on the tower but they were not disposed to be the least bit cooperative. The fear of the punishment that might be visited upon

them if, one, they left their post and, two, against the most stringent of orders opened the gate before dawn far outweighed the pleading of one wayward young woman. After some downright coarse remarks about what she might have been doing outside the gates at that hour of the night they proceeded to ignore her completely. Resignedly, Suicca was left to squat against the wall and wait for the morning.

She had in fact drifted into an uneasy doze when at last the gates creaked open to greet the morning. One of the guards made to nudge her awake with his foot then shrugged and left her to sleep on.

The sun was high in the sky when a cart rumbling by and almost crushing her against the wall brought her awake. She leaped up with a start and stiffly began to run towards the sanctuary. The gates there were also barred and a porter who finally responded to her shouting and banging refused to let her in.

"No one can see you," he insisted.

"But I have to speak to the Chief Druid," Suicca begged.

"Impossible!" The porter was adamant. "They must leave for Alesia within the hour. They will see no one."

Suicca tried to argue but there was no further response from the other side of the gate. Again, all she could do was squat down and wait. Her beautiful plan to capture the beautiful young man Maracatos for herself was rapidly being brought to nothing.

In the first grey of dawn, Annabella, Vivienne and Maracatos took the offering of food Gesataia had prepared for them and silently slipped out of the house without waking her. Their farewells had all been said the night before. They caught and saddled the horses and set their heads to the north, choosing to travel not by the road that led to Gergovia but along the little valley that had first brought them to the farm. When it was quite clear where they were headed, ghost Basil took umbrage.

You're not going where I think you're going?

None of your business, Annabella said.

Abso-jolly-lutely it's my business. I might remind you: no you, no jolly me.

You're forgetting, I'm immortal. Which makes you immortal too, and there's a horrible thought.

Thank you very much, Basil said, apparently deeply wounded. But I jolly well doubt that you'd care to be immortal on Waq Waq. I certainly wouldn't.

That's a very long bow...

No, it's not a long bow. It's not a long bow at all. If you jolly well provoke Cernunnos again, he's bound to go to Iblis. And you know very well Iblis means one thing and one thing only.

Then I'll just have to take my chances.

But why? Why, Annabella? Annabella paused at the use of her name. It was rare for the real Basil to invoke it, ghost Basil never.

We have to go somewhere, she said patiently. And north is the only somewhere on offer.

But Cernunnos...

Bugger Cernunnos. Annabella used the expletive deliberately. She wanted the conversation finished and done before it might expose her most secret thought to examination, her last hope. Once she had hinted that she would discuss this with ghost Basil, but now she was resolved to make the play without his advice. It would be hard enough to go through with it without the even greater internal doubts that he would inevitably provoke.

With the plateau of Gergovia standing stark in the distance to the west and with the remains of the Roman camp hidden by a fold in the ground, they again came to the edge of the forest.

Annabella knew from her excursion with Caesar that, at least up to the point where they had encountered the Aedui, the road was cleared of trees well back on either side. Presumably this had served the dual purpose of providing both security and timber. It also meant that during daylight out here in the open she was unlikely to encounter Cernunnos. But it was also true that it was most unlikely they would be able to pass through the forest by nightfall. She took a deep breath and tried not to think about what might happen.

They travelled all day and met no one. However, all the time Annabella was uneasily aware of a vague presence shadowing them. There was nothing overt but neither was it possible for her to ignore. Nor could she decide whether she was relieved or alarmed.

Towards dusk they came to the place where Caesar had confronted the rebellious Aedui. The road then climbed another hill, dropped down into a valley and began to trend towards the Allier. Gradually the gentle chuckle of running water began to impinge on the sounds of the forest. They came at last to the river and a ford, high but passable. The road continued on the opposite bank but there the trees crowded in close on either side.

Not good, ghost Basil said. Jolly ungood.

Annabella said nothing but took a deep breath. She was committed now. There could be no escaping the forest without a confrontation with Cernunnos. Which was what she wanted, wasn't it? But though she had made no reply, Basil was not to be denied.

This is mad, he snapped. Stark, staring, abso-jolly-lutely raving mad.

Too late now, Annabella said.

No, Basil said insistently. It's not too late. Not if you...

What? Annabella demanded.

Give him someone...

Give him someone...? Oh, no! Oh, no! Not that! Never again!

What jolly difference? He's a Gaul. He thinks he's going to be reincarnated. He thinks the ghul is a jolly god. He'll be pleased...

No!

Honoured...

No! Absolutely not! And get out of my head.

"We could stop here for the night," Maracatos said. "Water... Not a bad place to camp..." Annabella shuddered, something that did not go unnoticed by Vivienne.

"How far does the forest go on the other side of the river?" Annabella asked, suddenly stricken with doubts just as she had feared she would be. Maracatos looked puzzled.

"I'm not sure," he said. "A ways... Why?"

"We need to get out of the forest," Annabella said. "Before we stop..."

"But why?" Maracatos insisted. "The horses need water. They need to rest. We need to rest. It's almost dark."

"We have to get out of the forest," Annabella repeated. "Trust me."

"Please..." Vivienne added. She was not entirely sure why Annabella was so insistent but knew enough to go along with whatever Annabella thought was best. Maracatos shrugged and put his horse to the water, allowing him to stop in the middle of the river and drink his fill. The others did the same.

The crepuscular light under the trees was fading fast now and still there seemed no end to the thick woods.

The horses felt it first. Maracatos's gelding developed a quivering in his haunch, Vivienne's kept angling in on Annabella's mount, as though seeking protection and reassurance. Finally all three horses stopped and even Maracatos could not persuade them further.

"Leave them be," Annabella said when it was clear nothing would induce them to move forward.

"What...?" Vivienne said, her voice overly loud.

"Cernunnos," Annabella said wearily. "But as what, who knows?"

They waited.

"Can't we go on?" Vivienne asked at last, suppressing a shiver.

"If we can make the horses move," Maracatos said. They couldn't, even with Maracatos trying to lead them.

Again they waited, as full night drew in.

"Well, he's blown his timing," Vivienne commented eventually. "I'm bored now, not frightened."

"Good for you," Annabella said with rather false bravado, attempting to ignite her own courage. "Nor should we be frightened of a nasty scavenging ghul."

"What is a ghul?" Maracatos ventured. He had heard Annabella use the word at the time of the sacrifice but somehow the occasion had never arisen to pursue it further.

"Cernunnos is a god," he added dogmatically.

"There might be a god called Cernunnos," Annabella said, "I don't know. But I do know this thing in the forest that you call Cernunnos is no sort of god at all."

"Then what is a ghul?" Maracatos said doubtfully. Annabella sighed.

"How on earth do I explain?" she asked Vivienne.

"A ghul is just a demon," Vivienne began valiantly. "They scavenge dead bodies... Some people say they are the offspring of Iblis..."

"Iblis...?" Maracatos began but it was as though the name Iblis, taken in vain, was the trigger that Cernunnos required to finally reveal himself.

A hazy glow materialised in front of them, giving an impression of a huge body and gigantic antlers.

"The Stag Lord!" Maracatos exclaimed in awe, making the sign of the horns.

"No!" Annabella said as resolutely as she could, which wasn't very. Her missing finger was throbbing painfully. "He wants you to think he's the Stag Lord but he's just a dirty snivelling little ghul." Cernunnos reared back threateningly but failed to advance further. Annabella was suddenly gifted with a piercing insight, an insight that gave her the weapon she needed. She felt strength flooding through her.

"If he can't frighten you with his tricks," she added, with sudden, liberating certainty, "then he has no power. No power at all." Again Cernunnos reared threateningly and the horses skittered backwards in alarm.

"Annabella..." Vivienne began fearfully.

"Don't worry," Annabella said. "If you don't run, he can't chase you." She slipped from the saddle before either Vivienne or Maracatos realised what she was doing or could attempt to stop her. She marched forward, directly towards the apparition.

"Get out of my way!" Annabella spat. "In fact, get lost!"

As she advanced, Cernunnos was forced to retreat and it became very quickly evident that Annabella had been exactly correct. Stripped of his ability to strike fear, Cernunnos had no power whatsoever.

Still Annabella advanced, still the apparition retreated. They crossed an invisible line in the road and suddenly all that was left to Cernunnos was to vanish in abject defeat, not to say humiliation. As he did so, a faint waft of breeze materialised and on the instant the trees of the forest all seemed to be sounding the same sibilant threat:

"Blue eyes... Iblis... Blue eyes... Iblis... Blue eyes... Iblis..."

That went well, ghost Basil said. That when so jolly well that you've really done it this time. He'll go to Iblis now, guaranteed. As soon as he works out how to complain without making himself look ridiculous...

Shut up, Annabella said crossly. What did you expect me to do? What else could I do? And don't say what you're going to say. Don't you dare ever say anything like that ever again.

And at the deepest level within herself she began to speculate whether her innermost hope might now actually come true. Would the ghul really go to Iblis? And would that play the way she hoped? It was all such a desperate gamble. Suddenly the thought that she might lose and really be returned to Waq Waq made her go weak at the knees.

Vivienne and Maracatos led the horses forward to join Annabella. Maracatos, particularly, was in awe of Annabella's daring and took it as one more demonstration of her undeniable magical prowess. She might have attempted to explain away her ability to foretell the future with talk of a book – and Maracatos had only the haziest idea of what a book might be anyway – but nothing could explain the fact that she hadn't drowned when submerged in the cistern at Gergovia. Nor, as he had just witnessed, had she been struck dead on the spot by Cernunnos.

"Iblis...?" Maracatos said again, partly to cover his confusion, partly prompted by the wind in the trees. "What is Iblis?" Annabella said nothing so it was left to Vivienne again to take up the running.

"He's an 'ifrit," she said. "An evil spirit, or near enough. He is the chief 'ifrit. A Prince of Darkness..." Maracatos frowned.

"And why does that have anything to do with me?" he asked.

"It doesn't, or at least it shouldn't," Vivienne said. "But Annabella was once his prisoner on a terrible island where they grow human fruit..." She stopped suddenly.

"Annabella," she said after a moment. "He said blue eyes. He kept saying blue eyes... You don't think that ghul really will bring Iblis?"

"No," Annabella lied firmly. "No, I don't."

And you just jolly well keep thinking that, mistress mine, ghost Basil said on cue. *And we'll just see who's right.* But at the most basic level of her being, Annabella was praying that the ghul would do exactly that.

The forest thinned out quite soon after the encounter and when they could finally see the stars clear above, Maracatos insisted they stop and camp for the night. He and Vivienne gathered stuff for a small fire while Annabella attended to the horses. Then they ate sparingly and settled down to sleep. It did cross Annabella's mind that perhaps they should set a watch, but as she knew the armies were far to the north and as they had seen no one all day, there didn't seem much point.

Chapter 12

A carnyx sounded. The gates to the temple sanctuary were flung wide and Suicca was nearly run down by an emerging cavalcade as she tried to peer round the corner. Vernogena, to say nothing of Licnos, was travelling in a style befitting the Chief Druid complete with a powerful escort and an array of sumpter mules. She swept past and out of reach before Suicca thought to react. Licnos, who for obvious reasons had chosen to remain at the rear, did momentarily rein in his horse at the sight of Suicca's desperate gesticulating.

"The witch...!" Suicca shouted over the noise of their passing. "The one who wouldn't drown... Who brought Cernunnos...!" Licnos raised an eyebrow.

"What about her?" he mouthed more than spoke.

"She's on the road north with the other one," Suicca gabbled. "If you hurry you can catch them..." Licnos was largely uninterested. The witch was no longer of any particular significance in his scheme of things. Events had moved on and the witch was yesterday's problem. He touched up his horse and left Suicca gesticulating in the road.

"But the young man is mine," she called despairingly at his back. "Don't hurt the boy!" It was only then that Suicca bethought herself that if Maracatos were taken again he would also, again, inevitably, be put to the sacrifice, from which it was most unlikely she would be able to save him.

The cavalcade disappeared around a bend in the road, travelling fast, and Suicca was left to contemplate the ruins of her plan, not knowing what to hope for. She stamped her foot in frustration and then resignedly set off home to the farmhouse. It was a long, weary walk and, already hungry and thirsty, Suicca did not care to dwell on what her mother might have to say about the whole escapade.

In the event, however, Gesataia greeted the return of her prodigal daughter with a knowing look but resisted the temptation to comment. For her part, Suicca by then had decided that it was all Maracatos's fault if he were sacrificed – serve him right for not loving her – and at least that Vivienne would get her just deserts along with him. Besides, who knew, perhaps Maracatos would be reincarnated in time for Suicca to have another go at him.

Licnos found the whole business of this forced pilgrimage to Alesia more and more distasteful the longer the journey continued. The cavalcade stopped for the night at the ford across the Allier and though their attendants, equally appalled at the thought of being sequestered in Alesia under siege, did their grudging best, both he and Vernogena in their separate ways found the subsequent camp primitive to the point of privation.

As he lay awake tossing and turning on a shamefully inadequate pallet, Licnos's mind turned again to the encounter with the ragamuffin farm girl at the entrance to the sanctuary.

The witch... The witch who had nearly brought Vernogena undone... Who had nearly brought them all undone if it came to that. Perhaps there was some scope to manoeuvre after all. Turning over possible scenarios in his mind, he finally fell asleep.

The first light of dawn revealed that Annabella, Vivienne and Maracatos had come to camp where the track – no longer worthy of being called a road – wound through a natural meadow. Unable to make out much in the dark the night before, they had moved well away from the edge of the forest. As Maracatos had pointed out, Cernunnos was not the only danger within.

"What else?" Vivienne had asked. Maracatos had shrugged.

"Bears..." he had said. "Boar... Wolves, maybe..."

But in actuality they would have done better to stay in the trees. What the night had hidden from them was that the meadow showed signs of recent grazing. Had he been less tired and had he been able to see a little more, Maracatos would have insisted they either ride on or retreat.

The worried trampling of the horses brought them awake. They had been pegged out to forage for themselves. Maracatos's big gelding suddenly whinnied in alarm.

"What is it?" Vivienne said, starting up.

"Shsh," Maracatos whispered.

"Why? What...?"

"Shsh," Maracatos insisted.

"What is it?" Annabella whispered, puzzled but obedient.

"Ure," Maracatos said. Vivienne and Annabella looked at each other, their faces indistinct in the half-light.

"What..." Vivienne began but Annabella held up a hand.

"Wild cattle," she whispered. "Caesar writes about them. Very aggressive. Very dangerous. An aurochs bull..."

Maracatos rose to a crouch and immediately sank down again.

"They're all around," he murmured. "We have to get out of here. It's breeding season..."

"Look out!" Annabella warned. She was looking behind them. "I don't think he likes us..." In the strengthening light a bull was staring straight at them, swinging his head from side to side. He was huge, standing every bit as tall as Maracatos at the shoulder and weighing well over half a ton. His horns swept forward, wide-spaced, curved and deadly.

"He's working up to charge," Maracatos said.

"There's a tree there," Annabella said.

"But he's between us and it..." Vivienne protested.

The bull had now lowered his head and was pawing the ground.

"Be ready to run," Maracatos ordered. "Vivienne you go left. Annabella go right..."

"But what about you...?" Vivienne began but never finished.

With a snort and a bellow, the bull launched itself at them, accelerating with unbelievable speed.

"Run!" Maracatos roared, launching himself at the bull.

Neither Vivienne nor Annabella could ever quite believe what happened next. They were running full pelt over the rough ground, running for their lives, desperate not to fall but neither could resist glancing at Maracatos as he and the bull raced towards each other. One second he was about to be caught on the bull's horns and gored to death; the next, with the sort of split-second timing that is literally the interval between life and death, he had seized those same horns and as the bull swung his head up in outrage, Maracatos used the momentum to somersault right over the top of him, landing on the bull's rump and thence bouncing neatly to the ground.

Confused, the bull kept on for some distance before propping and hurling itself around in a circle, clods of earth and grass flying.

Vivienne and Annabella reached the tree, a solitary oak that had somehow managed to survive and prosper despite the attentions of generation after generation of ure in the pasture round about it. They helped each other into the lower branches and peered through the leaves to see Maracatos racing towards them with the bull in hot pursuit.

"Run! Oh, run!" Vivienne shrieked.

Maracatos reached the tree with the bull hard on his heels. There was no time to climb. All he could do was duck behind the trunk as the bull went thundering past. Again the great animal was thoroughly confused but this time turned more quickly, fixing Maracatos with his back to the trunk.

The bull charged again, all deadly intent.

Maracatos feinted left and went right about the trunk. The bull bellowed in frustration and came roaring back. This time Maracatos feinted right but the bull was not deceived. A horn caught Maracatos in the thigh and gouged the flesh as he tried to slip round behind the tree. Vivienne screamed. Blood began to pour down his leg.

As the bull lined up for his final attack, Annabella desperately climbed up and out along a branch she hoped would be high enough. The bull charged and she let herself swing down by her arms, dangling in the aurochs' path.

The sudden distraction was enough. The bull stopped short and then lifting his forequarters off the ground swung his horns again and again at Annabella's kicking feet.

"Get him up the tree," she gasped at Vivienne. "I can't do this for long."

Maracatos, dragging his wounded leg, began to haul himself up the trunk from branch to branch with Vivienne doing her best to help until they judged he was high enough.

"Annabella...!" Vivienne called.

With the last of her strength and a prayer of thanks for a misspent, tomboyish childhood, Annabella swung her legs up and managed to clasp them round the branch above. She inched her way back hand over hand to the main body of the tree.

Raging, the bull began to gore at the trunk.

From nowhere, a second bull suddenly appeared. He looked slightly bigger than the first bull and rather younger. The white eel stripe down the length of his back was very prominent. To Annabella, who had now squirmed her way back to a safe perch, he obviously had confrontation in mind. He roared in challenge.

The old bull beneath them immediately abandoned the trunk of the tree, now scarred with deep gouges, and swung about. With the merest hint of a pause to sight this impudent upstart daring to presume on his harem, the old bull hurled himself to the attack.

The young bull was caught napping. Clearly he had been expecting the usual preliminary insults and war dance but the old bull was already all fired up and was on him before he had even reached half pace. The result was inevitable. The young bull took the full brunt of the old bull's rage square on his forehead and went down, dazed and only semiconscious.

After that death was inevitable and came quickly, though in a prolonged expression of triumph, the old bull gored the body of his opponent time after time until all that was left was a torn, bloodied carcass, dead meat for the carrion creatures. At last, allowing himself a satisfied snort, the old bull trotted away, head held very high with the blood of the upstart congealing on his horns. It was one more victory for the cunning and experience of age over the arrogance of the youth.

The three of them were in a bad way. The aurochs herd, some 30 or so cows and their harem master, was spread out around the tree, leaving them stranded as though on a rock in an ocean surrounded by sharks. Their horses had disappeared. Evidently in panic they had jerked out the pegs tethering them when the bull charged. Maracatos's leg was still bleeding profusely. Fortunately the bull's horn had not speared deep into the muscle, but it had scored a long gash which in other places and the other times would automatically require stitching.

Annabella worked her way to a branch from which she could see their abandoned campsite. Their few possessions seemed untouched which was something, quite a lot in fact. It meant they still might have some food if ever they could reach it.

Vivienne had sacrificed a strip from the bottom of her tunic and was using it to bind Maracatos's wound.

"It will be all right," she said cheerfully as Maracatos winced.

"Ouch!" he complained.

"Typical male," Vivienne said. "Making a meal out of a mole hill... It's not even very deep."

"I think that's mountain..." Annabella murmured over her shoulder.

"What?" Maracatos said a touch querulously.

"Making a mountain out of a mole hill," Annabella said. "We say making a mountain out of a mole hill when we..."

"When we're making a fuss about nothing very much," Vivienne interrupted.

"But it hurts," Maracatos insisted.

"And you're being very brave," Vivienne said soothingly.

"Actually he was," Annabella said. "Extremely brave. That thing with the horns... That was amazing. Truly amazing. I think we owe you our lives." Vivienne kissed him solemnly on the forehead.

"We do," she said. "Absolutely."

"How on earth did you ever think to do that?" Annabella asked after a moment.

"When I was small..." Maracatos said hesitantly. "We had a pot, a sort of urn, that came from Greece..."

"Greece?" Vivienne exclaimed. "I don't believe it."

"Of course, Greece," Maracatos said. "We trade with Greece. We trade all over... Anyway, this pot had pictures on it of men running at bulls, grabbing the horns and leaping over the top of them. Anyway, when I was small I used to imagine myself doing that... I tried once, with our cow..." Annabella and Vivienne both broke into gentle laughter, as much relief from the tension just passed as anything.

"What happened?" Vivienne gurgled.

"I landed flat on my face in a cow pat," Maracatos said. He too was chuckling.

The moment passed.

"But really," Maracatos said suddenly sober and looking earnestly to Annabella. "If you hadn't done...what you did, I would be the one dead..."

"Let's just call it quits," Annabella said and added to deflect his gratitude: "What are we going to do about the horses?"

"With any luck," Maracatos replied, "they won't have gone too far, not with those tethers dragging. We have to wait till the ure go, then we can try to find them."

"You bet we're going to wait..." Vivienne said feelingly. "You're not getting me down there while any of those things are still in sight."

The day dragged on. All three of them were hungry and thirsty, now. Slowly the herd of females began to drift away from the area around the tree, watched over by their very self-satisfied bull, still grand champion and evidently equal to any challenge likely to eventuate, this breeding season at least.

At last, Maracatos began to slide down the trunk.

"Is it safe?" Vivienne asked anxiously.

"Safe enough I think," Maracatos said. "If we don't find the horses before dark we may never find them. We can't wait any longer."

All three cautiously climbed down and warily stared about them. The coast seemed clear.

"Which way will they have gone?" Annabella asked Maracatos.

"Away from the bull," he said. "So, back towards the forest. If we're lucky, we'll find them just inside the trees. Those tethers will catch and get tangled..."

They went back to their campsite, packed up their few, scattered possessions and put everything in a pile with the saddles. Maracatos cast about and found a hoof mark deeply impressed into a patch of soft soil. It was indeed pointing towards the forest.

"This way," he said.

It was quite a long walk back to the trees but every so often Maracatos would find another hoof mark which kept their hopes up. And in the event, they quickly found two of the horses – Annabella's and Vivienne's. As Maracatos had predicted the tether ropes had indeed tangled in the undergrowth and the two animals were standing

dejectedly, waiting for something to happen. However, of Maracatos's gelding there was no sign.

Eventually, Maracatos went back to the track through the forest and again began casting about for sign.

"Here," he said pointing to a hoof mark. "Mine has gone off along the track. If you wait here, I'll take one of your horses and go find it."

"Here?" Vivienne said doubtfully. "Wait here?"

"It'll be all right," Annabella said reassuringly.

"I won't be long..." Maracatos put in. With a grimace from the pain of his torn leg, he boosted himself onto the bare back of Annabella's bay and trotted off.

"He's been gone an awful long time," Vivienne grumbled. The girls had found a tree root to sit on and their one remaining horse was now placidly cropping the grass along the side of the track, again tethered to a peg. It was a crisp autumn day and under the trees, decidedly chilly.

"What on earth can be keeping him?" Vivienne continued. Annabella made no reply. The answer was nothing if not obvious, it seemed to her. She wondered idly what had happened to ghost Basil, who had not made an appearance since the final confrontation with Cernunnos. In one way it was a relief not to have to put up with his nagging, but all the same it had been reassuring to have some sort of continuing presence. Now that he too seemed to have deserted her she was feeling acutely alone, never mind that Vivienne was still with her.

"Should we go and look for him?" Vivienne said after another long silence. Annabella considered.

"It can't do any harm," she said at last. "And it will be warmer than sitting here."

"With the horse?"

"Bareback...? Oh, all right..."

They retrieved Vivienne's gelding, which fortunately was rather elderly and not disposed to be troublesome. And after helping each other to scramble up on to the animal's back, they set off along the track deeper into the forest.

Licnos had resolved to reassert himself and as the cavalcade set off in the morning he positioned himself at the head of the column next to Vernogena, much to her evident displeasure. There was satisfaction in that if nothing else. Licnos allowed himself a smirk.

Nevertheless, he was lost in a brown study when they came upon the riderless horse grazing by the verge. Licnos emerged from his self-absorption as the leader of their escort dismounted and warily approached the animal. The gelding was trailing a tether, Licnos noted, and had obviously broken away from a campsite.

"It is a Roman horse," the man said, seizing its bridle. Licnos groped for the fellow's name but quite failed to bring it to mind. Curious, Licnos thought. A Roman horse?

"Bring it," he ordered before Vernogena could say anything. A spare horse was always useful. Pre-empted, Vernogena glared at him.

The track a little later wound down into a gully and then up the other side. As they crested the rise a straight, level stretch came into view. At the far end, a large man on a smallish horse was trotting towards them. To Licnos, he looked somehow vaguely familiar. Much to his irritation, Vernogena got their first.

"The Remi..." she exclaimed. "Seize him!" Their escort, bored with convoy duty, reacted with alacrity. Half a dozen of them burst out of the column and were galloping hard towards their quarry before he had begun to react. He swung his mount about but it was too late. As he lashed the animal across the rump the horse chose to rear rather than run and then the Remi was surrounded. He drew his sword – a Roman gladius, Licnos noted in passing – but it was plain resistance was futile and a moment later he let it fall to the ground. A moment later he was on the ground himself and being marched towards them.

"But the boy is mine... Don't hurt him..." The young woman at the temple gate had said that, or something like it. The Remi was obviously the boy, Licnos thought, which could only mean one thing. Leaving Vernogena engaged with the captive, he gathered some more of the escort about him and galloped off.

Ambling along a mile or so away, Annabella and Vivienne had no chance.

A group of horsemen rocketed from the trees and thundered down the track towards them. Before they realised what was happening, they were surrounded.

"Kill them!" Vernogena said coldly. "Kill them now." Blue eyes, the God had said, we seek blue eyes. This time she would not fail.

Except for the stamp of a horse's foot, there was a sudden, all-encompassing silence, one of disbelief. The men of the escort were nonplussed. They were warriors, not cut-throats given to casual murder.

Maracatos, his hands bound behind him and haltered by a rope around his neck, strained mightily but futilely against his bonds. He took a stride towards Vivienne but was brought up short, gagging and half strangled. The disbelieving, rebellious silence elongated to the point where very quickly it would segue into disobedience then outright mutiny.

"I said, kill them!" Vernogena repeated, her voice implacable. Cavaros – that was the fellow's name, Licnos thought inconsequentially – made up his mind. It wasn't right but by the same token not worth making a fuss about. He shrugged and turned towards the two young women, drawing his sword as he did so. Annabella's gaze, baleful and unwavering, never shifted from Vernogena's where it had been fixed from the beginning.

"You forget," she said in a tone that exactly matched Vernogena's. "You've tried that twice already. And failed."

"You are a witch," Vernogena spat, "a vile witch. You must die. You must die to appease the gods."

"If you believe that," Annabella said, "if you truly believe I am a witch, then you should ask yourself what I might do if again you try to kill me." She raised her voice to carry to all the men of the escort. "All of you should ask yourselves what I might do. The first time you tried to drown me. Yet here I am. The second time you tried to sacrifice me but I summoned Cernunnos, who drove you to flight and who set me free..."

There was a sensation of indrawn breath from those surrounding her, more felt than heard. One or two of the men took an involuntary step backwards. Cavaros turned inquiringly towards Vernogena. Again the mood of the assembly teetered on the edge of rebellion. Licnos decided to step into the breach. If the escort did openly flout Vernogena's authority than the situation would become extremely unpredictable extremely quickly with who knew what consequences for both Druids. On the other hand, if he were to intervene successfully it would go to cement his position while subtly undermining Vernogena even further. It would be clear to all where the brains of the outfit resided...

"Wait!" he said. "To kill them here in this squalid little clearing would be a waste. They should be sacrificed with due ceremony to victory at Alesia. They should be sacrificed in Alesia."

There was a mutter of approval. For the first time, Vernogena took her eyes from Annabella and glanced about at the members of her escort. There could be no doubting that for the moment at least they were firmly with Licnos. The idea that the witch might again summon Cernunnos had played powerfully with the men's imaginations.

It was a defeat, another defeat, and all that was left to her was to put the best possible face on it, at the same time resolving that it was high time Licnos be dealt with once and for all.

Far back in the trees, the ghul thought to be Cernunnos watched as the blue-eyed she-devil who had so bruisingly humiliated him was captured by the Great Woman of Gergovia. He confidently expected that having achieved their obvious goal, the Great Woman and her pack of hunters would return to the sacred grove, there to conduct the Ceremony which in the fullness of time would provide the ghul with an abundance of the dead flesh he craved. And also the she-devil with the blue eyes demanded by Iblis, his overlord.

It was with shock and dismay then that the ghul thought to be Cernunnos observed the Great Woman lead the rest of her party on towards the edge of the forest, the edge of his territory, and not back to Gergovia.

The one word, "Alesia", began to resonate within him.

Chapter 13

Jamina came to a stop at the base of the tower and waited. Basil, too, remained silent, poised on the corbelled balcony above.

At last, Jamina spoke.

"Come," she said in a flat voice, devoid of expression. "There is something you need to see."

"Come where?" Basil replied, his voice vibrating with tension. Jamina hesitated.

"The Taklamakan Desert," she said eventually.

"The Desert of Death!" Basil shrieked. "Lilis! What have you done with Annabella...!"

Annabella, herself, woke to the sound of Vivienne retching. She was doubled over, obviously trying to suppress the noise. As Annabella watched, Vivienne actually vomited.

"V," Annabella whispered, stretching out a hand. "Are you all right?"

"Something I ate," Vivienne muttered. She groaned and helplessly heaved again. Annabella went to hold her head, as in all the best novels, though why that should help quite eluded her. It showed concern, she supposed. Then, her mind finally cranking into gear, she began to wonder. This wasn't the first time Vivienne had been sick. She was sure of that. But previously, Vivienne had managed to slide apart and more or less conceal it. Now, confined as they were by a detail of guards, there was no hiding it.

Vivienne... Being sick... Again... In the morning...

"V," Annabella said, an unreadable tone in her voice. "Are you pregnant? Don't tell me you're pregnant..."

Vivienne said nothing.

"You are, aren't you?" Annabella said, sitting back.

"Don't... Don't be angry..." Vivienne whispered. "I couldn't help it."

Annabella bit back the obvious retort and began to consider. If their situation had been bad before this, now it was infinitely more complicated.

"Maracatos?" she said eventually, though knowing perfectly well it could be nobody else. Vivienne nodded.

"Does he know?" Vivienne shook her head.

"And don't tell him," she said. "Please. Not yet..."

"When?" Annabella asked.

"I don't know. But not yet..."

"I meant, when did it happen?" Vivienne shrugged.

"The first time was when you went off with Caesar and left us alone in that camp. I was so frightened, so lonely..."

"The first time...? When else...?"

"Whenever we could," Vivienne said defiantly.

"And I never..." Annabella began.

"You were so preoccupied," Vivienne interrupted. "So distant... Please, don't be cross. I couldn't bear it."

"And you didn't think...?"

"What?"

"That there might be...consequences?" Vivienne smiled ruefully.

"It crossed my mind."

"But?"

"But... He's so beautiful..."

"Oh, V!"

"Don't be cross," Vivienne repeated again. "Please, don't be cross."

"Do you have any idea how difficult this makes things?"

"I'll manage," Vivienne said after a moment, her voice again defiant. "I'll manage."

"We," Annabella said.

"We, what?"

"We'll manage." Vivienne turned to her then and the two girls hugged each other.

"I suppose I should say: congratulations," Annabella murmured.

"Yes," Vivienne said definitely. "You should. Thank you."

"You want a boy or girl?"

"A girl," Vivienne said at once. "Boys cause so much trouble."

Two days later, Vernogena's party overnighted in Bibracte. Two days after that, in the evening, the Druids, their escort and their prisoners – again mounted on their stolen Roman horses – forded one of the two rivers protecting Alesia, crossed a rolling plain, passed through a defensive wall guarding the base of the plateau and ascended the heights to the oppidum proper. And so one of Annabella's worst fears came to be realised. Inevitably, she thought glumly.

For his part, Licnos was less than pleased. He had attempted to delay in Bibracte, hoping that Alesia might be sealed off by the Romans before they got there, but that fellow Cavaros would have none of it. He was Gorbanitio's man and his orders had been specific: Licnos and Vernogena were to reach Alesia before Caesar, come what may.

Licnos, weary with the unaccustomed physical exercise of travel, had not yet managed to find the wherewithal to interrogate the prisoners. He had no particular expectation that anything of use would arise, other than the advantage he had already gained, but it should be explored. If life had taught him one thing and one thing only it was that everything was always worth exploring.

Alesia, capital of the Mandubii and one of the largest hill forts in Gaul, was crammed with 80,000 of Vercingetorix's men crammed in on top of its own citizens. Everywhere was crowding bustle. Everywhere was tension, apprehension and barely suppressed hysteria. The Romans were coming. Drawn by the chance to settle with Vercingetorix once and for all, Caesar had finally succeeded in massing all his ten legions and was on the march. He was expected within a day, two at the most.

Cavaros forced a passage for his charges through the throng and led them to the temple compound. There he sent a messenger within, expecting to be granted admission forthwith, but Petrocorios, the Chief Druid of Alesia, himself came rushing to the gate. It was obvious he was seriously put out and making no attempt to hide it. Licnos, watching carefully, saw the beginnings of a ploy taking shape.

"Why are you here?" Petrocorios demanded without any sort of preamble, let alone civility. "You can't be here. The Romans are coming. You must leave. You must leave now!" Vernogena regarded him stonily. She knew Petrocorios of old. Once he had been forceful enough, now, clearly, he had degenerated into a querulous old man.

For his part, Petrocorios had always detested Vernogena. To put it bluntly, he thought her a prize bitch and ruthless with it, a woman with no particular redeeming features other than a glib tongue and her vaunted asceticism, which she flaunted quite shamelessly.

Vernogena dismounted and made to walk forward. Petrocorios flinched visibly and took a half step backwards.

"We need to talk," Vernogena said in a curious tone, her voice hovering somewhere between threatening and placating.

"No!" Petrocorios replied. "No! You must leave. You must leave now."

"On the contrary," Vernogena said, raising her voice. "We are here to help. We have been sent to assist you in your hour of greatest need..."

Pompous, Licnos thought without the slightest hint of self-mockery. So pompous. Always. He too dismounted.

"Need...?" Petrocorios quavered. "I – we – need you to go. Before it's too late. The last thing we *need* is more mouths to feed, more people eating their heads off. There's going to be a siege. Don't you understand? A siege..."

Vernogena took a step forward and Petrocorios recoiled again.

Licnos was torn. Alesia was the last place he wanted to be but he could see by the set of Cavaros's shoulders that whether or not they were admitted to the temple compound, there would be no departing the oppidum. Better then to be within the temple fleshpots, such as they might be. He decided to intervene.

"Perhaps I might speak..." he said respectfully. Petrocorios turned his head towards him to discover a priest as smooth, as sleek, as plump and altogether as self-satisfied as a well-fed cat.

"If I may introduce myself... Licnos, Licnos of Gergovia, at your service..." The name gave Petrocorios pause. He had heard gossip, not particularly savoury... Another one never to be trusted, to be watched like a hawk... To be got rid of immediately.

Licnos moved forward and this time Petrocorios held his ground as though less threatened by an advancing male.

"A word in your private ear," Licnos said and, managing to snare Petrocorios by the arm, led him out of earshot, leaving Vernogena to fume.

"As it happens..." Licnos said speaking fast and in a voice pitched for Petrocorios alone. "As it happens, I really can help. I bring you the most powerful of sacrifices..." He then recounted certain pertinent events from the recent past in Gergovia. Petrocorios listened first with agitation, then increasing attention.

Employing practised skill and with perfect timing, Licnos brought Petrocorios in a half circle which made his peroration available for general consumption.

"So you see," he said, his voice now readily audible, "not so many mouths to feed. Our escort – all hardened warriors – will be welcome to Vercingetorix and the few of us who are not warriors offer incalculable benefits..."

Annabella, Vivienne and Maracatos found themselves incarcerated this time in a stone cell, not in cages.

How many dungeons does this make, Annabella wondered forlornly?

"Not another dungeon...!" Vivienne exclaimed, echoing her thoughts.

"Afraid so," Annabella mumbled, seating herself with her back to a wall.

"What is a dungeon?" Maracatos asked, prowling about the cell which allowed him only two and a half steps in any direction. He was still limping slightly, but to everyone's relief, the wound the aurochs had given him had not festered and appeared to be healing cleanly.

"A prison," Vivienne supplied. "Annabella, what are we going to do?" Annabella shrugged tiredly.

"I don't know. No idea... You tell me." Vivienne looked at her searchingly. Annabella in a defeatist mood was so rare that Vivienne had no notion of how to deal with it.

"You know what happens here, in Alesia, don't you?" she said at last. Annabella sighed.

"Some of it," she said.

"And that's why you were so determined we shouldn't come here?" Annabella said nothing. There was a long pause.

"What does happen?" Maracatos asked eventually. Still Annabella said nothing.

"Well?" Maracatos prodded.

"Let her be," Vivienne said. "She thinks it's best we don't know."

"But..."

"I don't want to know," Vivienne said softly. "Not till I have to. Sufficient unto the day the evil thereof..."

"What?"

"Thinking about what's to come will just make it worse."

And I hope you're thinking about Iblis to come. Annabella started visibly, bringing a curious look from Maracatos.

I thought you'd gone, she said bleakly. *At least I hoped you'd gone.*

He will come. I promise you that. Annabella resisted the temptation to blurt out that she was counting on it. Instead, she decided to be practical.

When?

And how could I possibly know that? ghost Basil replied crossly. *In his own jolly good time...*

Let it be soon, Annabella thought to herself. Please, let it be soon.

Licnos was accorded a presentable chamber, hurriedly vacated by one of Petrocorios's senior acolytes. He wondered how it rated against Vernogena's accommodation. At least as good as, he wouldn't mind betting, if not superior. He felt that in the space of that one private conversation he had established the beginnings of a most promising rapport with the old man, who clearly – and most wisely it had to be said – abominated Vernogena.

It crossed Licnos's mind that now he had succeeded in removing himself from Cavaros's disapproving eye it should be possible for him to slip out of Alesia before the arrival of the Romans, but that option suddenly seemed most wasteful. In the first place Alesia was the most defensible and best defended oppidum in all of Gaul. It seemed inconceivable that the Romans would ever manage to conquer such a vast fortress. The fact that the local inhabitants for the most part were choosing to stay put testified to that.

In the second place, the elimination of Vernogena once and for all, clearing his way to the position of Chief Druid in Gergovia, was now a more tangible prospect than ever it had been.

Idly, Licnos allowed his mind to roam over events of the preceding days: the council meeting at Gergovia; his master stroke against Vernogena; Gorbanitio's smooth treachery which had sadly diluted it; the encounter with the witch in the forest and Vernogena's further discomfiture... The witch... The witch who still remained to be interrogated. However, the morning would be quite soon enough, he decided. He was comfortably reposed having made the most of the meagre evening meal, served to him alone in his room, and guiltily supplemented with some choice titbits – rather a lot actually – from his own personal supplies.

The grey light of morning seeping into their cell on balance was rather more depressing than the dark of the night. Annabella, Maracatos and Vivienne had been given a scant morsel of food the evening before and daylight only served to accentuate their hunger and general discomfort.

Vivienne was looking pale and there was a sheen of sweat across her forehead. Annabella knew very well she was trying not to gag.

"Do you think we'll get breakfast?" Vivienne said to divert Maracatos, who was looking at her somewhat searchingly. Food, at that moment, was the last thing she wanted.

"I hope so," Maracatos said gloomily. "I'm starving. But I don't give much for our chances..." He broke off at the tramp of footsteps approaching. He looked at Vivienne hopefully and helped her to her feet. Annabella stayed hunched on the floor.

The door was thrust open but what issued forth was not food, however meagre, but the plump oily Druid who had saved them from Vernogena's arbitrary execution. He was followed into the tiny cell by a guard armed with sword and spear, prudently poised. Annabella drew in her legs to avoid being trampled but made no attempt to rise.

"Get up, you!" the guard ordered. "Show some respect to the Druid." Still Annabella made no move.

Quick to anger, the guard moved his spear point down fractionally and made to poke at her. Maracatos grabbed the haft and on the instant, he and the guard were chest to chest struggling for possession of the weapon. Licnos stepped hastily back in alarm while Vivienne, leaping to Maracatos's side, made to claw at the guard's eyes.

"Stop it!" Annabella shouted, springing to her feet. "Stop it! Maracatos, let him go. Vivienne...!" For some seconds, the assailants froze and then drew apart, breathing heavily.

Licnos smoothed his hair and strove to recover his aplomb.

"Bring the witch," he ordered the guard eventually. Maracatos tensed, ready to spring again.

"No," Annabella said. "It's all right. If anything were going to happen it would be Vernogena, not this one, not with just one guard. He wants to talk... Don't you?" she added.

Licnos nodded uncomfortably, irked at being so easily read.

"I'll be back," Annabella said.

Licnos had her escorted to his chamber where he bade the guard tie her to a stool, then to wait outside. Annabella allowed her scorn to show, sneering openly.

"You are a witch," Licnos said defensively, answering the unspoken accusation.

"If that were true, do you think tying me up would really stop me putting a spell on you...? Or summoning Cernunnos again?" A look of genuine alarm flashed across Licnos's overfed face.

"I'm not a witch," Annabella said with contempt. "I'm a seer..."

"A seer?" Licnos repeated, struggling to recover control of the situation.

"I see the future and I see that you've put yourself in a really bad situation. The Romans win, you know. Here at Alesia. And I can tell you what Caesar will do when he does conquer Gaul. He kills one million of you, one million Gauls executed in cold blood, one million Gauls dead. And he enslaves another million of you. You're doomed..." Licnos's face was turning white as Annabella spoke.

"Which do you prefer?" she continued remorselessly. "To be dead? Or a slave? Because that's what you'll be. One or the other."

Licnos groped behind him and sat shakily on the second stool. The witch's words were preposterous, absolutely preposterous, yet precisely because of that they had the ring of unwelcome truth. Who could invent such a thing? Why would she invent such a thing?

"You can't know this," he protested weakly.

"I can and I do," Annabella said disinterestedly. "It's what will happen. You're a priest, a Druid. Most likely you'll be killed. The Romans hate your religion. They think you're barbaric. And you are. Human sacrifice...! They'll work to stamp it out and that means killing all the priests, crucifying them. You should escape now, while you can and get far, far away. It's your only chance."

Annabella fell silent. She had no real plan in mind but could see no reason why this odious little man shouldn't be made to feel as miserable as she did. Licnos was silent for a lengthy interval, minutes, as he digested the import of Annabella's words.

"I don't believe you can know this," he said again at last. Annabella shrugged. It made no odds to her whether he believed her or not but then, purely to feed the man's well-deserved fear, she decided to play along.

"Who do you think told Caesar to put his camp precisely in the place where it would be most dangerous to Gergovia? Who do you think told him to capture the hilltop and to put a second camp there, blocking your supply route? Who do you think told Caesar the Aedui army had revolted? Who do you think told him how to get to the Aedui in time to stop the rebellion, and to get back in time to save his camp?"

"But in the end we defeated Caesar at Gergovia," Licnos objected.

"Of course you did," Annabella said. "By that time we had escaped from the Romans and Caesar didn't have me telling him what to do. Of course you won." Again there was a long silence. And that ought to settle his hash, Annabella thought to herself, but she had reckoned without both Licnos's ambition and his passion for self-preservation.

"So," Licnos said slowly and carefully. A look of veiled cunning was creeping across his face. "You say Caesar ultimately failed at Gergovia because he no longer had you telling him what to do...? If you can see the future, then you must also be able to tell us how to change it, how to stop Caesar from taking Alesia..."

Annabella opened her mouth only too close it again. She had been on the point of derisively exclaiming that nothing could stop Caesar succeeding, that he would conquer regardless of what anybody might seek to do to prevent it, then the thought occurred that once again she might be able to take advantage of foreknowledge. Why not? It had worked once. There was no reason it shouldn't work again. It was at least a chance where until that moment there had been none. She made up her mind.

She looked down meaningfully at the ropes binding her.

"Oh no," Licnos said. "You must think I'm a fool."

"You will trust me to tell you how to beat Caesar, but you won't trust me free?"

"No," Licnos said with a smirk. "I won't."

"Then I have nothing to tell you."

"I thought that might be the case..."

"But then if you torture me, or my friends, you couldn't possibly believe a word I might say..." Annabella's words hung in the air. Abstractedly, Licnos scratched his groin. Pig, Annabella thought.

"Here's the deal," Annabella said.

"The what?"

"The bargain... I will tell you, not predict... I will tell you what is going to happen in exchange for decent food, decent accommodation and decent treatment. What you do with the information is up to you, but no improvement, no information." Licnos considered.

"That will be difficult," he said slowly. It would mean enlisting Petrocorios's aid without alerting Vernogena. If she ever got to hear that the witch was being given favoured treatment there would be merry Hades to pay as a Greek of his acquaintance had been wont to say. Yet, it might be possible and the risk was certainly worth it. Licnos, with the greed of the born hustler, had already convinced himself that Annabella could indeed do what she promised. And who knew what he might not achieve as the beneficiary of such priceless intelligence.

He came to a decision.

"Very well," he said. "I will do what I can to...ease your conditions. But it will take time. You must be patient."

"Not too much time," Annabella said coldly. "Or the deal is off."

"Well...?" Vivienne demanded as Annabella was thrust back into the cell and the door firmly barred behind her. Annabella shrugged.

"Dunno," she said. "I might be able to play him, the same as Caesar. I don't know... But I do know this. We have to escape. We have to get out of Alesia. And very soon. Or there's an excellent chance we never will."

"But..." Vivienne began.

"I know," Annabella said. "I know all that..."

"What can we do, then?" Maracatos asked.

"Wait," Annabella said. "Wait for a chance."

Petrocorios was distraught. The night before, the conventions had forced him to invite Vernogena, a fellow Chief Druid, albeit a rival Chief Druid, to share his evening meal, only to find himself being harangued the whole time about one thing or another, but mostly the witch, the danger she represented and the need to dispatch her immediately.

Petrocorios was also in a quandary. On the one hand, the harridan was now demanding immediate audience with a view to arranging the immediate sacrifice of the woman she proclaimed a witch. On the other hand, Vernogena's underling was also seeking an immediate interview in order to pass on what he claimed was vital information. Which to see first? But when framed in those terms Petrocorios realised the quandary resolved itself into an easy decision. Obviously he should consult with Licnos before girding his loins to deal with Vernogena and her importunate obsession. Petrocorios was coming to the view that Licnos, though of doubtful reputation, was a man of some parts, a man to be cultivated. And very possibly he might well be able to advise Petrocorios how best to deal with that...woman.

Licnos entered, looking as sleek and well-groomed as ever.

"I apologise for the paucity of your meal last night," Petrocorios began, spreading his hands. "The situation, you understand. We must conserve what little we have..." Licnos looked at him sharply, wondering if his personal excesses of the night before had been reported.

"...And I trust you have recovered from your journey," Petrocorios continued.

"Indeed," Licnos replied. "And I must thank you for my most comfortable lodging and the pleasures of your table."

"Scarcely pleasures, I'm afraid," Petrocorios said with a grimace. "Not in these parlous times..." Again Licnos looked at him sharply but saw nothing in the ageing Druid's expression to give him concern.

"Parlous times," Licnos said, "parlous times indeed... Which is why I seek the indulgence of this interview." Petrocorios raised an eyebrow. Licnos cleared his throat.

"It has come to my attention," he began, automatically retreating into his own brand of pomposity, "that we may have a most valuable source of intelligence as to events to come at present with us, right here in your residence. A source of intelligence such as could not possibly be imagined but one that I believe will be of utmost significance." Petrocorios raised his other eyebrow. Licnos could feel the temptation to flounder creeping upon him. Resolutely he ploughed on.

"Vernogena," he continued, "is absolutely wrong..." Petrocorios lowered his eyebrows and frowned at the mention of her name. Licnos took this to be encouraging. "...Absolutely wrong," he repeated. "The woman Vernogena accuses of being a witch is no such thing. She is a seer. She fell into Caesar's hands at Gergovia and it was she who gave Caesar the keys to the oppidum so nearly leading to the loss of the city. Yet she escaped from his clutches just before the final battle and took the keys with her. Thus, without his seer, Caesar was finally defeated. He yet may be defeated again with the knowledge this woman can give us. She was Caesar's seer, she is now ours."

"Vernogena wants her sacrificed immediately," Petrocorios remarked darkly, his mind diverted to his chief preoccupation, which was not the witch but Vernogena herself. "It might very well be for the best." At least it would shut Vernogena up, Petrocorios added to himself.

"It would be criminal incompetence," Licnos cut in, impatiently. He caught himself and continued in a properly respectful tone: "Sir, I beseech you... To discard what very well may be the difference between victory and defeat without at least investigating would, I humbly submit, be the height of folly."

"But Vernogena..." Petrocorios said worriedly. Licnos suddenly saw a wonderful opportunity opening before him.

"Perhaps... Perhaps sir, if you would permit, perhaps it would be best if I were the one to deal with Vernogena henceforward, with your imprimatur of course."

Petrocorios regarded him gravely. The old Druid was not yet so decrepit that he was unaware of the blatant ambition behind Licnos's manoeuvring, nevertheless it was a most tempting proposition. Dinner with Vernogena the night before had been truly scarifying. Never to have to deal with the woman again was an all-but-irresistible proposition. No, it was irresistible...

"You think that would be best?" he said, hesitating for form's sake.

"I do, sir," Licnos said gravely, managing to suppress his jubilation. "I am accustomed to her ways, difficult as they are, and it would be my privilege to relieve you of the burden."

"Then let it be so," Petrocorios said, the relief finally plain in his voice.

"And the matter of the witch?" Licnos dared to press.

"I... You must do as you think best."

"With your authority?" Licnos inquired delicately, scarcely daring to hope that he might gain this too.

"Certainly with my authority," Petrocorios declared. From a lifetime of making dubious decisions, usually forced upon him, he had learned that when such a decision was absolutely unavoidable it was always best to give the impression of conviction.

To have the message delivered by a pimply apprentice acolyte with a severe stammer was the first insult.

The message itself was the second. Petrocorios was indisposed for the foreseeable future and henceforward Vernogena must apply to Petrocorios's designated special assistant in all matters pertaining both to her and to her remaining retinue – one serving woman, now that the grooms and escort had been absorbed into the army.

The third and most deeply humiliating affront was to discover that said designated special assistant just happened to be Licnos of Gergovia.

In the privacy of her own chamber, Vernogena raged spectacularly for a solid 15 minutes by the sundial and then spent a further 20 minutes parsing the ramifications. She was eventually forced to conclude that not only was the situation deeply disturbing but also fraught with dangers both known and unknown.

She took time to splash cold water on her brow and wrists, checked that her robes were immaculate and then sallied forth to give battle, her demeanour as icy and controlled as a frozen river beneath the rigid surface of which a torrent still raged.

Even so, to discover that Licnos had been accorded a chamber markedly superior to her own very nearly brought the torrent prematurely to the surface. In the event, she managed to contain her outrage to a slight widening of her eyes, almost imperceptible yet noted by Licnos with the greatest satisfaction.

"Why?" was all Vernogena could bring herself to say.

"Sadly," Licnos began unctuously, "the Chief Druid..."

"I am the Chief Druid," Vernogena interrupted imperiously.

"The Chief Druid of this oppidum," Licnos amended smoothly but with a slight emphasis on the words *this oppidum*, an emphasis correctly translated by Vernogena to mean: "here, you have no power whereas I do, and best not forget it".

"The Chief Druid," Licnos continued, "is unwell and accordingly is unavailable."

"For how long?" Vernogena demanded. Licnos said nothing but allowed the corners of his mouth a small expression of satisfaction.

"For how long?" Vernogena repeated, her voice rising slightly despite her best efforts.

"For the duration of your stay, I should think," Licnos responded, for that one moment quite unable to keep the triumph from his voice. "You really should have devoted more of your efforts to placating rather than alienating him. He is an old man unaccustomed to strident women."

"How dare you?" The torrent was now fracturing the carapace of ice and sweeping it away down the rapids of Vernogena's rage. From frozen, at least on the surface, she was now all but incandescent.

"How dare you!" she repeated. "Outrageous! Unbelievable! You think you can come smarming your way into some strange oppidum and just take over...! Well let me tell you something, monsieur lickspittle Licnos. You can't!"

"Let me tell you something," Licnos replied, frowning at the epithet but greatly pleased with himself nonetheless. "I have!"

Chapter 14

Annabella, Vivienne and Maracatos were routed out of their dungeon cell by guards they had never seen before, to be herded up into the weak sunlight and across a courtyard, there to be installed in what might have been a stable but which now had been transformed into a reasonably comfortable chamber, certainly one good enough for a bunch of blow-in, ne'er do well, scapegrace vagabonds who, at the very least, required 24-hour surveillance lest they nick the pewter. There was a table with stools, pallets on the rush-strewn stone floor, food and water, and it would have been churlish to note that the door was heavy timber with a particularly solid bar. For the moment it was being allowed to stand open with a guard ostentatiously placed a little way off outside.

"Well," Vivienne said cheerfully. "This is better. Well done, Annabella. Don't know what we'd do without you."

"You wouldn't be here, but for me," Annabella retorted. Vivienne laughed.

"That's what I mean," she said sweetly. Annabella laughed in turn.

"You know very well what I'm saying," she said.

"I do," Vivienne said, suddenly serious. "But I wouldn't want to be anywhere else..."

"You don't mean that," Annabella said softly. "You can't mean that."

"But I do," Vivienne said equally quietly. "I can't imagine what my life would have been like without you. And now there's all the more reason..."

Maracatos shifted with embarrassment, cutting short whatever revelation Vivienne might have been about to make. He moved to the table.

"Some bread," he said. "Not much. Cheese, a little. Three apples...early apples." He bit into one and wiped the juice from his chin. "Delicious," he added, with his mouth full.

"So what happens now?" Vivienne asked.

"You tell me," Annabella said, and then, "more future shock, I suppose."

"When?" Annabella just shrugged.

Vernogena's situation had, in the space of a night and a morning, degenerated to the point of being distinctly dire. The Gergovian warriors of her escort had disappeared with alacrity into the teeming mass of Vercingetorix's army, not that Cavaros and his men could have been counted on for anything but the most token support. Similarly, her serving woman could be relied on only for the most menial of tasks, leaving her quite isolated in a strange temple in a strange oppidum with no help to call on and suddenly more or less at the mercy of her most serious rival.

Ruefully Vernogena was forced to admit to herself that she had been comprehensively outmanoeuvred in a fashion that was both outrageous, intolerable, and, if she were to be scrupulously honest, tactically brilliant. Nevertheless, she put aside her anger - righteous anger - for the moment at least and set herself to seek some way of retrieving her position. One avenue left to her was a direct and personal appeal

to Vercingetorix, but there Vernogena was under no illusions. Yes, they both might hail from the Gergovian ruling class and yes, there might have been a fluid alliance of convenience between them from time to time in the past but right now Vercingetorix was under extreme pressure and would have no patience with some petty internal squabble between rival Druids. Further, given that he had imposed himself on Alesia he would be most unlikely to risk alienating the local people by opposing their own Chief Druid.

No, any approach to Vercingetorix could only be a most desperate last resort... Unless... Unless she had something tangible to offer in return... Information... She needed information... She needed a spy.

And the first candidate who came to mind was the apprentice acolyte. Pimples he might have, and a stammer, but there was a knowing look in his eye all the same and in Vernogena's experience the young male animal was so susceptible to manipulation that it was almost criminal to take advantage, not that she would allow that to stop her.

She sent for him.

When he arrived, wary and alert, she didn't actually set out to seduce him, only to give the impression that she might, given the right circumstances. Vernogena was indeed old enough to be the boy's mother but her attentions were all the more flattering for that and when, after a suitable interval, she created occasion slowly to trace the line of his jaw with a velvet fingertip, leaving a quivering afterglow, Doros – his name was Doros – was enslaved on the instant.

Then, setting herself to draw him out, Vernogena soon came into possession of a great deal of inconsequential gossip but also one very salient fact.

The witch, at Licnos's behest, had been moved from the dungeon entirely appropriate to containing the danger she represented and was now ensconced in quarters far too good for her, along with her two accomplices.

It was greatly puzzling. What interest could Licnos possibly have in the witch? Why should he bother to concern himself with her comfort? Why should he bother with her at all? It bespoke some sort of bargain, but what? What bargain could Licnos possibly seek to make with such a degenerate? Vernogena was quite aware that Licnos was no stranger to depravity himself, given an opportunity sufficiently discreet. Indeed, it was a continuing disappointment that she had never quite been able to catch him in the act, but what foul exploit could he possibly be contemplating in league with that slim young woman and her devilish, thoroughly disconcerting and intensely blue eyes. Unnatural eyes. Eyes that glistened and glimmered with unalloyed evil. Eyes, indeed, demanded by the gods. The thought gave Vernogena sharp pause. She must not fail the gods again.

She continued to probe her newest conquest and shortly thereafter struck the mother lode. The question then became how best to mine it, refine it and to use it.

Sometime after noon, a great tremor of anticipatory fear vibrated through the whole of Alesia, spreading faster than a man could run or word could travel. The Romans had arrived, or at least the vanguard of Caesar's army. Even now from the heights of

Alesia a man with good eyes could make out the glitter of the Eagles, and all could see the dust raised by the march of passage.

Even immured as they were, Annabella, Vivienne and Maracatos could feel the sudden electricity crackling through the air. Their guard outside was clearly on tenterhooks, craning his head, straining to hear, striving to see.

Vivienne looked to Annabella, raising her eyebrows. Annabella nodded.

"Any moment now, I should think," she said. And she was exactly right. In seconds, Licnos was standing in the entrance, panting slightly. He stepped inside and drew the door closed behind him.

"What will happen?" he said without preamble, his eyes fixed on Annabella and ignoring Vivienne and Maracatos completely. Annabella considered.

"Well?" Licnos demanded impatiently.

"Caesar has decided to starve you out," she said, automatically using her expressionless seer's voice. "He will mount a siege and to make it effective he will build a circumvallation right round Alesia."

"A what?" Licnos said, his brows furrowing.

"A circumvallation," Annabella repeated. "A barrier, a fortification. There will be a wall, at least the height of two men, with watchtowers every hundred paces or so. Between this and Alesia there will be three ditches, each twice as wide as a man can jump. The first one will become a moat, filled with water by diverting one of the rivers."

"But that's impossible," Licnos protested. "Such a barrier would have to be..." He paused, calculating.

"Twelve miles long," supplied Annabella, who had already done the arithmetic. "Twelve Roman miles..."

"How far is that in real money?" Vivienne interrupted, unable to help herself.

"Tell you later," Annabella muttered.

"Impossible!" Licnos repeated.

"It's what will happen," Annabella said, still speaking dispassionately. "It's why I say you should get out now, while you can. Very soon, no one will be able to leave. No one."

"But Vercingetorix will stop him, will prevent the wall..." Licnos protested. "He must..."

"He will try. But he will fail. The circumvallation will be completed. I have read it..."

"Read it?" Licnos said quickly. "Read it were?"

"In the future," Annabella said cryptically. They both fell silent, Licnos thinking, Annabella waiting.

"But we must prevent this," Licnos said eventually. "How can we prevent this?"

"You can't," Annabella said austere. "It has happened. It will happen." Again Licnos sank into thought. Suddenly his face flushed with a sunrise of inspiration.

"The hammer and the anvil!" he exclaimed, his voice rising with excitement. "The hammer and the anvil..." he repeated, rushing from the room.

"What?" Vivienne and Maracatos said simultaneously, staring after Licnos's figure departing through the courtyard. He was actually running.

"He thinks he's thought of a way to beat Caesar," Annabella said wearily.

"And has he?" Maracatos asked with some anxiety.

"No," Annabella said. "No, he hasn't."

"So how long is 12 Roman miles?" Vivienne asked.

"Eighteen kilometres, give or take," Annabella said.

"Surely they can't build a whatsit that long?" Vivienne said, as incredulous as Licnos had been. "It'll take forever."

"Three weeks," Annabella replied. "It takes three weeks. And I'll tell you something else. They build an even longer one, 21 kilometres, right round the outside of the first one."

"What do you mean?" Vivienne demanded.

"I don't understand," Maracatos said simultaneously.

"The hammer and the anvil," Annabella said. "Vercingetorix will get messengers out before the circumvallation is complete, summoning the rest of Gaul. They will think to crush Caesar between them, between Alesia the anvil and the hammer that will come to the rescue..."

"But?" Vivienne prompted.

"It's the obvious strategy so Caesar uses the obvious defence. He builds a contravallation, another wall. The first one round Alesia to stop anyone getting out and the second one round himself to stop anyone getting in."

"I still don't understand," Vivienne said. Maracatos nodded in agreement.

"Caesar puts a wall around Alesia," Annabella said patiently. "Then he puts another wall right round the outside of his army and his camps. He is protected from the inside by one ring and from the outside by the other."

"The meat in the sandwich?" Vivienne said.

"The what?" Maracatos asked.

"If you like," Annabella said. "Except Caesar gets to eat the lot."

At the news of the Roman advance, every single inhabitant of Alesia seemed to have decided it was essential to rush into the streets. Licnos found himself trying to force a passage through a heaving mass of people. Fortunately, Vercingetorix's headquarters were not far from the temple complex but even so Licnos was hot, bothered and far from his usual sleek self by the time he reached the entrance. The token guards were totally engaged with the surrounding ferment and he was able to slip inside the building unchallenged. He paused to straighten his dishevelled clothing, heard voices raised in passionate debate and so boldly made his way down a passage and into the principal chamber. Vercingetorix and his principal officers were gathered at one end of the room arguing over a report from the leader of a reconnaissance patrol. They turned as one at Licnos's unlooked-for intrusion.

"What?" grizzled old Orceterix demanded.

"It's Licnos," somebody else said. "Licnos from Gergovia..."

"What?" Orceterix repeated, growling now. He supposed Druids were necessary in the scheme of things but the further away they stayed from him, the better he liked it. Particularly this one.

"I have intelligence," Licnos said, striving to keep his voice firm and if not commanding at least penetrating. "Vital intelligence. I can tell you what Caesar plans to do. And I can tell you what we must do to defeat him."

Vercingetorix stepped forward. He looked ten years older than the last time Licnos had seen him, ten years older and ten times more beleaguered.

"And what will he do?" Vercingetorix asked quietly. His voice was tinged with exhaustion round the edges and something else, melancholy, Licnos thought, as though Vercingetorix had already seen his fate.

"He will mount a siege," Licnos said.

"Of course, he will..." Somebody began to interrupt. Licnos held up an imperious hand.

"And to do so," he continued, "he will build a barricade, a circumvallation, right round Alesia to enforce a complete blockade."

"Impossible!" Orceterix snorted. There were other expressions of disbelief, and even scornful laughter.

"Yet it will happen," Licnos said adamantly, striving to maintain his composure and praying the witch really was a seer. "There will be a wall, at least the height of two men, with watchtowers every hundred paces or so. Between the wall and us will be three ditches, each twice as wide as a man can jump. The first one will become a moat, filled with water by diverting one of the rivers." Annabella's description had been graven into Licnos's memory and he repeated her words more or less exactly.

"And if this...circumvallation does indeed come to pass, what then?" Vercingetorix said, cutting through a rising tide of derision.

"The hammer and the anvil!" Licnos said, and was gratified to find the room again falling silent.

"Explain, if you will," Vercingetorix said.

"We must dispatch messengers, couriers before Alesia is sealed...We must dispatch them now to the four corners of Gaul summoning the tribes, every single warrior. They will be the hammer. We, here in Alesia, the anvil. We will catch Caesar between us and together crush him, along with his army, once and for all."

There was a collective intake of breath as every man in the room simultaneously glimpsed the tantalising chimera of a Gaul cleared of Roman soldiers, a Gaul free of the Roman yoke. Then there was an outbreak of clamour as every man strove to have his question answered first. Again Vercingetorix's voice cut through the hubbub.

"And you know this how? The circumvallation...?" Licnos could suddenly feel a bead of sweat start at the base of his throat and trickle down his belly. This was the moment of crisis and he had not yet resolved in his own mind how to handle it. He could launch into a convoluted explanation involving seers and the supernatural, which would inevitably be treated with utmost suspicion, or he could tell a simple lie. Inevitably he chose the latter.

"I have managed to place a spy in Caesar's camp," he said, gaining confidence as the words rolled out. "A highly placed spy..."

"Who communicates how?" Vercingetorix demanded sharply.

"By way of a Druidic technique I am not at liberty to divulge." There was silence for a moment and then somebody snorted. Orceterix. Of course it was Orceterix. Vercingetorix regarded Licnos with a penetrating stare for a moment longer and then turned away dismissively.

"You will see tomorrow," Licnos said. "They will start the circumvallation in the morning exactly as I have described and then you will see that I bring you the truth. The truth and the means to defeat Caesar." He turned sharply and left the room, not at all displeased with the way things had gone.

We have to get away, Basil said.

You still here?

We have to get out of Alesia.

I know, Annabella said.

No time like the present...

"Vivienne," Annabella said in a tone Vivienne knew all too well.

"What?" Vivienne said warily.

"Now that we're out of that dungeon we've got a chance..."

"To what?"

"Escape."

"Escape?"

"We have to get out of Alesia before Caesar finishes the circumvallation. And the longer we wait, the harder it will be."

"Why...? Why do we have to get out of Alesia?"

"Trust me. We just do." Vivienne frowned.

"The Romans..." she said. "The Romans want to execute me and Maracatos. Or had you forgotten?"

"Vernogena wants to sacrifice all of us," Annabella snapped back. "Or had you forgotten?" There was silence for a moment or two, Maracatos looking uneasily from one to the other.

"I don't plan for us to go anywhere near the Romans," Annabella said eventually. "And if I know only one thing...we have to get out of Alesia."

"So what do you expect me to do about it?" Vivienne said, surrendering the point.

"How about some va-va-voom? See that guard out there...?"

"Oh no!" Vivienne said. "Oh no...!"

"What are you talking about?" Maracatos demanded, picking up on the vibe if not the sense of the words.

"You do it," Vivienne said.

"But you're so much better at it than I am," Annabella replied firmly.

"Do what?" Maracatos insisted.

"She wants me to vamp the guard," Vivienne said.

"Vamp...?"

"Make eyes at him... Make up to him... Seduce him..."

"Oh no!" Maracatos said angrily. "Absolutely not..."

"Now just a minute," Vivienne snapped back, abruptly switching tacks. "Who do you think you are? You can't tell me what to do..."

"Children, children!" Annabella said. "Maracatos, you behave yourself, and Vivienne, you get on with it..."

Vivienne sauntered out into the courtyard and seated herself with her back to the wall, ostensibly taking the sun. Both her profiles, face and poitrine, arranged to display themselves to maximum advantage. The guard was lounging in a corner, thoroughly bored. Slowly he began to gravitate towards her.

At last he nodded and Vivienne gave the hint of a smile.

"So you come from Gergovia," the guard said, taking this as licence. "It is a fine oppidum, they say..." Vivienne nodded in her turn.

"But not as fine as Alesia," the guard continued. "Alesia is the finest oppidum of all the oppida..." Vivienne smiled indulgently at this Gaulish habit of outrageous boasting, which the guard was pleased to take as a challenge, if only to prolong the conversation.

"You don't believe me?" he continued. Vivienne tossed her head alluringly..

"How can I?" she said. "...Believe you. We arrived here in darkness. I have seen nothing of Alesia." The guard took the opportunity to look her up and down, openly lascivious. He hesitated.

"I could show you," he said. "Except the others..." He shrugged. Vivienne smiled, in triumph if only the guard had realised. It was all so easy. She rose with studied grace, slipped along the wall and eased the door closed, dropping the bar into the slots.

"What others?" she inquired sweetly.

"Hey!" Annabella shouted through the thick planks for form's sake. "What are you doing? What's going on...!" Maracatos said nothing, but sank deeper into a fit of the sulks.

His name was Garo and underneath his helmet he was a pleasant, fresh-faced young man about the same age as Maracatos but a good four inches shorter. He led Vivienne through an archway and across another courtyard, then through a small door that proved to open directly onto the street. They had encountered no one. Already the escapade was proving extremely valuable, Vivienne thought, and worth the umbrage she could expect from Maracatos. Annabella had been right as usual.

The uproar provoked by the Romans' arrival had subsided and they were able to make their way without undue difficulty. Garo, however, found it necessary to take Vivienne's arm to steer her through the remaining traffic, guiding her towards a small eminence rising out of the plateau on which the oppidum was situated. At the summit

of the rise, the whole of Alesia was spread around them and Vivienne was able to express her admiration without undue mendacity.

And it was a fine sight. Streets and buildings disappeared into the distance, interspersed with areas of open ground now taken up with tents and bivouacs for Vercingetorix's army. The whole was ringed by impressive stone and timber walls, dotted with sentries patrolling the ramparts – a great many sentries as the guard had been doubled with the advent of the Romans.

"See?" Garo proclaimed after they had spent some time admiring the view. "Far superior to Gergovia. No other oppidum could match this."

"I don't know about that," Vivienne said coquettishly. "I bet Gergovia has something you don't have... "

"Impossible! What?"

"A place... A place where...young people can go... For some privacy..."

"Oh...!" Garo exclaimed, expectation quickly succeeding what so far had been limited to hope. "But you are wrong. Quite wrong. Come, I will show you."

He led Vivienne back down the hill and towards the rear of the oppidum. They eventually emerged from a lane into a patch of pasture riven by a gully which led directly to the perimeter wall.

"There," Garo said, stopping before they aroused the interest of the nearest sentry. "The wall crosses the gully and there is a culvert. There has to be for drainage. It is easy to get through and on the other side there are plenty of places..."

"So," Vivienne said, looking her most alluring. "We could..."

"Tonight," Garo said with a catch in his voice. "Not now. We can't be seen. But tonight..."

"Tonight!" Vivienne repeated and after a moment added: "Now we'd better go back before someone notices we're gone..."

She was silent all away to the temple compound which Garo took to be anticipation of delights to come. In fact, Vivienne was doing her best to memorise the route.

The courtyard was as they had left it, the door still barred and it was clear their absence had gone unremarked. Vivienne reached up and planted a quick kiss on Garo's cheek to seal the deal then went to the door.

"Tonight then...?" Garo said with all the eagerness of an inexperienced tyro. Vivienne threw a quick smile over her shoulder and lifted the bar. Annabella looked up quickly as she entered but Maracatos stayed staring fixedly at his hands. She and Annabella exchanged a weary look.

"Well...?" Annabella said encouragingly.

"Better than we hoped," Vivienne said. "He showed me a way under the walls and we're supposed to be going there tonight..." At which Maracatos looked up suddenly.

"Go with him?" he demanded with a ferocious scowl. "I won't let you." Annabella and Vivienne exchanged another look. Vivienne shrugged her shoulders as though to say: Men!

Vivienne could have let it go then but suddenly, for whatever reason – hormones – chose not to.

"Who on earth do you think you are?" she demanded of Maracatos, her voice rising. "You can't tell me what to do. You don't tell me what to do. You will never tell me what to do..."

"Vivienne..." Annabella began soothingly.

"And you stay out of this," Vivienne shot back. "This...man has to understand one thing and he'd better learn it now. He – does – not – ever – tell me what to do."

"But..." Maracatos ventured, bewildered by Vivienne's sudden vehemence and angry with it.

"Not ever!" Vivienne shouted. "Just because we... That doesn't give you any sort of rights over me. And don't ever think it."

"But I thought..." Maracatos dared to protest, his anger mounting rapidly.

"Don't think," Vivienne stormed. "Not about me. How dare you?"

"Oh, for heaven's sake," Annabella put in. "Vivienne, you're being ridiculous..."

"I won't let you go with him," Maracatos shouted, now furious in his turn. "I'll kill him. I'll kill you..." He moved forward threateningly.

"Shut up!" Annabella roared. "Both of you just shut up!" The two combatants lapsed into heavy-breathing silence, glaring at each other.

"Vivienne," Annabella said. "You still haven't told him, have you?"

"Told me what?" Maracatos demanded sullenly. "...I won't let you go with him."

"Shut up!" Annabella ordered again as Vivienne showed signs of wading back into battle. "Told you that you're..."

"Annabella! Don't you dare!"

"...That you're going to be a father."

Maracatos stood stunned. Vivienne, her hormones roiling, burst into tears.

"Of course she's not going with that guard," Annabella continued. "She's carrying your child, you silly great fool. And I could have a great deal to say about that..."

"Me?" Maracatos managed at last. "A father?"

"You. And a smart man would stop standing there, staring, and do something about it."

Much later, Maracatos said: "But why did you let me think you would go with him?"

"I was teasing," Vivienne said softly.

"Is that what you call it?" Annabella remarked. "I'd hate to see you losing your temper."

"You're really not going with him?" Maracatos insisted.

"He thinks I am," Vivienne said patiently. "To make sure he comes back sometime after they lock us in, when the coast is clear..."

"Terrific," Annabella said. "Well done." But there was a slightly odd tone in her voice.

"What?" Vivienne demanded, quick to pick up on it.

"Nothing."

"Annabella! You told me to do it!"

"I know," Annabella said, then grimaced to rob the words of further offence. "But do you have to be quite so good at it?"

For once, Maracatos was wise enough to say nothing.

Just before dusk, Licnos reappeared. He summoned Annabella out into the courtyard.

"The circumvallation..." he said, anxiety plain in his voice. "You're sure about this?" Annabella said nothing.

"I told them, Vercingetorix...What you said."

"Caesar will be so very grateful," Annabella said acidly, her voice heavy with sarcasm.

"You're certain...? If you're wrong..."

"I am never wrong." Licnos stood there twisting his hands and then decided to accept her words at face value. When all was said and done, he had no choice. He beckoned to Garo. Neither of them noticed an eye and an ear poking round the archway.

"Lock them in," Licnos ordered. "Then you can go."

"Food," Annabella said. "Or I will say nothing more." Licnos stared at her and then nodded reluctantly.

"See they get food," he added to Garo. The eye vanished.

When Annabella returned inside, Vivienne and Maracatos had their heads very close together. They stopped whispering as Annabella entered.

"Don't mind me," she said with a trace of bitterness. "You just go right on ahead..."

Garo brought their evening meal himself – less bread, less cheese, no apples – winked broadly at Vivienne and then left, barring the door behind him.

"What are we going to do when he comes back...?" Vivienne asked. Maracatos scowled again.

"Maracatos is going to hit him," Annabella said. "And then tie him up." Maracatos's scowl melted into a wolfish grin.

"Tie him up with what?" Vivienne asked. For answer Annabella pointed to one of the pallets.

"We'll tear the cover into strips," she said.

"Annabella," Vivienne said seriously. "Are you really sure this is the right thing to do? What if the Romans catch us again?"

"Then it's out of the frying pan into the fire," Annabella said. "But at least if we go, it's a chance. And we can't stay here, I promise you that."

"Why?" Vivienne said. "What happens?"

"I thought you didn't want to know," Maracatos said, and then: "What does happen?"

"Let me put it this way," Annabella said. "Probably better the Romans do catch us than we stay here..."

It seemed hours before there was a faint scratching at the door as somebody eased the bar from its slots. Annabella gestured frantically at Maracatos who grabbed a stool and leaped into position. The door began to open and a spear point poked its way cautiously through the gap, to be followed by Garo. Maracatos stepped out from behind the door and brought the edge of the stool swinging down on Garo's neck just below the rim of his helmet. It was a cruel blow and Garo had no chance. Annabella caught his spear neatly as he fell.

"Quickly," she said. "Tie him up. Gag him. Maracatos you take his weapons, his armour."

Five minutes later they crept from the chamber, barred the door and, hugging the shadows, followed Vivienne out of the temple complex. They met no one and no alarm was raised behind them.

Out in the street, Vivienne turned confidently to the left and though there were still people about, nobody thought to question them, escorted as they were by a fine, upstanding, Gaulish warrior in full armour. It took twice as long as it should have done for Vivienne to find the patch of pasture and the gully, but then navigation had never been her strong point.

At last she stopped and pointed. By the light of a gibbous moon they could see the perimeter wall and a shadow running towards it.

"There's a culvert under the wall," Vivienne whispered. "Garo said it's easy to get through to the other side."

"Will I fit?" Maracatos hissed anxiously.

"If Garo can get through, you can too," Annabella whispered back.

"But he's much smaller," Maracatos protested.

"Not that much," Annabella said. "Take off the armour..."

"Annabella..." Vivienne said. "Are you quite sure about this? What are we going to do on the other side? We have nothing..." Her voice was rising as she spoke.

"Shsh," Annabella hissed. "I'm quite sure. And anyway it's too late to go back. We'll worry about what we're going to do when we get out. Come on..."

"Wait," Maracatos whispered a touch desperately. He was still struggling to get out of the mail shirt which was very tight on him. The girls turned to help but there was considerable exertion before he emerged at last, dishevelled and breathless.

They waited for a cloud to cover the moon and slipped, crouching, across the grass and into the gully, where they crept towards the wall. They could hear two guards conversing up on the rampart. Annabella, who was leading, could see that the moon would soon reappear and hurried to make the shelter of the darkness caused by the angle of the wall at the end of the gully, praying that no one made a noise.

They arrived safely just as the moon re-emerged. They could see a round aperture walled in stone. It would be easy enough for the girls to slip through but a tight fit for Maracatos.

"Wait here," Annabella breathed. "I'll check." She slid headfirst into the tunnel and wriggled her way to the other end, which seemed impossibly far away. It was barred. Of course, it was barred. Annabella felt a moment of panicky claustrophobia, then began to think again. There were two iron rods running horizontally across the mouth of the culvert. She reached out to try the top one. She found one end was loose and would slide towards her. As it did so the other end slipped out of the corresponding socket on the other side. The bar had obviously been compromised by the lovers of Alesia to avoid compromising themselves. It was surprisingly heavy and she nearly dropped it. The second bar also proved to work in similar fashion.

She emerged on the other side of the wall to see that the gully continued on down the hillside and would give them some cover until they got clear of the guards. She turned about and wormed her way back to the others.

"It's all right," she whispered. "We can get through as long as Maracatos doesn't get stuck."

"Stuck...?" Maracatos repeated unhappily.

"We'll help," Annabella said firmly. "I'll go first, then you, then Vivienne. And you'll have to put your arms out in front of you to make your shoulders as narrow as possible."

"I hate small places..." Maracatos began but Annabella gave him no chance for his fear to become uncontrollable. She dived back into the tunnel.

"Come on," she hissed. "It's not far and we have to go."

Still Maracatos was hesitating. Vivienne reached up and kissed him.

"Don't think about it," she said. "Just do it." And Maracatos, diverted by the warm glide of Vivienne's lips on his, did – and duly stuck fast about two thirds of the way through.

"Help!" he whispered, fear curdling his voice. "Help me!"

"Stay calm," Annabella called back. "I'm going out to turn round so I can pull."

Moments later she had slipped out and dived back in to grasp Maracatos's large hands. They were sweating and felt clammy to the touch. She could hear Maracatos breathing in shallow, frightened gasps.

"Just be calm," she repeated and then in a low voice she called: "Vivienne, can you hear me?"

"Yes," came the muffled reply.

"You have to brace yourself in the tunnel so Maracatos can push against your shoulders. Can you do that?"

"Yes..."

"Tell me when you're ready."

There was a moment's pause.

"Now!" Vivienne called.

"All right," Annabella said to Maracatos. "You push against Vivienne and pull against me. Slowly and steadily. Are you ready?"

"But what if...?" Maracatos began but Annabella wouldn't let him finish.

"On three..." she said. "One...two...three!" She could feel Maracatos begin to strain. Nothing happened and now she could feel through his hands his level of panic beginning to build.

"Stop," she said. "I was wrong. If you pull your shoulders bunch and make it worse. You have to relax. Make your shoulders as thin as possible. Just push with your legs against Vivienne and I'll pull." She could feel Maracatos shaking now and her own level of fear began to rise. This could be a very bad situation developing. She squeezed his hands.

"What's happening?" Vivienne called. Her voice was also unsteady.

"We going to have another go in a second," Annabella called. "Just stay there." She squeezed Maracatos's hands again and felt a hesitant answering pressure.

"It will be all right, I promise," Annabella said, wondering why she always ended up telling lies. "Relax," she repeated. "Keep your shoulders really skinny this time. Are you ready?"

"I'll try," Maracatos said. "But..."

"It will be all right," Annabella insisted. "One...two..." And on three she began to pull, humping her back against the roof of the tunnel to try to achieve some purchase. For long seconds nothing happened, then there was a slight rustle and Maracatos began to inch towards her. She could feel as well as hear his gusty breathing now and then all at once he was past the obstruction.

"Stop," Annabella said. "Let me get out of your way. You'll be all right now, or we can do this again if we have to. But you'll be all right... So just relax."

She backed her way out of the tunnel followed a minute later by Maracatos and then Vivienne appeared. She made to speak but Annabella held a finger to her lips and pointed upwards. She let them catch their breath and then motioning for them to keep low with her hands, she led the way, creeping down the gully.

Some way down, it began to flatten and then opened out into a pleasant dell which was obviously where the courting couples of Alesia were accustomed to take their pleasure.

Annabella stopped, turned and gasped.

"What's wrong with your face?" she demanded of Vivienne. In the moonlight she could see blood dripping from a nasty cut at the bridge of Vivienne's nose. "What happened?" Annabella added. Vivienne shook her head slightly.

"Did I do that?" Maracatos asked suddenly. "Did I kick you?"

"It doesn't matter," Vivienne said, her voice oddly nasal. "You're out. That's the main thing."

"I'm so sorry," Maracatos said. "Let me see..."

"Later," Annabella said firmly. "We have to get right away from here before morning."

Chapter 15

The two djinn materialised above the great bowl of the Taklamakan desert and all at once Basil was swept away by a great wave of emotion. There was a figure standing there on the crest of the sand hill, a figure he knew, he was certain of it. Only Annabella held herself just so, poised yet relaxed, questing, ready for anything yet still, so still. He lingered a moment, stunned. And then he was rushing towards her.

Garo was found to be AWOL when he failed to present himself for duty at first light. It was assumed he was still outside the walls with his fancy piece from Gergovia. There was no denying the girl was a looker and the consensus among his fellows was that Garo was quite justified in boasting that was rather more outrageous than usual.

The true state of affairs was discovered when Licnos demanded an escort with which to visit the prisoners. To say that Licnos was aghast when Garo was revealed bound, gagged and with a very sore head, alone in an otherwise empty chamber was understating his distress by at least one whole order of magnitude.

Doros, lurking in the background, heard some interesting new words that he assumed were Druidic but which in fact were merely anatomical. He hastened to Vernogena. She heard out his account of the morning's events in silence but with an exquisite excitement suffusing her veins.

She paused to assume her most magisterial persona then strode to the courtyard, her back as straight as the haft of a Roman spear. Haughty contempt informed every other line of her body.

Licnos was standing in the middle of the courtyard when she arrived, expletives depleted, and for the moment bereft of ideas. Three more men from the temple guard, hastily summoned, were standing about with expressions innocent of either interest or responsibility while Garo was supporting himself against a wall retching wretchedly. It was a situation perfect for a woman with a fine air of command in which to exert her authority.

"Seize that man!" she barked at the temple guard, pointing to Licnos. "He is a traitor. He has committed treason. He is in league with the Romans." Two of the guard uncertainly pointed their spears vaguely in the direction of Licnos. Licnos himself was caught completely unprepared for such an assault and gaped foolishly. All at once the gravity of the charge began to penetrate.

"W-what...?" he began but Vernogena gave him no chance to speak.

"He is a traitor," she repeated, her voice louder and more authoritative. "He must be brought to Vercingetorix forthwith." She turned on her heel and stalked off, leaving the guard no choice but to obey. A Chief Druid was a Chief Druid no matter which oppidum she might hail from. One of the men tentatively poked Licnos in the small of his back with the butt of his spear and then, suddenly, they were all following in Vernogena's wake.

Garo was left to contemplate both the physical punishment that would inevitably be meted out and the torrent of mockery that would pour down upon him as the story of his humiliation at the hands of the saucy piece from Gergovia spread about. Suicide might be preferable. Certainly death in battle. Or was it possible, just possible, to redeem himself? He suffered through one last painful convulsion and then left in search of weapons to replace those so treacherously taken from him.

Vercingetorix had risen well before dawn and was standing on the tower platform above the main gate of Alesia as the sun rose, to view the Roman Army. The strengthening light revealed exactly what he had expected to see: a vast encampment laid out with the usual precision and attention to detail; defensive fortifications and accommodations for 10 legions, something over 52,000 frontline troops not counting auxiliaries, slaves and general hangers on which meant a total of perhaps 70,000 all told.

It was an intimidating sight, fearsome and deeply, deeply disturbing. Vercingetorix felt the pain that had come to bedevil his stomach off and on these past months return in surging waves. It was actually welcome just then as it suppressed the panic threatening to overwhelm his brain. He stood there for what seemed like hours without a word to his command group, contemplating his destiny. Finally in the full light of day, with the sun well above the horizon, he made out a speck of red. Was that Caesar? Caesar in his famous red cloak? Caesar his implacable enemy?

Abruptly he swung about and descended from the tower, leaving his chieftains to trail behind him.

The two processions met at the entrance to the Alesian HQ: Vercingetorix with his posse of generals, bodyguards and runners; Vernogena with the detail from the temple and their semi-prisoner. Licnos the while had been vocal in both his protestations of innocence and over-riding authority, and Petrocorios's men were now somewhat uncertain as to just whose orders they should be obeying. It was with relief that they prepared to hand over all responsibility to the army.

Vercingetorix spotted Vernogena from some distance with a stab of recognition followed by pain as the acid in his stomach bubbled again. Ever since that disastrous ceremony in the forest he had held grave reservations about his Chief Druid, though powerless to intervene in any way in the inner workings of the sect.

The sacrifice in the grove had seemed to him a most mismanaged affair albeit his victory at Gergovia – minor victory, as it turned out – had appeared to belie the evil omen that Vernogena had conjured. Subsequent events, however, were revealing the portent all too potent.

"Holiness," Vercingetorix said, taking refuge in formal address and hoping this might induce the woman to keep a decent distance. It didn't. Vernogena marched right up to him and stood so close that Vercingetorix was forced to take a step backwards or do intimate battle with her bosom.

"I had no notion you were in Gergovia," Vercingetorix added to cover his discomfiture.

"Then your spies and informers are more incompetent than ever," Vernogena snapped.

"As may be," Vercingetorix snapped back. "Nevertheless, you should not be here. Why are you here?"

"And it would be better for all concerned – especially you – if we were to conduct this conversation in private," Vernogena responded. "A public thoroughfare is not the place to discuss matters of treason, high treason..."

"Well!" Vercingetorix demanded when their confrontation had finally achieved the tedious business of removing itself indoors. In the interim, he noticed, that during the handover of the prisoner to his men, Vernogena had somehow contrived to have Licnos gagged. Also, his hands were now bound. From the satisfied look on Orceterix's face, Vercingetorix assumed he had been prevailed upon to do the necessary. It seemed appropriate. After his performance the day before, Licnos was clearly a loose catapult careering about the decks of a ship bound for the wilder shores of improbability. A circumvallation indeed! Around Alesia! Clearly impossible!

Vernogena smoothed her robes then, speaking with what could only be described as cold relish, she began her indictment.

"It is with reluctance – great reluctance – that I must make the king aware that he is harbouring a traitor in his midst, a traitor even now actively engaged in treason so breath-taking..."

If reluctant, Vercingetorix thought to himself, then why was this ghastly woman taking such evident pleasure in what she was saying. And she was ghastly, Vercingetorix decided at that moment. Always he had been ambivalent about her. Now, any lingering doubt was laid to rest.

"Treason!" he said, interrupting. "A traitor... Have a care Madame. Such charges are not lightly made." Vercingetorix's sudden omission of her formal title was pointed and gave Vernogena pause.

"Indeed!" she said after a moment. "They are grave charges. The most grave of charges, but borne out by the evidence." Licnos, she saw with satisfaction out of the corner of her eye, was staring at her, face red and eyes bulging.

"And it grieves me," she went on, "that I must direct such charges at a colleague I have trusted...whom we all have trusted with our lives." It was an exaggeration but pardonable in the circumstances, Vernogena calculated. Vercingetorix, however, was tapping his foot. She decided to speed up.

"The commander will recall the witch who saved herself from sacrifice by summoning Cernunnos to the sacred grove... By fortuitous chance I recaptured that witch during my journey to Alesia. She was properly imprisoned in the temple dungeon. This man, however..." she gestured at Licnos "...took it upon himself to interrogate her. She was heard by witnesses..." well, one anyway "...to admit to being a seer as well as a witch, a seer who on escaping her fate in the grove fell in with the Romans, subsequently advising Caesar on how best to attack Gergovia." Vernogena paused to draw breath and was pleased to note that she now had everybody's undivided attention.

"It was the witch who betrayed Gergovia's secret supply route," she went on. "She it was who led Caesar to pitch his camp where he did, to attack the outpost on the hill and to fortify the position with trenches to his main camp. She it was who alerted Caesar to the mutiny of the Aedui army in time for him to recover the situation, and finally, she it was who brought Caesar to the rescue of his camps seconds before they must have fallen."

"But we beat Caesar at Gergovia," Orceterix interjected.

"Only because the witch had left Caesar by then," Vernogena shot back.

"So how does any of this make Licnos a traitor?" Vercingetorix demanded with renewed impatience, rather querulous impatience.

"Is it not obvious?" Vernogena replied. "First we have Licnos consorting with a known informant of the Romans, an informant who has betrayed knowledge of great importance to them. Second, I have witnesses, unimpeachable witnesses, who will swear they heard Licnos say to the witch only hours ago, yesterday evening in fact: *I told Vercingetorix what you said to say*. And this woman...this witch said to Licnos: *Caesar will be so very grateful*. That's what she said: *Caesar will be grateful*." There was a scuffle quickly suppressed as an impassioned Licnos strove to break free of his captors.

"*Caesar will be grateful!*" Vernogena repeated again with heavy emphasis.

"You can prove this, you say?" Vercingetorix questioned to gain time.

"There are witnesses," Vernogena said calmly. "A serving boy and a guard, both belonging to the temple, not to me. And there is one more thing, most damning of all. The witch and her accomplices have been allowed to escape. She has sown her criminal betrayal through this traitor and now she is gone."

There was silence in the chamber, Vernogena triumphant, Licnos apoplectic and spluttering into his gag, the rest uneasy.

"Seems conclusive," Orceterix ventured at last. "If there are witnesses..."

Vercingetorix nodded. Both could contemplate the demise of a Druid, known for his devious ways, with some equanimity. Licnos's muffled noises rose to a crescendo.

There was a matching hammering at the door and one of Orceterix's men burst into the room. He went immediately to his chief and began to whisper into Orceterix's ear. The expression on Orceterix's face passed rapidly through annoyance and surprise to deep concern. He turned to stare at Licnos.

"What?" Vercingetorix said, again impatient.

"The Romans have started building a wall," Orceterix said slowly. "With ditches. Just like Licnos predicted yesterday. It's already the length of 100 paces... But..."

"But Licnos said he had a spy," Vercingetorix finished for him. "A spy, not a witch, not a seer."

Again Licnos made noisy but unsuccessful attempts to speak.

"Remove the gag," Vercingetorix ordered. A moment later, he added: "Well?"

"If I had said a seer," Licnos managed to protest after a bout of coughing. "Who would have believed me? She is a seer, not a spy. She reads the future. We have to get her back..."

The sentries on the wall were all staring conscientiously outwards and Garo reached the culvert quite unseen. He found discarded armour – his own armour – lying in the dust, hastily camouflaged, but no weapons and he wondered how that big brute of a Remi had managed to get through the tunnel. It was a tight fit even for him. But pushing his armour before him, he wasted no more time on speculation. The bars blocking the outer end of the tunnel were still lying on the ground where Annabella had left them. Moved by some impulse of belated conscience, Garo took time in the lee of the wall to replace them – it wouldn't do for the Romans to think the culvert unprotected – then, bearing his armour before him, he dashed off down the gully.

"Hey!" came a cry from above and behind him. "Stop or I'll shoot..." Garo kept running, until an arrow kicked up dirt by his feet. He turned and waved at the wall.

"Garo! What are you doing? What's going on...?" But Garo only waved again and then continued to run. There were no more arrows and he reached the dell quite unscathed.

His quarry had left obvious signs there. He stopped to put on his mail and then set himself to track them. Garo was proud of his prowess as a hunter and felt quite confident that he could successfully follow three people taking no particular care to hide their trail.

Confirmation of Caesar's intended circumvallation of Alesia galvanised Vercingetorix and the rest of his generals. Licnos's proposal from the day before of the hammer and the anvil instantly became accepted wisdom and the preparations for despatching trusted couriers far and wide all-consuming.

As a result, Licnos, though immediately restored to a position of excellent standing, could get no traction when he raised the matter of the seer; of the necessity, vital, to pursue and recapture her. He was left only with the considerable consolation of escorting that bitch Vernogena, now more or less completely disgraced, back to the temple complex and confining her to her room.

Subsequently he discovered that Garo had disappeared. Further inquiries established that he had been seen on the other side of the wall before disappearing in the direction of a well-known lovers' trysting place. It was instantly clear to Licnos that Garo had been seduced either by the seer or her companion and was even now hastening to a reunion. And it was equally clear to Licnos that if he were to follow – with a strong escort, naturally – he might regain the most valuable asset that had ever been in his possession, however briefly.

Using the authority conferred on him by Petrocorios and so recently confirmed by Vercingetorix, he set about assembling a party and setting forth. They left by the postern gate closest to the culvert half an hour later.

"Where are we going to go?" Vivienne asked at last, puffing slightly. It had been slow going in the dark of the night but now in the daylight it was clear they were reasonably well away from Alesia. It seemed a fair question so Annabella stopped and sat down to rest for a minute.

"What are we going to do?" Vivienne added for good measure, also sinking down gratefully. "How are we going to live?" Despite her best efforts, she failed to keep her voice quite level.

"Oh V..." Annabella said. "I don't know. I just know we had to get out of Alesia..."

"We will go north, of course," Maracatos said, dropping to his haunches. "North to my people... I will take you home... You and my son..."

"But..." Vivienne began.

"We'll work it out," Annabella said.

"Food...?"

"I will hunt," Maracatos said. "I have a spear. I have a sword..."

"Soon?" Vivienne said. "Will you do some hunting soon?" The others chuckled indulgently and Annabella reflected that anxiety seemed to have put paid to Vivienne's morning queasiness.

"Come on," Annabella said. "We have to get far, far away from here before we think of anything else."

"So which way is north?" Vivienne wanted to know next, now sounding distinctly querulous.

"That way..." Maracatos said, pointing confidently.

"Are you sure?" Vivienne demanded. For a moment Maracatos looked hurt at being doubted but then he pointed up at the sun.

"I'm sure," he said simply.

Annabella nodded and made to rise.

"Please," Vivienne said. "A bit longer..."

"It will be all right," Maracatos said privately to Vivienne, stretching out his legs and lying back. "I really do know how to hunt."

Annabella was about to insist they move on, then shrugged. She too was weary and a bit more respite would do no harm.

Licnos stood in the dell at a total loss. It was all very well to set out to recapture the seer, but the actual doing of it was quite another matter. Matters practical were not his forte. Fifteen years spent learning a vast body of knowledge by rote had of necessity precluded any sort of practical experience. The nominal leader of his escort came to his rescue.

"They went that way," he said pointing, his voice faintly scornful.

"Then after them!" Licnos said. "The quicker we catch them, the quicker we can get back to Alesia." And by Alesia, he meant safety. It was only now that he was outside the walls, with Romans possibly in the immediate vicinity, that he was beginning to realise just how vulnerable he might be. The five men with him looked at each other knowingly but said nothing.

"Come on," Iutos, the leader, said eventually and turned to follow the tracks quite evident to anyone but a blind man. There were three people in a group, if he was any judge, being followed by Garo. One clear print in a patch of soft soil showed a nick in the toe and Iutos happened to have been present when Garo had nearly taken his foot

off, dropping an axe. Iutos found himself wondering indulgently what the young idiot thought he was doing, out here by himself.

The young idiot, moving at an easy lope, was closing in on his quarry. He could sense it. The hair on the back of his neck was beginning to prickle, always a sure sign the kill was close.

He stopped to listen. Nothing. He ran on.

Five minutes later he stopped again. The grass had been trampled rather more than it would have been by three people just passing through. They had paused here, rested. Again Garo listened carefully. Still nothing, but judging by the way the grass had not yet had time to straighten, they could not be far ahead. Garo loosened his sword in its scabbard and ran on.

Vivienne, in the rear, heard a noise. A rustle. A moment later she realised it had come from behind, where there should be nothing. She swung round, tripping on a tussock as she did so and falling to one side.

"Look out!" Vivienne shrieked as she fell but was too late.

The spear that had been aimed at the small of her back took Maracatos in the rump instead. He roared with shock and pain, then wrenched the weapon free. Blood streamed down the back of his leg. He swung round to confront Garo, still some little way off.

"Filth!" he spat. "Coward! To attack me from behind..."

"The spear was aimed at me," Vivienne said, rising to her knees.

"Even worse," Maracatos said.

"She deserved it," Garo spat in his turn. "She's a whore. A lying whore...!"

Maracatos swelled with fury, considered a moment and then drew back his throwing arm.

"Now who's the coward?" Garo taunted.

Maracatos considered a moment longer and then dropped the spear to the ground. He drew his sword, Garo's sword. Blood was still streaming down his leg, spattering on the grass.

"You have armour," Maracatos said quietly. It was Garo's turn to consider and then he began to strip away his mail.

"No!" Vivienne said adamantly. "You are not to fight. You're wounded."

Maracatos said nothing. Garo paused to sneer.

"Go on then...hide behind the woman..." he said, twisting his words with contempt, and went back to discarding the last of his armour.

"Wait...!" Licnos called, with difficulty. He was breathing raggedly and his throat was burning. His escort was already some distance ahead and Licnos was feeling as vulnerable as a child left alone in the dark. Iutos motioned to his men and turned, making no effort to hide his scorn.

"If his Excellency truly wishes to catch the fugitives," he said, "then his Excellency will have to keep running."

Licnos said nothing. In truth, he was incapable of replying. For once in his life he was speechless. He stood there, hands on his knees, hyperventilating. It was minutes before he could speak again and then only to gasp the one word: "Water..."

Iutos spat expressively into the dirt. One of the other men went back and silently handed Licnos a flask.

"You can't fight him," Vivienne said desperately, seizing Maracatos by his free arm. "You're wounded...already...badly... What if he kills you...? We'll be alone... Me... Your son..."

"Let him go, V," Annabella said. "He certainly can't fight with you hanging on to him."

"I know, idiot. Why do you think I'm doing it?"

"Then Garo will kill you both," Annabella said, with an effort keeping her voice reasonable. "The spear was aimed at you. You said so yourself."

Vivienne turned a stricken face towards her.

But seeking to catch Maracatos off-guard, Garo had already charged.

Annabella did the only thing she could. Although defenceless, she stepped forward, putting herself between the two men. Heedless with blood lust, Garo charged on, aiming a swingeing forehand at Annabella to clear the way to Maracatos. Had it connected it would have all but cut her in half. It didn't. Instead, Vivienne threw herself in its path, her arm futilely outstretched to ward off the blow which sliced into her midriff.

She exhaled like a punctured bladder and died.

It was so sudden, so unexpected, that time stopped.

Garo and Maracatos stood staring at each other, frozen. Annabella was turned to stone on the instant, her face a petrified rictus of horror. Vivienne lay crumpled on the grass, blood pooling swiftly about her, the glistening red a vivid contrast to the bright green.

Time started again and began a new era.

Annabella screamed, a sound so lonely, so desperate, so heartbroken that it seared the soul.

Maracatos howled and launched himself at Garo, who, still shocked by what he had done – even though it was what he had intended to achieve with his spear – made no attempt to defend himself. His head landed at his feet with a small thud. His body fell a moment later to lie beside Vivienne's in death in a way that he had so much hoped might happen in life.

Still Annabella screamed, her shock mindless, all-consuming.

"That's them," Iutos said as the sounds of distress floated over the brow of a small rise and drifted towards them in the clear air of the crisp early morning. "Come on," he

added needlessly. He and his men had automatically accelerated their pace to the maximum. Licnos was left far in the rear.

Maracatos was still staring numbly down at Vivienne's body, Annabella's keening ringing in his ears, when his peripheral vision caught movement. Five men were cresting the rise he and his companions had so recently crested themselves. They were warriors. They were from Alesia. From whence this other one had come, the one who had killed the woman Maracatos knew to have been the love of his life... The woman bearing his son...

The rage came pulsing, pounding. He roared in fury. Then he was on them.

The first two had no chance. They collapsed meekly to the ground, butchered cleanly, blood still spurting. The third took Maracatos's sword in his belly and clung on just long enough for the fourth to give Maracatos a terrible wound to his shoulder before he, too, died to a cut that opened him up from groin to breastbone. Iutos, circling behind the madman, thought he had him, but was too slow. His sword swinging down brought death just as Maracatos's reverse slash cut through to his own backbone.

They both fell. They both lay still. One of the other men was still alive, enough to be moaning. Then that also ceased.

Licnos gazed upon the carnage with disbelief. And anger. His escort, the men who were supposed to protect him, were all dead, or near enough to it, leaving him alone out here in the wilderness, prey to the Romans. It was intolerable.

He realised then that the screaming had stopped, that threnody of unbearable grief which had brought his men hurtling to their doom like the call of some deranged siren. He looked up and a little way off saw a woman, the woman he was pursuing, the witch, the seer. She was seated on the ground with the head of the other one, her friend, cradled in her lap.

Well that was something, Licnos thought. The seer, at least... Perhaps all was not yet lost. Given ordinary luck, it might be possible to get back to Alesia with his prize. He began to move towards her.

A voice was speaking. A distant voice. An insistent voice. A voice that finally penetrated to Annabella's consciousness. It was Licnos, she realised, the odious little Druid.

What was he saying? That he was taking her back to Alesia?

No. Not possible. Vivienne was here. She couldn't leave. She must stay...

A hand grasped her shoulder. Annabella struck out blindly, angrily, striking something.

The voice came again. Loud now. Demanding.

Impossible. Impossible to leave Vivienne. Vivienne needed her.

He was shaking her now. Then a hand slapped her face. A soft hand, a pudgy hand.

Annabella reached back for balance, to stop herself falling. She felt the hilt of a sword come to hand, Garo's sword.

She gripped and thrust with all her strength. There was a gurgle and the voice stopped.

Nearby a bird was singing.

It was still a beautiful autumn morning.

Chapter 16

"Salve, salve, salve..." came a voice speaking in Latin. "What have we 'ere then?"

You should answer him, you know, ghost Basil said.

"This one's still alive." Another voice. "He's a Druid by the looks."

"And you say he's still alive?" The first voice said. "Why?" There was an unpleasant, squishing sound.

"Not any more..."

You really should talk to them.

"So what are we going to do with this one?" It was a different voice again.

Why?

"Put her out of her misery..."

That's why.

"What's all this?" A fourth voice, a little distant, more cultured. There was the sound of a horse approaching and someone dismounting.

"Don't know, sir. We found them like this. Looks like there's been a fight..."

"Who's the woman?"

"Don't know, sir."

"Show me her face."

Annabella felt a rough hand grasp her chin, turning her face up and to the side. The light was painful and she screwed her eyes shut. A shadow fell across her.

"I know her," the cultured voice said. "I saw her with Caesar back at Gergovia. Bring her."

Men either side grasped Annabella's arms and pulled her clear of Vivienne's body, hauling her to her feet.

"No!" she screamed. "No...!" She began to struggle dementedly then sagged unconscious as somebody clipped her across the jaw.

It was dark. She was lying on some sort of pallet.

Where are we?

How should I jolly well know? The Roman camp for a bet. They were Roman soldiers...

I can't do this, Basil. I can't go on. Not without V...

You think you have a choice?

Leave me alone.

I might point out that you were the one who jolly well spoke to me.

You don't exist. So leave me alone.

All alone? Is that really what you want?

"I am all alone!" Annabella howled into the darkness. There was a stirring outside the tent and the flap was lifted.

"Out!" a voice said.

Annabella did nothing. She let her head fall back to the pallet.

"Out!" A second voice said. "Or we'll drag you out..."

Better do it, Basil advised. So undignified to be pulled out by your ankles, your tunic up around your bum...

Slowly Annabella emerged on all fours and rose unsteadily. The two guards grasped her elbows and, her feet barely touching the ground, she was marched off towards the praetorium.

The tent was empty, or at least the main chamber. Annabella was thrust inside and left alone. She stood where her momentum had carried her. Silent. Unseeing. Unmoving. Unthinking.

Sometime later, she had no idea how long, Caesar entered. He seated himself on an elaborate folding stool and regarded Annabella curiously. Still she gave no sign that she was aware of any presence.

"Your friend is dead?" Caesar asked eventually.

"My sister..." Annabella whispered.

"Good," Caesar said matter-of-factly. "Or I would have been forced to have her executed...which would have been much worse for her."

Annabella said nothing. Caesar waited with increasing impatience.

"What can you tell me about Alesia?" he said at last. "What will happen? What should I do?"

Bargain, Basil said.

What for?

For something to do. To jolly well start you functioning again.

Bargain for what?

Oh... I see. A decent burial for Vivienne for starters.

"They left my sister's body," Annabella murmured, her voice toneless. Caesar gestured dismissively.

"They left my sister's body," Annabella repeated, her voice still toneless, barely audible.

"That is the price...?" Caesar demanded and went on without waiting for an answer: "Then I will have the body brought here and you may cremate it with proper ceremony."

"No," Annabella said with a small spark of returning determination. "It's not our custom. I want to bury her, out there in the open, where it's clean, with her man." Caesar hesitated.

"There could be danger," he said. "Enemy patrols..."

For the first time Annabella raised her eyes to meet his, but said nothing. The message was plain and Caesar capitulated.

"It will be done," he said.

"No," Annabella said. "I must do it." Again Caesar hesitated, and capitulated.

"Very well," he said. "Alesia...?"

"Vercingetorix will raise Gaul to come to his rescue." Caesar snorted.

"They haven't so far."

"This time Gaul has no choice. They must come or lose all 80,000 men in Vercingetorix's army. They will come. The couriers have already been sent out." Caesar sat silently, stroking his chin.

"They will come," Annabella repeated, her voice a little firmer. "Vercingetorix believes that this time they can destroy you. The hammer and the anvil... Alesia the anvil, the rest of Gaul the hammer." Caesar was staring at her now, unblinkingly.

"When?" he demanded.

"It must be within a month. Vercingetorix only has supplies for 30 days at the most."

"How many?" Caesar asked next. "How many men will come?"

"A quarter of a million," Annabella said. "Two hundred fifty and thousand warriors." Caesar rocked back on his stool.

"I don't believe you," he said at last. "How can I possibly believe you?" Annabella shrugged indifferently.

"It's what will happen."

There was a long, long silence which gradually took on a quality of despair.

"I must retreat," Caesar murmured to himself in the end. "How can I fight so many. There is no alternative. It must be retreat."

"But there is one," Annabella said, still speaking in the same even, toneless voice.

"What?" Caesar barked. "There is one what?"

"An alternative." Caesar just stared at her.

"A contravallation," Annabella said.

"To keep out 250,000 men? You stupid little..." And Caesar bit off one of the soldiers' coarsest expressions.

"It's what happens," Annabella said for the second time.

Caesar stared at her, a long searching look that sought to bore into her brain.

"Who is it that kills me?" he whispered at last. "Tell me, who kills me?"

Annabella just lowered her eyes and stared at the ground.

She was given a horse in the morning, which was fortunate as it turned out to be a long trip to return to the scene of yesterday's disastrous events, right round to the other side of Alesia. There was some evidence that animals had already been at work but as yet, both Vivienne and Maracatos were untouched, apart from their hideous wounds.

More bodies than a Shakespearean play, Basil said cheerfully. *Except the writing isn't as good...* Annabella determinedly ignored him, dismounted and walked towards the patch of burnished gold that marked her sister.

"Poor Vivienne," she sighed in a whisper and began to cry. She couldn't help herself.

Why? Why poor Vivienne?

What do you mean? Annabella raged silently.

When you're dead you don't know it, so what's the problem? Why poor Vivienne? Poor Vivienne nothing. Vivienne is nothing. And it's all nothing to her now.

You...bastard! Have you no respect for the dead?

Nope, Basil said, still unbearably bright. None. They don't know they're dead and respect means nothing to them. That's my point.

Go away! Go away! Go awaaaay...!

As you wish...

Annabella blotted her face on her sleeve and looked around, for the first time really seeing the area. It was open, rolling countryside bounded by the rivers that guarded Alesia. There was another rise ahead, a rise that Vivienne had failed to reach the day before. It seemed appropriate somehow, doubly so as it offered a pleasant panoramic view. She led her horse there, took the dolabra she had made them give her and began to dig.

The centurion who had been charged with her safety at peril of his own shook his head and motioned to two of his men.

"I'll do it," Annabella said woodenly.

"And at that rate you'll still be going in a week's time," the centurion said. "It's dangerous here." He gestured back at the fallen bodies. "So much should be obvious."

Reluctantly Annabella stepped back. "Make it big enough for two," she said. "Please."

The centurion gestured to two more of his men and set up a perimeter with the rest of his men having taken his own words to heart. One could never be too careful where the gods-rotted Gauls were concerned.

Annabella took herself some way off and stood staring out at the beautiful countryside, the steady rhythmic thump of the mattocks the only passing bell that Vivienne and Maracatos would ever receive. Unbidden, memories began to swamp Annabella.

Here was the first time she had ever spoken to Vivienne – at that horrible school – when Vivienne had conquered her own fear enough to warn her of what was coming. And here was the terrible punishment they had wreaked on their persecutors... Annabella's mouth twitched despite herself.

Here was the chase through the bazaar at Baghdad, and the riot, when Vivienne had gamely matched Annabella's contortions.

Here was the hunting screech of the great rukh – terrifying – and Vivienne hurling gold bricks at its head.

Here was the great rukh again – two of them – and the wild chase through the passes of the Pamirs; the storm; the avalanche.

Here was the Taklamakan desert, and Lilis... Annabella hastily changed direction. She had no desire to revisit the ordeal to which Lilis had subjected her, nor the

aftermath... Iblis and Waq Waq. Nor much of anything else that had followed on down the years.

But always Vivienne had been there, loyal, supportive, habitually cheerful, except possibly when hungry, always her sister, the only person in whom Annabella could place blind, implicit trust...

And finally she became aware of the terrible paradox inherent in Vivienne's instinctive sacrifice. Without the slightest hesitation, Vivienne had stepped in front of the plunging blade to save, as she thought, her sister to whom she owed everything. But Annabella was immortal. Undoubtedly the sword would have done her terrible damage, but it would have been quite unable to slay her, as it had done Vivienne.

Annabella began to weep then, in earnest

Doughty diggers these Romans. Jolly doughty...

Annabella brought the tears to an end by main force, in truth, almost grateful for Basil's interruption. It was timely. She wiped her face and turned back.

The graves were finished.

At Annabella's direction, legionaries laid first Maracatos at the bottom, then Vivienne beside him. Annabella stood at the edge looking down one last time at the beautiful face of her sister, the shining hair, the stunning figure now fatally disfigured. Then the tears came again, blotting her out for ever. Annabella turned away and blindly stumbled off into the distance, leaving behind her the sounds of the earth reclaiming its own.

She was numb, frozen, all the way back to camp. She was taken to her tent and then mercifully left alone. There was food there waiting for her. She pushed it away.

You should eat, you know. You've had nothing since the night before last. Starving won't bring Vivienne back and punishing yourself is just stupid.

I'm not punishing myself. Leave me alone.

What do you jolly well call it then?

Grief. How about grief?

It won't cut any ice with Caesar. I can promise you that.

As if I care...

You should. You need him.

I need Caesar? How many did he kill? How many did he enslave? Millions. Millions by his own admission. And you tell me I need him...? You must be joking.

Think about it. And they'll be coming to take you to him any time soon, so you'd better eat while you jolly well have the chance.

Caesar was in a reflective mood, reclining on a couch. There was still the smell of food in the air.

"Sit," Caesar said pointing at a stool. Annabella hesitated and then did as she was told.

"You say a contravallation?" Annabella made no reply but did raise her gaze to hold Caesar's. The black of his eyes bored into the intense cobalt blue of her own. She noted absently that his short hair was combed forward to hide a receding hairline.

"Why should I believe that a contravallation could prove successful?" Caesar asked after a long interval. There was an angry edge to his voice if for no other reason than that this strange young woman had forced him to drop his eyes first. It was not something to which he was accustomed and it rankled.

"I really don't care what you believe or don't believe," Annabella said, her voice low but firm. "Suit yourself. I'm simply telling you what happens."

"But how do you know?" Caesar demanded, now faintly querulous, his irritation forgotten. "How can you possibly know it happened?"

"I read it," Annabella declared, suddenly tired of subterfuge and artifice.

"Read it! Read it where?"

"In the book you wrote, that you will write."

"Book?" Caesar said blankly. "Me? I write a book?"

"You do."

"Why on earth would I write a book?"

"To tell all Rome just how incredibly clever you've been." Annabella hesitated but then thought, in for a penny in for a pound. "You use it as a tool to gain power, political power." Caesar's eyes glazed. He was evidently processing a novel idea and gauging its worth. He refocused.

"So how can you possibly have read a book that I only just this minute thought of writing?" Annabella laughed, coldly amused.

"That you thought of writing? Oh, please..." Caesar waved an impatient hand.

"How can you have read it?" he insisted.

"Because this is not my time. I come from the future."

"A book. I write a book," Caesar said, completely missing the import of Annabella's statement. "What do I call it?" he added.

"*Commentarii de Bello Gallico*," she said indifferently.

"How restrained of me," Caesar remarked with a hint of self-mockery. "Not *Hero of the Republic Conquers Gaul*?"

"It doesn't stay a republic long," Annabella said before she could stop herself. "You see to that." Caesar looked at her sharply.

"What are you saying?" Annabella grimaced.

"You make yourself dictator. Fortunately, many people would say, you're assassinated."

"Who kills me?" Caesar demanded, his voice trembling with passion. "Tell me who kills me...?"

"So you can kill him first?"

"Obviously."

"No," Annabella said baldly.

"I will put you to the torture."

"Then I will spin such a tale that you will have to kill everyone close to you, everyone you love." There was the silence of stalemate.

"And you will never be able to believe anything I say ever again," Annabella added for good measure. "Is that really what you want? Or have you forgotten that pretty soon you're going to have a quarter of a million Gauls baying for your blood?"

Again there was silence until Caesar gestured in negation.

"My book..." he said, returning to a point Annabella thought had slipped past him. "The one you say I will write... How can you possibly have read it when I haven't even begun it?"

"I told you. I'm not of your time. I come from the future."

"Impossible. How can that be possible?"

"Time is not linear," Annabella said.

"Whatever that might mean... Prove it. Prove you're from the future."

"I have already. Or have you forgotten Gergovia? What I told you...? And what happened...?"

"Coincidence," Caesar said, but uncertainly. Annabella shrugged.

"Whatever," she said. "I really don't care what you think."

"Then why tell me anything in the first place?" Again Annabella shrugged.

"Food," she said. "Protection. To look after my sister. Information was all I had to trade." Caesar looked her up and down appraisingly.

"Not quite," he remarked.

"Are you propositioning me?" Annabella said coldly.

"I could be..."

"Just another lonely soldier...?"

"It's been a long campaign."

"Touch me," Annabella spat, "and it'll be the same as torture. You will never be able to believe another word I say." Caesar, who had been leaning forward slightly, drew back. The expression on his face made it plain that he enjoyed summary rejection no more than any other man.

"You play a dangerous game," he said.

"It's not a game," Annabella retorted. "And it would only be dangerous if you were to decide to cut off your nose to spite your face. But you won't. You're far too ambitious. You know I've spoken the truth. And I will continue to tell the truth so long as you treat me properly... And you know you need to know what I choose to tell you."

"I know you spoke the truth at Gergovia," Caesar said thoughtfully. "However, that's no guarantee you will continue to do so. Particularly as you have made it quite clear you dislike me."

"Wrong," Annabella said bluntly. "There is a guarantee... My self-interest. As long as you hold me, I must tell you the truth or suffer the consequences."

"You have escaped once already."

"And whose fault was that?"

"Quite," Caesar said, regarding her narrowly. "I shall have to be more careful in future." He sprang lithely to his feet, a fit, strong man at the height of his powers, and went to the door. A moment later two legionaries of his personal bodyguard stamped their way into the chamber.

"From now on," Caesar said with a certain grim satisfaction, "you will be kept in my quarters under 24-hour guard."

Well, that went well... Congratulations. Now you'll never get away again.

What makes you think I want to.

You were the one who was jolly well desperate not to go to Alesia.

I'm not in Alesia any more. Or hadn't you noticed? And this is as good a place to wait as any.

Wait? What do you mean wait? Annabella, however, made no reply. The fact that ghost Basil, a product of her own thinking processes, somehow didn't know all her innermost thoughts made no sort of sense. And then suddenly he did know, or so it seemed.

Wait... Basil repeated. Waiting...? Now, I get it. Now I jolly well get it. That's why you challenged Cernunnos... You're crazy. You want Iblis to come. You're stark staring mad. You'll end up spending eternity on Waq Waq... Remember Waq Waq? And there you really will go stark staring mad. Insane. Demented...

But it's a chance, Annabella said.

A chance of what? Eternal jolly damnation?

So ghost Basil still didn't know quite everything.

Anyway, Annabella said. *If he hasn't come by now, he's never going to.*

Except for one thing, Basil said, his voice unnaturally grave. *Time for you is not necessarily time for him. A year for you can be a flash of rage for him. He'll come. Depend on it.*

Which, Annabella thought miserably, was probably the most bizarrely hopeful thing she had ever heard in her life.

At dawn, Annabella was woken by urgent bustle about the praetorium. She was doubly surprised. She had never thought she might sleep in the first place, given the aching raw place in her soul that was all that was left of Vivienne, never mind wake to an emergency.

"What is it?" she asked, poking her head out the door and engaging one of her guards. He looked at her and shrugged uneasily, uncertain whether it was permitted for him to talk to the prisoner.

"What?" Annabella insisted.

"The Gauls," the second guard said, less concerned about the possibility of offending authority.

"The Gauls?" Annabella said blankly.

"Attacking the circumvallation."

"Oh..." Annabella said. In the distance they could hear the tramp of feet and then Caesar's voice. A party of officers swept round the corner and all but fell over themselves when Caesar stopped abruptly on seeing Annabella.

"Bring her," he ordered.

She was marched into Caesar's command chamber in the wake of his men and then required to wait while he issued a series of crisp orders. One by one they departed, as much at the double as their dignity would allow, until eventually only Annabella and her guards were left. They too were motioned outside.

"Vercingetorix attacks my wall," Caesar said without preamble. "It gives the lie to what you told me. Why would he do that if as you say he intends to crush me against it. The anvil, you called it... Well?"

"It's too early in the morning," Annabella protested. She was feeling dreadful, sleep-sodden and heavy with grief. Abruptly Caesar raised his hand as though to slap her.

"Really," Annabella said. "I thought you were supposed to be smart."

"You insult me? Have a care, young lady. One day you will presume too far..."

"If you were Vercingetorix," Annabella said, speaking with exaggerated patience, "and if you had secretly sent out couriers to rouse the country, then wouldn't you practice a little deception, like attacking the wall, say, just to keep you interested, just to stop you thinking, just to stop you wondering why the wall wasn't being attacked?" Caesar said nothing and Annabella glanced up sharply. There was a hint of satisfaction about his mouth.

"But you knew this," Annabella said after a moment. "You were testing me... To see what I'd say, to see if I'd panic..." Still Caesar said nothing.

"Well I hope you're satisfied," she went on eventually. "But it makes no difference whether you are or whether you're not. I've told you the truth. What you do about it is up to you." Caesar grimaced.

"Very well," he said. "A contravallation it will be."

Chapter 17

Some vestige of caution made Basil slow, then come to a halt altogether. Annabella stood there before him. All he had to do was cross the last stretch of sand and embrace her.

"My beloved..." she said. It was Annabella's true voice, no question. Then why was he stopping? To hesitate was to repudiate. The words... It was the words... The voice was right but the words were wrong. Where was the acid? Where was the "About time..." the "Typical male, always late..." the "What the hell kept you..."?

All at once, Annabella's face dissolved into a snarling mask of voracious greed and one of her arms shot out, seemingly infinitely long like a chameleon's tongue. The speed of the strike caused the very air to vibrate. Basil could not possibly evade it. It must capture him. And then his life essence would be sucked from his being, just as he had once witnessed the prince, Toğrül, reduced to empty skin, lying discarded like orange peel there on the sand of the Desert of Death. There was absolutely no possibility that Basil could evade such a whiplash, except that it fell fractionally short.

Lilis had miscalculated. She had allowed herself to exult an inch too soon and in revealing herself a fraction prematurely had given Basil enough warning to aethelerate. His emotions had been keyed to such high pitch that his reaction was instantaneous.

Except nothing happened. He was still there, still hovering above the sand just out of range, feeling as though he had just slammed into a brick wall.

Lilis let loose the howl of a thousand banshees. Her rage at being thwarted of this the greatest of prizes, a Marid in the full pomp of his power, a prize such as she had never attempted before nor likely ever would again, enraged her beyond all reason. The rest of Annabella's persona, imprinted on Lilis's consciousness from a previous encounter and which the great ghul had assumed for this meeting, disintegrated into a furious storm of whirling sand, spreading rapidly outward and upward.

Basil moved rapidly backwards to keep clear, but still he could not aethelerate. He was blocked. That he noticed another wisp of smoke, off to one side and some distance away. It could only be Jamina. She and Lilis together evidently had power to prevent him aethelerating but now that he was alerted, not sufficient power to overcome him. Stalemate.

Lilis's tantrum slowly subsided.

A door materialised. It was the most bizarre object imaginable. There in the endless plain of the desert beneath the endless plane of the sky, stood an oaken door, heavy, iron-studded, complete with frame and jamb. It was a door Basil knew. It was the same door that once had confronted Annabella.

The message was clear. To escape, possibly, he must pass through the door and negotiate whatever lay beyond. He knew the details of Annabella's ordeal and wondered bleakly whether he would be able to muster the same fortitude, the same iron resolve which had seen her win to the other side. Then he opened the latch and passed through. For long, long moments there was silence, the eerie silence of barren

emptiness. Finally, as with Annabella, came the sound of a door shutting, as definite, as final as the crack of doom.

Desolation struck him with a force that made him gasp. Again, he was outside this very door knowing that Annabella within must surely perish. The pain of it was so numbing he could no longer think, no longer breathe. But this time, the exquisite relief when finally she had reappeared was utterly denied him.

Now he was hovering above Castle Alamut his despair as black as the great void of the great beyond. Annabella had voluntarily manipulated her way to the island of Waq Waq, from whence no human ever returned. But this time, there was no voice to call his name, to send joy surging through his being like the first rays of the first sun.

Again he was hovering, this time above Castle Maysaf, banished by Annabella forever, with the double anguish of knowing she was somewhere below subject to the foulest torture a demented fiend could devise, knowing he was powerless to intervene because the fiend yet possessed the Seal of Solomon.

And finally, here he was in the box at La Scala with the shocking realisation that he was alone, the agony of understanding that Annabella had been torn from his side, never to return.

Agony upon anguish, anguish upon despair, despair upon desolation, magnified, resonating, filling his brain with the one overriding, inescapable imperative. The pain is too much, too unbearable. Surrender! Now!

A whisper. There was yet room for a whisper.

"Stop feeling sorry for yourself," Annabella's voice said, tartly yet tenderly. "I need you. Find me."

And he was free.

The door on the floor of the desert vanished and there was nothing. It took some little time for Jamina to realise what it must mean.

Shocked and distraught at the failure of her assassination attempt, she remained rooted to the spot until questing tendrils from the shadow that Lilis had now become began to reach towards her. Then she too aethelerated in the full knowledge that she now faced disaster, personal disaster. To attend the convocation was doom, certain and sure. To flee would delay it only a little. She would be outcast and hunted down in ignominy by every djinni on the planet with a licence – a duty – to destroy her.

The mysterious disappearance of Licnos and some number of the temple guard in pursuit of a purported witch went generally unremarked in the exigencies of the developing situation. Both Vercingetorix and Orceterix were content to let talk of traitors, spies and seers fade into the background, if they remembered it at all, and, given the way the tables had been turned upon her, Vernogena was scarcely about to remind them.

On a personal level, there was no one other than Vernogena to question the fact that Licnos had vanished, and as for the guards, their fellows still at the temple assumed that once outside the walls they had taken their chance and deserted. Or, if not actually

deserting, then they must have decided to wait and join the relief army when it arrived. At least they could then expect some decent food.

For her part, Vernogena was furious that somehow both Licnos and the witch – again – had escaped just retribution but as there was nothing to be done about it for the moment, she took the opportunity to insinuate herself more prominently into the day-to-day affairs of the temple, much to Petrocorios's disgust.

The general situation in Alesia deteriorated with alarming speed. With an army of 80,000 plus the oppidum's native inhabitants all now depending on such supplies as they had managed to stockpile in the short interval between the arrival of Vercingetorix and the coming of the Romans, food rapidly became an all-consuming issue.

The equation was simple. Even on half rations it was calculated that Alesia could not hold out until even the earliest possible arrival date of the relief army. And to leave any sort of safety margin at all, rations would have to be reduced immediately to one third, meaning life immediately became all but intolerable.

Meanwhile, the Roman walls – inner and outer, circumvallation and contravallation – proceeded at a pace that was simply unbelievable, despite the Gauls' best efforts to damage what had been built and to obstruct further progress. Nothing seemed to make any difference and the juggernaut of extempore Roman engineering rolled on and on until Alesia was completely encircled, twice, except for an interval in the outer wall to the north where rugged terrain made it impossible to achieve a complete seal.

And still the relief army had not arrived.

As hunger bit more and more deeply, the day, originally marked as the earliest possible moment they could reasonably expect Commius and the rest of Gauls' fighting men to appear, assumed mystical significance. It morphed from possibility to probability to certainty. Accordingly, when the actual day finally dawned and processed through to sunset with no sign, no hint, of any relief force anywhere in the vicinity, Alesia was plunged into gloom and depression blacker and deeper than the night that followed. In the space of only a few hours morale was completely destroyed and the siege began to bite twice as deeply. The constant, gnawing hunger became the pangs of starvation. Thirst that had been just bearable instantly became torture. Infections spreading from body to body, unwashed for a month, erupted into the torments of the damned.

The horses had all been eaten, all the livestock, all the poultry. No dog, no cat, no rat survived. No edible greenery was left. All that remained were their belts, their boots and the pitiful ration of grain, grudgingly doled out once a day. Already people were stealing from each other, fighting over the dwindling grain, killing.

And now... The army hadn't come.

A council of the commanders was summoned. Vercingetorix had no choice. As the day had worn on, with hope dissipating every passing minute, a feeling expressed here and there had gradually grown into a universal clamour.

Better to die fighting than starving. Better by far. Better to mount one last glorious assault against the Romans. Better to charge into battle – one last, superb battle – and to go down in history as the heroes of Alesia, the heroes of Gaul, albeit the defeated heroes.

Anything must be better than this ghastly melting away to rotting skin and cracking bone. This was no way for a fighting man to die, this was no path to reincarnation. It was simply humiliation and the gods would spit on them...

Vercingetorix himself was hard put to resist such temptation. So simple it would be just to don his armour, take up his sword and shield, his helmet, and to lead his men forth to glory. They were fine men, brave beyond belief, they deserved this... One last moment of fulfilment. What was a warrior for if not to fight and die by the sword? Starving in a rat hole was for Romans, not Gauls.

It was also the mood of the meeting, of his other commanders. Vercingetorix might officially be called King but he had few of a king's real powers. He was *primus inter pares*, that was all. He could lead only if the others consented to follow and it seemed they were much of a mind to. All of them. Except one.

Critognatus stood forth, Critognatus of the Averni.

"You cowards!" he said in a cold, clear, deeply insulting voice, a voice spitting contempt.

"Cowards?" somebody spluttered.

"Yes cowards," Critognatus hissed. "To attack would be surrender, pure and simple. Surrender by suicide. We rouse the whole of Gaul to come to our aid yet what do we do? Rather than wait for the relief army to arrive, we lead 80,000 men out to be butchered and to destroy any hope of Gaul ever defeating the Romans. And why? Because we're a little bit hungry. Hungry little girls crying for our mothers. We are behaving disgracefully and if we actually do this, if we actually march out of here and invite the Romans to execute us, if we march out to a nice easy death, then we will disgrace the name of Gaul through all eternity." There was an unconscious sigh from his audience.

"Then what would you have us do?" Vercingetorix asked in the ensuing silence.

"What our ancestors did," Critognatus growled. "When besieged in the wars with the Cimbri and the Teutones, our fathers' fathers ate corpses rather than surrender. They ate corpses, I tell you. Call them cannibal if you will, but they did not surrender. But then they were men. True men. They were men of resolve. They were men of strength. *They were warriors.*

"If we lead our men to battle now, they will inevitably be slaughtered, the flower of Gaul. And Caesar must then conquer. Once we leave the walls of Alesia, he has the defended position. Our army will be rendered into dust and blown away, and with it Gaul. Our beloved nation can never survive the loss of 80,000 men. And what will happen then? What does Rome want? What does Rome require? The complete demise, the final death, the utter end, of Gaul, that's what Rome will demand. Gaul will be no more. Our laws, our lands, our liberty will be wiped away. So easy for us to march out to die, but the nation will pay the price. And our wives. And our children. And our children's children. For them it will be a life of slavery, slavery of the most

demeaning, humiliating and brutal kind. Better that you had taken a sword to them yourselves than sentence them to this.

"There is one honourable course and one only. We must draw our belts still tighter. We must stand firm within these walls. Only then may we yet defeat this brigand, Caesar, who seeks to steal our country.

"I implore you. I beg you. Resist this temptation. Suffer on. And save the nation. I swear to you that if we do go out to fight then we are spitting on the name of Gaul and condemning it to everlasting damnation. It will not be glory we die for. It will be disgrace."

It was a ringing speech, delivered with fire and passion, and all the power of conviction. It was irresistible. But it still left the problem of imminent starvation quite unaddressed and unresolved.

Where the suggestion first came from, nobody would admit. Nobody wanted to own the opprobrium. It began as a whisper and gradually spread.

Fewer mouths to feed would mean more food for the remainder. Fighting men must eat or no longer be able to fight. Civilians at this moment of the nation's greatest peril must be regarded as expendable. The women, the children, the sick, the old, in other words the Mandubii, the owners of this oppidum... They should all be evicted.

Actually, when one came to think about it, the idea was quite brilliant, and indeed, compassionate. The Romans in the name of humanity would be forced to allow such civilians passage through their walls to the countryside beyond. There they could find food, succour. There they would be saved. It was merciful, most merciful. And, double benefit, it would mean Vercingetorix and his men still within Alesia could hold out longer, certainly until the relief army should arrive.

The order was given. At dawn, every last person incapable of holding a sword in battle must depart the oppidum. No appeal. No exceptions. All must go, taking nothing with them. All food, all water must remain. The civilians of Alesia would be sent from the oppidum to pass through the Roman fortifications and on to where they would find an end to their suffering.

Once before, in the desert when estranged from Basil, Annabella had sunk down deep into herself. Now it seemed she might never surface. She was so far reduced that days would pass without her having a single conscious thought. To be torn from Basil without warning and deposited in this strange land in a strange time had been devastating, and only responsibility for Vivienne had forced her to continue functioning. But Vivienne now was dead, shockingly slain, trying to save, as she had thought, her sister and for Annabella all purpose had died with her. All that was left was pain, compounded exponentially by the fact that both the beings she loved and needed most were lost to her. She was truly, utterly, absolutely alone.

To eat was an effort she could rarely bring herself to make and if she did take food she had forgotten the fact in minutes. She grew thinner and thinner, her face shadowed and sharply angled, her eyes now so enlarged and intense they were downright frightening to the soldiers detailed to guard her. In Alesia, her condition would have

passed unnoticed – it was the norm – but in the Roman camp, while food was growing short there was still sufficient.

The endless work of building the walls that went on night and day made no impression on her, nor the clash of the regular sorties mounted by the Gauls. And Caesar, preoccupied with the endless details and immediate problems of construction, found no need to consult her.

In the midst of some 70,000 souls busily pursuing a common goal, she was so isolated she might have been languishing on a desert island.

At one point, ghost Basil came into her head.

Don't you think this has gone on long enough?

What?

Feeling sorry for yourself.

Leave me alone.

That's all grief is, you know, self-pity...

I don't care what you call it. Leave me alone.

But as once before in the desert when she had been roused from hibernation by a crisis, so fate intervened again.

A great wailing shivered through the vast camp, quite drowning out the everyday noises.

Annabella knew what it was. It was the reason she had so dreaded ever being forced to come to Alesia, the reason she had been so driven to escape, albeit that success had cost Vivienne her life. Annabella thrust her fingers into her ears but was quite unable to block out this terrible sound – the sound of people, thousands of people whimpering, begging, pleading, demanding a way through the Roman walls to freedom, and life, beyond. Ghost Basil returned.

You have to do something.

I can't. There is nothing to be done.

You have to.

I can't change history. It happened. So I can't stop it happening.

What history doesn't know jolly well won't hurt it.

Don't be stupid.

You could try. At least you could try.

Shamed, Annabella reluctantly rose – she seemed to be lifting a great weight – and went to the entrance.

"Take me to Caesar," she told the stolid guard standing just outside.

He was leaning against the parapet, high in the nearest watchtower surveying the miserable multitude spread out before him beyond the fossae, women holding up their children, old men holding up supplicating arms, begging if not for passage through the walls, then pleading at least for slavery, slavery however debased, as the price of a trifle of food. Caesar's face was set and grim though at the same time he seemed to exude a certain air of satisfaction.

He turned as the guard escorting Annabella stamped a salute which echoed hollowly on the boards of the platform beneath them. The once comely young woman, he saw, was now waiflike, all sharp lines and glittering eyes, as though she too had come from Alesia along with the starving horde yonder. She might have been a delegate sent by the multitude to intercede with him, which, it transpired, was exactly what she was.

"Why do you come?" he said. "I have no need of prophecy to deal with this."

"You must let them through," Annabella said. Caesar stared at her, his eyes shrewd and knowing.

"Is that what my book says I did?"

"Yes," Annabella said, already knowing she had lost.

"You're lying. I know you're lying."

"I'm not..."

"Under no circumstances would I ever dream of letting them through. Therefore I know I did not let them through and that you do indeed lie."

"Why?" Annabella demanded, emotion beginning to work in her. "Why won't you let them go? They can do you no harm. They will do you no harm."

"But there where they are, they will do great harm to those they left behind," Caesar said complacently. He gestured at the heights of Alesia. "Let them hear their misery up there, let them watch them die, let them see what they've done to their own people. Let them think. Let them reflect. And let them be afraid, very afraid, of what I shall do to the rest of them."

"They will hate you," Annabella said, her voice rising.

"Good," Caesar said. "People only hate what they fear. And they are right to fear me. The more the better."

"You really are the most despicable tyrant," Annabella stormed, finally roused to passion. "First the rape of Avaricum and now this... It's a tragedy for the world they didn't assassinate you years ago."

"Who?" Caesar shot back. "Who kills me?" He stepped forward and made to seize her by the throat. He stopped only inches short, the claws of his hands outstretched. Annabella stood unmoving, her face, her body expressing only contempt.

"Who assassinates me?" Caesar shouted again, this time right in her face. She could feel his flying spittle and was revolted, but stood her ground unmoving, her lips clamped shut.

She shook her head.

Caesar stepped back, breathing heavily. The silence between them blotted out the wailing and pleading from the thousands beyond.

"Very well," Caesar said at last, his voice cold and perfectly controlled. "Your usefulness is at an end." He turned to the guard detail manning the tower.

"Put her over the wall," he said. "Let her starve with the rest of them."

The thought that hammered at Annabella was that now, Vivienne's death had been rendered even more pointless. There was not even to be the small consolation of at least one of them avoiding this horror.

Annabella was bundled down the ladders to ground level and a detachment of heavily armed legionaries summoned. They thrust her through a postern gate in the wall into no man's land and towards the first ditch, which was now full of putrid-looking water. A broad plank was flung across.

"You can walk or you can be carried," the decurion in charge said. Annabella chose to walk. She was followed by three of the troops, who drew the plank after them and dropped it across the next ditch which had vertical sides and the bottom of which was lined with sharpened stakes. They crossed with marked caution. A slip would mean death. Again, the men drew the plank after them and hustled Annabella across the hundred metres or so of open ground beyond.

"Watch out for man traps," one of the men growled, but he was speaking not to Annabella but to his companions.

They came to the third and final fossa which had been completed first of all as protection for the legionaries during the process of constructing the main fortifications. The far side was lined by the great mass of people ejected from Alesia. They had fallen silent as the postern gate swung open and were now watching stonily as Annabella was marched towards them.

Once more the plank was thrown across and those nearest on the other side drew back for a moment then one old man, taking it as an invitation, crabbed forward.

"Halt!" the decurion bellowed. "Get across!" he told Annabella. "Quickly!" She hesitated.

"Last chance!" the decurion said. More people were now moving towards the plank. "Or we'll throw you in the ditch and you can climb out yourself."

Annabella went but before she had fairly reached the other side the plank was pulled out from underneath her by the Romans, fearing a rush. She fell across the edge of the ditch, her torso on solid ground but her legs dangling over the void. She scrabbled desperately and somebody pulled at an arm. Somebody else grabbed the other and she was pulled to her feet, scraping her shins. She glanced over her shoulder to see the Romans disappearing at speed. They had already reached the ditches nearer the wall.

She turned again to her front. The people facing her were all hideously emaciated, human caricatures. They fell back slowly until she was left standing alone in a cleared area, her back to the artificial ravine behind her. Somebody was pushing through the serried ranks to emerge at last in front of Annabella. There was an in-drawn breath and a sharp exclamation.

"You!" Vernogena spat.

Annabella's expulsion from the Roman side of the wall inadvertently provided the necessary circuit breaker. People began to accept that whatever hope might be left, it could not lie in that direction. Thousands had been evicted from Alesia and only one young woman from the Roman camp, but the message amounted to the same thing. Unless you were a fighting man there was no place for you on either side. All that remained for such as they was this vale of tears in between.

Tentatively at first then with more resolution, people began to move away, seeking whatever might be found in the way of shelter, possibly even sustenance. At least there was some faint prospect of water now if a way could be found to get to the flooded moat near the wall without breaking a leg or being shot.

At last Annabella and Vernogena found themselves effectively alone. Both were still standing, graven, staring at each other. Though roused by recent events, Annabella could feel herself sinking back into apathy; this wasteland or a tent in the praetorium, it made no difference. Nothing made any difference. Her eye caught a large boulder off to one side that had been thrown up by the excavation of the fossa. It would be something to lean against.

She made to move around Vernogena but the Druid stepped in front of her, blocking her path. Annabella just stood there, hands by her sides, waiting, or not waiting. It made no difference. Vernogena she could see without bothering to assess the implications was at least as wasted as she was herself. The older woman's face was drawn and riven. There was a wild look in her eye. The deprivations of the siege had affected her not only physically.

"You did this!" Vernogena hissed. "You had us driven from Alesia. And now you're here to pursue me."

The charge was so outrageous, bordering on insane, that Annabella, almost stirred to action, opened her mouth to reply. She closed it again. What was the point? What was the point of anything? In the end she just stood, her gaze distant, totally unresponsive.

Vernogena raised a hand as though to strike her. Annabella shifted her gaze to Vernogena's face and the Druid's arm fell back, arrested by the terrible blankness of Annabella's eyes, two pools of unrelieved blue that threatened to swallow an observer down into the emptiness within.

Vernogena might be on the edge of madness but still she was afraid of the unknown and the look in Annabella's eyes spoke of mysteries too frightful to contemplate.

Vernogena turned and left.

Night was falling, bringing with it the cold bite of late autumn. People hunkered down as best they could, huddling together for warmth. The only sound was lamentation, rising there, floating on the breeze to settle here, moving on, circling back. Annabella was still sitting against her rock. It provided some shelter from the freezing night wind, though she was unaware of this at any more than the most basic level.

A small figure crossed her vacant gaze without her registering the fact. It crossed back. Eventually it spoke.

"Have you seen my mother?" the girl said, her voice liquid with unshed tears. "I can't find her. Have you seen her?" The child was perhaps seven or eight, all stick limbs and staring eyes.

Annabella said nothing. There was nothing to say.

The girl began to cry, tears sliding down her face though she made no sound. She looked exactly as desolate as Annabella would have felt, had she been capable of feeling anything.

It went on so long that eventually some vestigial sense of pity forced its way through Annabella's emotional barriers. She patted the ground beside her and the girl sat, holding herself stiff and wary. She was shivering with cold, the material of her thin tunic vibrating. Annabella opened an arm and after a second the girl snuggled in close, feeding off Annabella's warmth. The girl sighed then and fell fast asleep, her breathing thick with the mucus of her weeping.

It was a long, long, remorseless night. Endless. A crescent of moon appeared and fought a losing battle with gathering cloud. The wind rose. There was a spatter of rain. Another shower. Then it came in earnest. There was no shelter to be found. There was nothing to be done. Only endure, if possible, die, if not. Annabella found herself pulling the child closer and trying to shield her. She wondered why. There was no reason. She couldn't make things any better. It was just the human thing to do.

But she wasn't human, not any more. She was immortal. At least until she managed to find some monster to devour and digest her. She wondered idly whether fire might consume her, if the fire went on long enough. But given the decades-long torture of Hassan-i Sabbāh in the mud of the boiling volcano, it seemed unlikely. Then she wondered that she was wondering.

The rain stopped and Annabella wiped her face with a sodden sleeve, a gesture quite useless, she thought wryly. A thought! Where hitherto she had been thought-less. Another thought: she sucked at the fabric and was grateful for the moisture. She shifted the child to a more comfortable position in her lap. The wind was icy now, the sort of wind that cut to the bone and flayed the flesh, melting it away, what little might be left.

Vivienne.

She wished Vivienne were here. Always she had had Vivienne to rely on. She wished so much that Vivienne were here. It would mean she were still alive. And the baby inside her. It was the first time Annabella had allowed herself to think of Vivienne's unborn child. It was the first time Annabella had allowed herself to think of Vivienne as more than just an abstract wound to her soul since she had died.

She was hungry now, Annabella realised. Starving. Literally. Just like everyone else here. The twice damned. Ejected by their own. Rejected by the Romans. Abandoned to a pitiless fate. People would be dying now. In their hundreds. Thousands. Wind chill on wet clothing would finish them quickly. No reserves. No strength. No hope.

The rain came again and the wind grew still stronger, enough to drown out the constant threnody of suffering that had never ceased but which was now also diminishing of its own accord as people slipped into unconsciousness.

Basil.

Annabella loved him so much. And he was so beautiful when they were together, alone, and he allowed himself to become visible. His touch. The feel of him within

her. His gentle movement. Quickening. Urgent. Unstoppable. And then the shattering moment. Endless. Ending. Peace. Such peace.

And it was the first time since being ripped from his side at la Scala that Annabella had allowed herself to think of Basil in concrete terms. Until now she had kept herself locked away from her memories for fear of what they might do to her. Now, finally unleashed, they were every bit as crushing as she had feared they would be.

She wept, her chest heaving, unable to breathe, the tears flooding, mingling with the rain. She wept for Vivienne. She wept for the thousands about her inexorably dying. She wept for Basil. But most of all she wept for herself, a great, cathartic cleansing that finally left her drained, barely alive.

At last the terrible night came to an end. A tentative dawn gradually exposed the brutal harvest of the dark hours, the clumps of bodies huddled together in death. Here and there, someone stirred. The great many never would again. The no-man's land between Caesar and Vercingetorix was now dead ground indeed.

The girl was still alive. She woke.

"I want my mother," she whispered in a voice so weak that Annabella had to bend her head to hear. The child began to cry again.

"We'll find her," Annabella said. "We'll try..." It was something to do though she wondered if she was, in fact, being kind. If they found the girl's mother dead, what then?

Nevertheless they rose and began to pick their way through the wasteland, dotted with bodies and pools of stagnant water. Annabella saw one old man drinking from a muddy puddle, lapping like a dog, too enfeebled to do anything else.

How low have we sunk, Annabella thought? How much further is there still to go?

They moved on haltingly, picking their way through the vast conglomeration of misery. Annabella wondered how the girl had become separated from her mother in the first place. Finding her seemed a hopeless quest. The child was staggering now and Annabella was about to pick her up and carry her

There was a cry.

"Iliana!" The girl broke away from Annabella's side and tried to run towards the voice, her feet slipping in the mud, water splashing. A woman struggled to her feet. She was holding a bundle, a baby? Was that why she had been unable to search for her daughter?

Iliana seized the woman around her legs and clung desperately, pressing her face into her mother, who lifted her gaze to meet Annabella's. She mouthed something though the sound didn't carry. A thank you, Annabella presumed and turned away.

Alone again, she thought, but philosophically. And cue ghost Basil, she added to herself. But no. Ghost Basil quite failed to make his presence known. And thinking about it, Annabella came to the conclusion that he had met his end permanently and forever when she had finally allowed the real Basil to fill her mind during the night.

Which was no sort of comfort as the horrific day dragged on. It remained cold and windy, with the occasional shower to keep everything and everybody soaking wet. As

the hours passed so the volume of distress diminished as more and more people went into coma and died.

The warriors remaining in Alesia watched on with mounting horror, racked with guilt. The native Mandubii among them, whose families were down there on the plain dying in droves, were slowly destroyed by anguish until eventually they could stand it no longer. A large delegation went to Vercingetorix demanding those still surviving be allowed to return to the oppidum.

The meeting began respectfully enough but took less than a minute to degenerate into something resembling an all-in brawl. Men, wild with distress, were quite unable to leave the talking to their designated spokesman and began to shout over the top of him and each other, gesticulating and striving to be heard. Gesturing quickly became shoving and the situation explosive. Vercingetorix was all but submerged by a mob of frantic men, each one determined to make his point.

It only came to a stop when Orceterix drowned them out with blasts on a carnyx and sent in a wedge of Averni to rescue the king. It was an ugly moment with both Mandubii and Averni reaching for swords, and the whole army at risk of descending into civil war.

A semblance of peace was eventually restored, but only a semblance resting on the shakiest of foundations: the native Mandubii were far outnumbered by the rest of the Vercingetorix's army, that was all. As to Vercingetorix, if the acid was not burning his soul, it was certainly burning his stomach almost beyond endurance, though endure it he did, some sort of penance, he supposed, for what he was forcing upon his people.

Then night followed day and down on the plain many more of the dying followed the already dead.

Chapter 18

Basil found himself on his father's beach, reverting to childhood, seeking comfort. He was trembling uncontrollably. The Sheikh joined him moments later.

"What?" he demanded.

"Lilis..." Basil managed.

"Lilis what?"

"She was... Annabella..."

"Annabella...? What in all tarnation were you doing anywhere near Lilis?" Basil said nothing.

"Well?" the Sheikh demanded.

"Jamina..." Basil said at last.

And finally his father was forced to accept that primary responsibility for the disaster threatening to destroy his family rested solely with him.

Vernogena also survived the second night, warmed by burning hatred of the witch. She had watched discreetly from afar as the child was reunited with her mother. In the midst of so much misery and pathos it was a touching scene but Vernogena had eyes only for her quarry, who stayed for a moment and then retraced the long, circuitous route from the far end of the encampment, if such it could be called, back to her boulder.

Good, Vernogena thought. During the rest of the day and the long trial of the succeeding darkness she had occupied herself thinking and finally inspiration had struck.

At dawn she lingered long enough to make sure the witch was still settled in place behind the boulder, was still alive and that she was unlikely to move for the foreseeable future, then Vernogena set off on the thankless climb up the heights to the gates of Alesia.

It took her more than an hour and was completely exhausting given her enfeebled state, but she was quite determined that the expenditure of so much of her little remaining energy should reap a dividend..

Right beneath the gates she paused for long minutes to gather her resources and then lifted her voice to the guards watching bleakly from above on the ramparts.

"Get Petrocorios!" she demanded. And if ever there was a useless mouth who should have been expelled from Alesia along with the rest of us, she thought, it's that useless apology for a Chief Druid.

There was a long wait, an unconscionably long wait, a wait so long that Vernogena had reached the conclusion that Petrocorios was refusing to come. She was canvassing schemes to force his attendance when his bald, turkey-cock head finally poked over the parapet.

"What do you want?" he said querulously. "I can't do anything..."

"Osiers," Vernogena said, slowly rising to her feet. Petrocorios stared at her.

"You know why," Vernogena said. "The gods demand it. Cernunnos demands it." Still Petrocorios could only stare at her.

"Cart loads," Vernogena said. "To solicit victory for Vercingetorix it must be the biggest Wicker Man there ever has been. Out here, on the edge of the plateau, where the gods can see the Romans."

"Who will it be?" Petrocorios was finally able to ask.

"The witch, of course," Vernogena said. "And others."

"What others?"

"You will know better than I," Vernogena said. "You will have candidates." Petrocorios's face took on a calculating look.

"How many?"

"Fifty," Vernogena said firmly.

"Fifty!"

"I told you. It must be the biggest Wicker Man ever seen, ever thought of."

"But fifty...?" Petrocorios repeated. "Is that possible?"

"I'll make it possible," Vernogena said. "Come down..."

Much against his better judgement Petrocorios did descend, finally to emerge through a small portal to the side of the main gate. Vernogena was waiting, plainly in distress physically but nevertheless glittering and determined. Petrocorios drew her to one side out of earshot of the guards above.

"A Wicker Man?" he said. "There have been none in my lifetime. And none that have ever been so big, with so many..."

"Which will make it twice blessed," Vernogena replied. "So rare and so powerful. It cannot fail. And we must not fail. Or it will be the end of Gaul. The end of all of us. The end of you..."

Petrocorios hesitated. For the first time since Vernogena's arrival he felt that she was genuine, that this time she was not attempting to manipulate him. Vernogena watched him carefully and at the psychological moment spoke again.

"And if Vercingetorix is to triumph," she said. "Then it must be with our aid. We cannot be seen to have played no part. And if, Cernunnos forbid, he should be defeated and we are seen to have done nothing to prevent it, then inevitably we shall bear the blame."

Her point struck home like an arrow and for once, Petrocorios acted decisively. He was not without finely tuned political antenna, an essential prerequisite for anyone aspiring to rank in political or religious circles.

"You must return with me to the oppidum," he said.

"I am banished, along with the others."

"Not any more, not while I still have power," Petrocorios said with some satisfaction.

The ghul thought to be Cernunnos had been paralysed by anxiety and indecision ever since the great woman of Gergovia had neglected to deliver him the blue-eyed

she-devil, instead removing her from his forest and disappearing in the direction of Alesia. The command had been explicit – "we seek the girl with blue eyes" – and three times now the ghul thought to be Cernunnos had failed to comply.

It was his clear duty to inform Iblis but in doing so he would have to reveal how he had come to have been so comprehensively humiliated by a mere human. Iblis was a chancy proposition at the best of times but to be forced to admit to such a fiasco could lead to the most unpredictable of consequences.

Accordingly, the ghul was very much disposed to let discretion be the better part of cowardice, except for one thing. The dependable supply of corpses had quite ceased and, as far as the ghul could determine from prowling about the edges of Gergovia, was unlikely to resume in the foreseeable future. While there had been rich pickings to be had after the defeat of the Romans, the departure of both armies had meant that the rest of the inhabitants of the oppidum had gratefully subsided into the quietest possible daily round. The need for sacrifices was now non-existent, particularly as Gorbanitio had so skilfully manipulated that harridan of a Chief Druid and her deputy into departing the city.

In short, quiet times in and around Gergovia meant desperate times for the ghul and in desperation he began to formulate possible approaches to Iblis.

About mid-morning, the first outriders of the Gaulish relief army began to appear on the plain, visible from the heights of Alesia. The word spread through the oppidum with the rush of a river in flood. A torrent of people surged through the streets and in minutes the walls were black with spectators, all more or less hysterical with elation. Help had arrived, and not just help. As more and more of the army came into view it became evident just how mighty was the host that had been assembled to save Alesia, to save Gaul. The Romans could not possibly stand before such a magnificent force. The tribes had joined as one and risen to this final challenge beyond everybody's wildest expectations.

Standing in the gate tower, Vercingetorix was swept with such a huge wave of relief that his knees trembled uncontrollably and he was forced to grip the parapet to support himself. Now all things were possible. Now Caesar was surely finished. Once and for all! The hammer had come to the anvil, finally, in the nick of time, and all that remained was to crush the Romans between them like a handful of walnuts. Vercingetorix's heart sang with the joy of it as the myriad weapons of his brother Gauls flashed and glinted in the sunlight out there on the plain.

He watched avidly as Commius went about getting the host into camp and it was nightfall before he could bring himself to descend the tower and begin the business of planning the Romans' destruction.

Caesar also stood for the rest of the day in a tower, studying the Gaulish army. He, however, was not quivering with emotion but was cold and appraising. At the back of his mind he was conscious that in the next day or two his campaign to retake Gaul would come to a climax. He would win the country for Rome, and in due course Rome

for himself, as the seer had predicted. Or he would lose everything, as doubtless the seer must hope, if she were still alive, out there behind the inner wall.

Deeper still, there was fear. How could he possibly hope to defeat this huge army? His own troops were well outnumbered just by the garrison bottled up in Alesia, never mind the hordes of warriors pouring into the plain before him. All told, he would be facing odds of at least five to one, possibly six. And deeper still he began to wish that he had not so lost his temper that he had thrown the young woman over the wall to die. Right now he would dearly love the advice and reassurance she might offer. He wondered, briefly, if she were still alive, whether she might yet be found and brought back.

However, the forefront of Caesar's mind was occupied only with assimilating information: the discipline of these new fighters, their likely steadiness in battle, the proportions of archers, cavalry and infantry, whether they had brought siege weapons, how they were organised, the quality of their officers and a hundred other factors that would have a material bearing on the battles to come. His own tactics would depend to a great extent on the moves of the enemy. There was only one possible strategy. At all costs, the army outside the contravallation must be prevented from uniting with the army inside the circumvallation. To let the two conjoin was defeat and death.

Petrocorios was furious and berated himself as a fool and an idiot. No sooner had he agreed to allow a rival chief Druid to return to the temple – after only just having succeeded in getting rid of her – and no sooner had he set her preposterous plan in urgent motion, when lo and behold, what should turn up but the long-awaited relief army. It was too, too aggravating. There she was, re-ensconced in her chamber, doubtless stuffing her face with what few scraps remained of his food, and the reason for her resurrection had just evaporated. Petrocorios, again standing on the ramparts watching the spectacle, fulminated silently but with ferocious virulence. Below him, some few men were listlessly beginning to stack bundles of withies. Pathetic, he thought. Their efforts were pathetic, and now quite useless.

Somebody touched him on the shoulder and he swung round as savagely as his ageing bones would allow. It was Vernogena, not in her chamber.

"We must proceed," she said without any sort of preamble. "It is now more imperative than ever. There will be a great victory. Caesar will be smashed, finished for all time. We must be seen to have brought it about by interceding with Cernunnos. The Wicker Man will do that. It will be the crowning moment. The moment all will remember."

Abruptly Petrocorios forgot his temper. The woman was right, damn her. Absolutely correct. He nodded agreement.

"How soon can it be ready?" Vernogena asked urgently, gazing down at the beginnings of the project. "Tonight?"

"So big..." Petrocorios mused. "Impossible."

"Then it must be tomorrow night," Vernogena said adamantly. Again Petrocorios shook his head.

"Do you have any idea how big it will have to be to take fifty? How much work it will take?"

"But if we're too late, it will be pointless."

"Then it will become a celebration," Petrocorios ad libbed, delighted with his riposte. "It will be ready when it's ready. There are only so many basket-weavers, and who knows if there will be sufficient withies."

"Get more," Vernogena demanded, her voice again tending to the strident. "Send men to the osier beds. Use your authority. Whatever basket-weavers there are can direct others. There is no shortage of men."

"Very well," Petrocorios agreed, though greatly irked at being given orders in such a peremptory fashion.

"And we must take the witch. That is the vital point. The most important point of all. She is the sacrifice who will bring us victory."

"...Or crown the celebration," Petrocorios added pointedly.

The greatly diminished number of refugees still surviving, still trapped on the point of death in the no man's land between Caesar and Vercingetorix, saw the walls of Alesia turn black with spectators and heard the cheering. They knew what it must mean. The arrival of the relief army. Some few still able wasted precious energy climbing high enough up the flanks of the plateau to be able to see the plain beyond the Roman walls. The vastness of Commius's host slowly became apparent to them and in time they reported to those waiting anxiously below that victory must be assured. The only question then became when would they be permitted to return to their homes in the oppidum?

Eventually people, individually, began to take matters into their own hands. Singly at first, then in family groups and finally as a general movement, they set off to return to the gates. Everywhere, humped figures were left lying in piles on the ground for the carrion creatures. Nobody there had strength left for any but the living.

Annabella also remained, sitting against her boulder. It seemed to her the only thing to do. Then a woman was coming slowly towards her, with difficulty carrying a child, Iliana. Both she and her mother had evidently managed to survive. There was no sign of what Annabella had presumed was her baby.

"Are you not coming?" the woman asked when she was still some little way off. Annabella shrugged.

"I have nowhere to go," she said.

"Come on," the woman said. "Come with us..."

And so Annabella did. Once they reached the flanks of the plateau and began to climb, the mother, Medila, quickly flagged and some little way on was beginning to stagger. Annabella took the child from her and managed to carry her all the way to the top, pausing every hundred paces to rest. The child, wasted as she was, weighed next to nothing. Even so, by the time they reached the gates Annabella was also staggering and her head was swimming with fatigue.

"I have to rest again," she said to Medila, who nodded gratefully. They moved to the side of the road and sat as the trickle, only a trickle, of returning refugees slowly ground their way past.

Annabella, when she could think again, was struck by the strange atmosphere that cloaked them. It was as though they were invisible, non-existent. The guards on the gate, the spectators crowding the battlements all, without exception, looked straight through them without the slightest acknowledgement of their presence. There was nary a smile, a wave, not even a frown.

It was guilt, Annabella realised at last, silent, sullen guilt. Here were the rightful owners of the oppidum, the few who were left, returning to the homes from which they had been summarily evicted and their only greeting was the shame of those who had done the evicting. She stood up.

"Shall we go...?" she asked. Medila nodded and struggled to her feet. Annabella again picked up the child and turned to the gates. She happened to look up to the walls above and straight into the eyes of Vernogena. The Druid had been watching for her and instantly began to shout:

"That woman... The one with the blue eyes... Seize her!" However, her words were determinedly ignored. No one, it seemed, was prepared to bring themselves to individual notice in the pervading air of general infamy. Vernogena began to tug importunately at Petrocorios's arm, but he too ignored her. When she refused to stop, he shrugged her off.

"Later," he muttered. "Not now!"

Vernogena abandoned any idea of co-opting others and began to push her way to the staircase leading down from the rampart.

Just inside the gate, a man rushed up, seized Iliana from Annabella and crushed her into a great embrace, together with Medila. He was obviously husband and father to the two. Annabella faded back so as not to intrude on the reunion, though she did wonder what sort of man he might be ever to have allowed them to go. Which was unfair, she realised a moment later. He never could have guessed how Caesar would behave. She looked for somewhere to sit and wait and wondered vaguely how the father might react to the loss of the baby.

There was a brief outburst at the news which quickly became dumb acceptance. No doubt he was grateful that two of his family of three had survived, and babies were cheap. The thought led her inexorably to her own family, to Vivienne and her never-to-be-born infant. Would it have been a boy or a girl? Which would Annabella have enjoyed playing Auntie Mame to most?

At that moment, Medila turned to her.

"My husband has to go back to the wall," she said. "You are still welcome to come with us..."

Passing the temple, Annabella absently noticed a train of men moving ahead, bearing loads of long, whippy sticks on their backs. There were also loaded carts

heading in the same direction. There had been other men outside the gates, she remembered now, working with similar bundles.

"What are those?" she asked Medila, pointing.

"Withies," Medila said. "From the osier bushes... For basket-weaving..."

"Why so many?" Annabella asked, her curiosity aroused. "What would they be for?"

Medila turned to look again at the passing porters.

"It can't be," she said. "I don't believe it... I've never seen one... But they must be making..." Medila's voice trailed off.

"What?" Annabella asked, with a sudden shiver. "What are they making?"

"A Wicker Man," Medila said. "They must be making a Wicker Man."

And all at once, Annabella put it together. When he came to write his Gallic Wars, Caesar never used the phrase Wicker Man, but he had used the word "viminibus" – of osiers – and the sentence in which it occurred, bizarre as it was, had stuck for a long time in Annabella's mind. Part of it came back to her now: contexta viminibus membra vivis hominibus complent... Limbs formed of osiers which they fill with living men...

And set on fire.

She shuddered. Instinctively she knew what was going to happen.

Not fire! Not again! Why fire? Always fire? She began to panic, her head twisting and turning like a trapped animal's, seeking escape. Medila watched her with concern.

"What's wrong?" she asked. "What's happening?"

"Can you hide me?" Annabella said urgently. "At least until that thing has gone...?" She pointed at the passing porters, meaning the Wicker Man. There was a frantic edge to her voice.

"What have you done?" Medila whispered. "Why are you afraid?"

"Nothing," Annabella said. "I've done nothing... The Druids... They claim I'm a witch..."

"A witch!"

"I'm not! Of course I'm not!"

"But... If the Druids...?"

"I'm not," Annabella pleaded, the desperation plain in her voice. "I swear I'm not..." Medila came to a sudden decision.

"You helped Iliana... You probably saved her life... Come..."

And infused with new purpose she led Annabella into a crowded quarter of small workshops and dwellings.

Far behind, Vernogena watched as the two women – the witch again carrying the child – hurried off and, smiling grimly to herself, she glided in discreet pursuit.

Half an hour later however, Vernogena was frustrated and angry. Her quarry had disappeared. She tracked back, found the alley they must have taken, so narrow it was little more than a passageway, and followed it through to a little square surrounded by dwellings, ten or twelve, she estimated. Well, she thought, a determined search would

rout out the witch and in the meantime she was most unlikely to go anywhere, particularly if Vernogena posted a watcher. She thought immediately of Doros.

Chapter 19

Medila left Iliana with Annabella and went scrounging for food. She was able to wheedle a handful of grain out of one of Vercingetorix's quartermasters who happened to be a cousin of her brother's wife and returned to make a few spoonfuls of an unappetising gruel. Shared between the three of them with Iliana getting the greater portion, it did more to accentuate their hunger than alleviate it. The scant meal, hardly worth the name, was followed by another long cold night which Annabella spent concealed in the cellar.

In the morning, Medila left to hunt for more food and so was able to witness Commius and the Gaulish relief army take the field.

It was a brave, brave sight. Gaulish warriors by the thousand, by the tens of thousand, by the hundreds of thousand emerged onto the plain and paraded up to the Roman walls, taunting, challenging, insulting. The din of so many swords clashing on so many shields was the thunder of a jealous god high in the heavens threatening a storm of retribution.

It went on for hours until at last the Roman cavalry sallied forth to teach the barbarians better manners. The fighting was fierce and continuous, mass versus movement, and stretched from midday to sundown with neither side able to gain advantage until, with the light failing fast, a charge by Caesar's German auxiliaries turned the Gaulish flank and sent the army retreating back to camp, tails between their legs.

The garrison of Alesia had watched from the walls with the utmost attention, none more so than Vercingetorix, and were cast down deep into despair when Commius was forced to withdraw in defeat. It seemed inconceivable that so many warriors could be driven off by so few cavalry, yet skill and discipline had won the day, leaving the people of Alesia to another night of near starvation.

"What will happen now?" Medila asked those she was standing with. "Will Commius try again tomorrow?" But the consensus was that Commius would need at least a day for his army to regroup and to prepare before again assaulting the Roman walls.

"Will the Wicker Man be ready tonight?" Vernogena demanded.

"No," Petrocorios said uneasily. "Impossible. You can see... Quite impossible. Tomorrow night at the earliest." The two Druids were standing outside the gate, watching dozens of men still hard at work. Torches had been brought and the flaring light revealed that the huge structure was not nearly complete.

"But it must be ready tonight," Vernogena said. There was an hysterical edge to her voice that Petrocorios found deeply alarming. "We must make the sacrifice *before* the battle, or it will be pointless..."

Petrocorios was about to fall back on his "celebration" line but was unable to resist the temptation of rubbing in his superior position.

"I am told," he said weightily, "that there will definitely be no battle tomorrow. After what happened today, Commius needs time... I am told, by those who know, that the best opportunity for the next attack is likely to be late tomorrow night. Midnight, or after..."

"Is this reliable? Or just gossip?" Vernogena interrupted.

"Madam...!" Petrocorios responded, deeply irked at being questioned so peremptorily. "It comes from the top, the very top. Vercingetorix expects Commius to attack at midnight tomorrow and even now is setting preparations in train for the men of Alesia to join the assault from the inside. The Romans will be caught, finally, between the hammer and the anvil." So there! he added to himself privately.

Vernogena took some moments to process the information and then began to smile.

"Perfect," she said, her tone now relaxed, even ebullient. "Our men shall go to glory with the Gods at their side, propitiated by the screams from the greatest sacrifice there has ever been."

"If it is ready," Petrocorios put in, partly out of spite, mostly from worry that it wouldn't be.

"Oh, it will be ready," Vernogena said. "You can be sure it will be ready. I'll see to that." And without another word, she strode towards the workmen leaving Petrocorios stranded and wondering how it was that this infernal woman always managed to make him feel deeply foolish.

However, when she got close, the scene that greeted Vernogena in the torchlight was less than encouraging and might have made her feel slightly foolish on her own account, had she ever allowed herself such weakness.

The outline of the structure was huge and it was dawning on the work party that the project was in fact impossibly huge. Most of the men involved were now standing round arguing. They fell silent as Vernogena strode manfully towards them.

"Who's in charge?" Vernogena demanded. Reluctantly, a large man who should have been fat stepped forward. Like everyone else in Alesia he was three-quarters starved and the skin of his face hung down in curious folds.

"Name?" Vernogena snapped.

"Latumaros," he offered warily. Which for Vernogena was even less encouraging, the word meaning "big drunkard". She could only hope everything alcoholic in the oppidum had long since been consumed.

"Why are you standing around like this?" Vernogena went on, her voice sharp enough to cut stone. "Why aren't you working?" Latumaros spread his hands.

"It can't be done," he said defensively. "No one could do it. It's too big. It will just collapse of its own weight. It's hopeless."

"Understand me now," Vernogena said, raising her voice. "All of you... It will be done. It will be done by tomorrow night. There will be no rest until it is done. Do I make myself clear?"

"But Holiness," Latumaros said despairingly. "Even if we do finish it, it will just fall apart. I don't even know how we can raise it. But if we do try, it will just fold up... It's too big... Impossible... It will just collapse," he repeated.

"Fool," Vernogena said impatiently. "We don't raise it, we build it in place. And we need timber to reinforce it. Or is that beyond you? Timber, get timber..."

"But even if timber is to be had, how can we make it stand? It's impossible..."

"I will show you," Vernogena said. Latumaros rearranged his bloodhound jowls into an expression of extreme doubt. He was not to know that even though no Wicker Man had been constructed in Alesia in living memory, the engineering knowledge required was very much part of a Druidical education and a facet to which Vernogena had paid particular attention. As a teenage girl she had witnessed a Wicker sacrifice – a smallish one – and it had been an ambition ever since to hold a very large one, large enough to go down in the annals.

She took time to survey the work so far, then metaphorically rolled up her sleeves and began to exert her authority.

The matter of the witch could wait till morning.

The ghul thought to be Cernunnos was as hungry as any of the besieged of Alesia. Indeed since the siege had begun weeks before, nothing in the way of acceptable carrion, human carrion, had come his way. The people of Gergovia and the surrounding countryside had all gone to ground, deeming it prudent to adopt the lowest of profiles until the great and weighty matters of their betters should be resolved.

However, unaware as he was of the wheels that were in motion, grinding nation against nation, the ghul searched for some other explanation for the famine that had fallen upon him, and the greater his hunger became, so he fixed more and more on the blue-eyed she-devil as being the only possible cause. No wonder Iblis was demanding her capture. Clearly, the she-devil had erected a barrier around the forest that prevented any human ingress. Clearly, she was determined to prohibit any and all sustenance reaching him. Clearly, she was determined he should starve to death, whereupon his territory would become her territory. Clearly, it was a plot. A foul plot. And intolerable.

But any appeal to Iblis, involving as it did confession of his own derelictions, was fraught with grave risks and the ghul thought to be Cernunnos delayed and delayed until finally he was faced with the choice of chancing whatever idle torments Iblis should be pleased to visit upon him for his own amusement, or, quite literally, death by starvation.

Then, in extremis, he was seized with a profound insight.

The blue-eyed she-devil obviously was unsanctioned. Were she sanctioned, were she to owe fealty to Iblis, then Iblis would not be seeking her so determinedly. In the second place, the she-devil would never have dared to move against the ghul thought to be Cernunnos. Iblis adjudicated on territorial disputes among his vassals with impartial savagery. Therefore, the blue-eyed she-devil was twice rogue or she never would have risked such judgement. It was known that of all things, except perhaps blue-eyed she-devils, Iblis most detested freelance elements trespassing on his domains of evil. Therefore, if the ghul thought to be Cernunnos directed Iblis's attention to the blue-eyed she-devil in such terms, the ghul thought to be Cernunnos

might expect to emerge from the encounter unscathed, Iblis's idle amusement and his wrath having been focused on the interloper.

The ghul thought to be Cernunnos could find no flaw in his reasoning, yet still he hesitated.

In constructing the Wicker Man, Vernogena had finally found her true calling. She only reproached herself that she had not taken personal charge sooner. She was a natural foreman who, given the chance, delighted in addressing and solving practical difficulties. Her first decision was to discard all the work already done. The legs were far too thin and far too long. The body also was far too thin and far too long. Of course it would collapse under its own weight. Latumaros had been right about that, at least. She set men to unpicking the withies that had been used, moved some distance away and after spending time on calculation, marked out a new design.

The legs would be simple cylinders, the height of two men and of sufficient circumference that five could be crammed in on each level, the upper level on the lower's shoulders. The least guilty of the miscreants to be sacrificed would go here. Their agony would be the shortest.

The arms also would be simple cylinders, each taking two men, while the remaining 26 would be forced into the globe forming the body. Finally, a second much smaller globe would form the head and take the witch, who would thus live longest and suffer most.

Timber began to arrive and Vernogena put some of her remaining workers to digging foundation holes to take the leg posts, plus a larger, deeper hole in the centre and set back for the main support. This would also bear the crane for loading the Man with his human freight and for raising the piece de resistance, the head containing the witch.

With the foundation work well underway, Vernogena then turned to Latumaros to address the matter of constructing the main brace. To make it sufficiently long and sufficiently strong, the heaviest barks of timber available would have to be jointed and pegged.

"Carpenters," she said. "We need carpenters. I'll speak to Petrocorios in a minute. Meanwhile, let's get started." And to everyone's astonishment, Vernogena began to whistle through her teeth as she strode about, assigning tasks.

Annabella spent a second night shivering in the cellar. Medila – her husband still on duty – tried to get her to come upstairs and share a bed with Iliana and herself for warmth, but Annabella was unable to bear the thought of taking the risk. If people came searching, the concealed trapdoor gave at least some chance of escaping detection.

Fear of the Wicker Man loomed larger and larger. Without even thinking about it, Annabella was certain Vernogena was planning to include her in the sacrifice and the prospect of being burnt alive, then staying alive, was reducing her to primordial terror. Intellectually she knew she should be able to control the dread planted in her childhood, but in practice she was quite unable to command herself. Indeed, as she

had grown older and had been forced to face this, her ultimate nightmare, at least twice more, the fear had grown worse.

At an unconscious level, Annabella was also aware that in rejecting Medila's offer of shared warmth she was tending to alienate her rather than bring her closer. Already Medila was deeply apprehensive of the accusation of witchcraft hanging over Annabella. However convincingly Annabella might deny the charge, Medila was schooled to accept Druidic pronouncements without question and she was torn between the truth in Annabella's piercing blue eyes and the long conditioning of her upbringing.

For Annabella, it was another long, long night during which she barely slept. Every creak of the floor above, every rustle of a mouse, every irregularity of her own breathing brought her clangingly awake, fully aroused and ready for instant fight or flight.

It was wearing in the extreme, worse in many ways than the nights spent trapped in the valley of the dying.

As dawn streaked the sky – Vernogena noted with satisfaction that the day promised to be fine – work on the Man was progressing smoothly. The long length of the main brace had been jointed and partially pegged while the legs were almost complete. Once the brace was raised and in position her crew of weavers could begin work on the body. The arms and head would be constructed simultaneously to be raised into position in due course.

Vernogena was tired but buoyed by a justifiable sense of achievement. She was confident they would meet her self-imposed deadline, and midnight was a fitting time for such sacrifice. She allowed herself to sit and rest, even to doze off.

Sometime later – how long she didn't know – she was woken by shouting. Confused, she took some moments to grasp what was happening. A powerful-looking officer whom she didn't know, backed by a squad of armed men, was summarily commandeering the dozen carpenters she had managed to conscript the night before. She leaped to her feet, a mother bear defending her cubs, and rushed to the attack. It was to no avail. The officer was adamant that the carpenters were required to construct assault weapons – ladders and hooks, and hurdles for crossing the ditches.

He remained somewhat respectful but would brook no interference from anyone, not even a Chief Druid, however much she might protest and however strident she became. The carpenters were marched off, surrounded by the squad, leaving Vernogena frustrated and deeply vexed. Speaking briefly to Latumaros, she hurried off to enlist Petrocorios in an appeal to Vercingetorix.

Petrocorios himself, woken at a most ungodly hour, was, needless to say, entirely reluctant to take the matter further. In fact, he flatly refused, until, that is, Vernogena threatened to brand him with the failure of everything, should everything fail. Given the size of the army that Commius had brought to the relief of Alesia, it seemed unlikely that everything would fail, but Petrocorios had achieved high office with a policy of hedging his bets and it seemed wise to continue the practice. He dawdled

unconscionably, changing out of his nightwear, but eventually he could delay no longer and the two set off for Vercingetorix's headquarters accompanied by a retinue of acolytes to lend weight to the argument.

Their reception was, of course, entirely perfunctory. Vercingetorix refused to receive them at all and in the end delegated Orceterix to deal with whatever complaint it was they insisted on making. For his part, after the revelation that Licnos had indeed been correct in his projection of the future, Orceterix was somewhat more disposed to take Druids seriously. In the end he acceded to argument, mainly to shut the dreadful woman up, and sent her off with one of his senior men to track down the purloined carpenters.

With great relief, Petrocorios quietly faded out of the chase and took himself back to his bed.

It took time to find the carpenters. It took even more time to prise them free of the officious underling charged with producing at least a gross of scaling ladders by dusk that day, but eventually Vernogena succeeded. She was herding the now thoroughly disgruntled and disaffected workers back towards the Man when the messenger found her.

Disaster! There had been a disaster. There was no other word for it. Thinking the main brace finished, which superficially it appeared to be, and thinking to get ahead in Vernogena's absence, Latumaros had set about raising it into position. Still only tacked together and not properly fastened, it had buckled and broken.

Vernogena, rushing to the scene, found the beam fractured and splintered. Some of it could be salvaged but most of the work was to be done again and she realised then that her self-imposed deadline was quite unattainable. There was no conceivable way the Man could be ready by midnight.

She resisted the temptation to fly into a rage on the spot and searched about for Latumaros, intending to vent her extreme displeasure in private. Latumaros, however, had vanished, which Vernogena in due course would come to count as a blessing. In the meantime, she set about retrieving the situation as best possible.

Doros, faithful to his post, slept the night in a doorway, confident that no one could leave the square without first passing him, unless, that is, they slipped out a back way. The dawn found him shivering with cold but at least he had a fragment of oatcake in his pocket for breakfast. It was a most meagre repast for a growing boy but given the famine that had reigned in Alesia for the past weeks, he was grateful to have anything.

A door opened across the little square and a woman came out bearing a leather pail, obviously intending to seek her ration of water. She set off but was stopped by a child bursting out behind her, a child who then proceeded to burst into tears.

"Iliana," the woman called. "Go back inside... You must go back inside. I won't be long." However, the child stood rooted to the spot, sobbing in great whoops. The woman returned and the child instantly seized hold, determined never to let her go. It was a stand-off. Eventually the woman spoke through the still open door:

"Annabella, could you...?"

A second woman emerged, one Doros had seen before, the one with the striking blue eyes, the one with the funny name.

He smiled to himself. His mistress would be pleased.

Chapter 20

The day everywhere was a frenzy of waiting.

The Gaulish fighting men on both sides of the great Roman divide were fully engaged in preparing for battle: fabricating assault tackle, sharpening swords, burnishing armour, anything to occupy the empty introspection of men preparing to fight and likely die.

Likewise, the Romans – already as prepared as they could possibly be – dutifully, in their disciplined military way, went through the motions of the make-work their officers wished upon them. Anything to occupy the empty introspection of men preparing to fight and likely die.

Vercingetorix, again ensconced in the gate tower, mentally rehearsed every possible scenario and every five minutes by the sundial bemoaned the fact that he had no direct communication with Commius, no communication of any sort. And every five minutes by the sundial he berated himself for the fact that in sending out the couriers to summon the relief army, he had neglected to institute some sort of signalling system. A nasty intuition informed him that he would carry that regret to his grave.

Commius, however, did not regret the lack of contact with Vercingetorix. His present position as supreme commander of the relief army was the result of many long, hard years of political manoeuvring and ultimately betrayal – including betrayal of Caesar himself, to whom Commius had once been subordinate. He had no wish to share the glory, so hard won, with any rival.

He was so confident that his army must prevail – outnumbering the Romans, as it did, by a factor of five to one – that co-ordinated action with the forces besieged in the oppidum seemed quite unnecessary, indeed that a joint attack could only serve to shore up a Vercingetorix's position as king. In his secret heart Commius had his own very specific ambition which did not include pulling Vercingetorix's political chestnuts out of the fire.

He supposed Vercingetorix would be bound to join the assault from within when the battle began, but really, what Vercingetorix might or might not do was neither here nor there. He turned his mind to insurance, insurance on his own account. For a wise man experienced in the ways of battle, it would be well to have some sort of fall-back. Just in case... Unlikely as the need would be...

He summoned Vergasillaunus, one of his most reliable commanders. The fact that he was also a kinsman to Vercingetorix couldn't be helped. They held a long conference, consulted the chief scout and several of his underlings, and then orders were issued. Vergasillaunus found himself with an independent mission, as

independent commander of 60,000 men, 60,000 elite warriors, from the most warlike of the tribes assembled there on the plain.

That settled, Commius's main concern, his only concern, was to bolster the fragile veneer of cohesion and cooperation that papered over the inherently fissiparous nature of the vast conglomeration of quarrelling nations, tribes, clans and families that made up his force. Yesterday's withdrawal before the flanking cavalry – all right, forced withdrawal – and the subsequent shocking casualty list had not helped matters in the slightest, serving to unleash a storm of jealous criticism and complaint among the chiefs and nobles who made up the officers of his disparate army and who were all deeply envious of Vergasillaunus's assignment.

Commius's time from then on was wholly occupied in adjudicating what were essentially frivolous and trivial grievances, but vital in the sense that if not handled with subtle delicacy they would inevitably lead to further fracturing of his command. At one point he wished distractedly that like his one-time friend, Caesar, he could impose Roman discipline.

For his part Caesar, ostensibly resting in his private chamber, paced the floor with rapid steps, diverting thoughts of death in battle with thoughts of death by assassination. It had been a definite mistake to throw the seer over the wall into the desert of dying beyond. Even now the unmistakable and familiar smell of corpses decaying en masse was percolating through the camp, a constant reminder of the ruthless, but correct, decision he had made. He wrinkled his nose and wondered if the seer had survived. He should have forced a name, names, from her while he had the chance. Even if suspect, they would have given him a starting point. He wondered if he would ever meet the woman again and vowed that if fortune should so favour him, he would not make the same mistake. She would be put to the torture, come what may.

Annabella had thought it safe enough to emerge from the cellar during daylight hours – there would surely be warning of approaching danger and time to hide – but being forced to venture outside to retrieve Iliana worried her badly. She supposed she couldn't blame the child. Having lost her mother once in that dreadful field of death, Iliana was now determined never to let Medila out of her sight. There had been a similar performance when Medila had gone out to get food the day before, but contained indoors. Annabella thought this morning's episode had gone unobserved – it had been very early, after all – but she was determined there should be no repeat. Whatever happened, she must not be found and captured before the Wicker Man had been duly completed and destroyed.

Beyond that, she had no plan, only the wispy remains of what had only ever been the faintest of hopes. It had been so long now since she had gambled on provoking the ghul into going to Iblis that she had more or less abandoned any thought it might bear fruit.

The ghul thought to be Cernunnos, for his part, had reached a point where if he failed to summon sufficient courage to petition Iblis he could expect to starve to death

in the very near future. Yet still he wavered. It had occurred to the ghul that Iblis might well be seeking the blue-eyed she-devil from desire, not for retribution, in which case the ghul thought to be Cernunnos, rather than being rewarded, might find his territory being handed to the she-devil on a plate, along with himself.

The thought threw him into a fit of frantic vacillation and he could only execrate the day the she-devil had magically appeared out of thin air in the middle of his sacrificial Grove. It had seemed most fortuitous for a heartbeat or two at the time, but now the ghul, thought to be Cernunnos, knew it to have been the advent of a curse and a plague.

One person still gainfully employed, at least by her own lights, was Vernogena. It would have been easier and undoubtedly quicker to begin a new main brace from scratch but there was insufficient heavy timber remaining in Alesia and access to a suitable forest was denied by the Romans, never mind that locating, cutting down, and dressing a suitable tree would have set the work back even further. There was simply no help for it but to make the best of a bad job.

She had been forced to split her workforce into shifts to allow some rest but by mid-afternoon the full crew was again on the job. However, it was painfully clear to Vernogena that it was quite impossible that the Man would be finished by midnight. The head and arms were now ready as well as the legs, but until the repaired main brace was solidly in position nothing further could be done in the way of wicker work. Reluctantly, most reluctantly, she allowed the specialist basket-weavers to disperse in search of food. It then occurred to Vernogena that it would be wise if she were to do the same. A state of exalted purpose must inevitably fade with fatigue and hunger.

She delegated management of the construction site to Ruffos, her new foreman, and took herself back to the temple. There was a message awaiting her there from Doros. He had positively identified the house where the witch had gone to ground. It was excellent news and Vernogena began to make plans.

She returned to the common just on dusk to find that Ruffos had kept his crew diligently at work and that repairs to the brace were substantially complete.

"Another hour, Holiness," he announced. "Then we can raise it. And then we can all go home..."

"Not quite," Vernogena said. "There will have to be scaffolding so the weavers can work."

Ruffos's face fell and there was a grumble of discontent from the two or three carpenters who had managed to overhear, but Vernogena was not in a mood to brook argument. She pointed to the head of the Wicker Man, lying ready.

"We can always make room for a few more," she remarked in a carrying voice. There was instant silence and the workmen were looking anywhere but in her direction. Vernogena took herself off to one side, wearing a satisfied expression, and settled herself to wait.

Eventually, the last peg was hammered home and Ruffos diffidently approached.

"It is ready, Holiness," he said. Vernogena rose.

"Good," she allowed.

"We will need more men to help raise it." Vernogena gestured to one of her acolytes.

"Send messengers. Get all the weavers back. Immediately. And get the temple guard..."

Ruffos made one last anxious inspection. The base of the great beam lay next to the foundation pit that had been dug for it. Ropes ran from the top, over sheer legs and back to the crowd of men waiting beyond the hole, ready to haul on command.

"Well?" Vernogena said impatiently. "Are we ready?"

"Yes, Holiness," Ruffos said reluctantly.

"Then do it... There's no time to waste."

"Yes, Holiness," Ruffos repeated. He waved his arm and shouted: "Now! Heave!"

The men tailing on the ropes began to walk backwards and as they did so, the top of the beam began to rise. The butt slid forward at the same time but caught on the edge of the hole. The top continued to rise, the sheer legs fell away and suddenly, with a great thud, the beam dropped into the hole, the joints creaking and protesting. However, this time they held and the main brace for the Wicker Man was now standing solid and firm.

"Good," Vernogena said to Ruffos. "Well done." Ruffos said nothing but the expression on his face was plain to read: what a waste of fine work just to go up in smoke.

Vernogena supervised the erection of scaffolding to the head weaver's satisfaction and saw work on the body of the Man underway, then she beckoned to the captain of the guard detachment.

"Follow me," she ordered. Everything was taking longer than she bargained for. Already the night was slipping by at an alarming speed.

Doros was waiting faithfully in his doorway.

"That one," he said in a low voice, pointing to Medila's house.

"And the witch is still inside?" Vernogena whispered. Doros nodded and Vernogena took time to caress his cheek – the boy deserved something – then she gestured to the guard captain. "You know what to do," she said and followed close behind as the half dozen men rushed across the little square and began to pound on the Medila's door. Somebody kicked at the latch and it burst open. They poured inside. By the light of coals glowing in the fireplace they could see a woman clutching a child and staring at them in fear. They were crouched on a pallet where they had obviously been asleep.

"Where is the witch?" Vernogena demanded, striding to the front. The woman said nothing, just shook her head.

"Take the child," Vernogena said to the guard captain. "Hold her..." She was pulling a knife from her girdle as she spoke. The captain looked at her in shock but the woman intervened before he could protest.

"No," Medila cried. "She's down there..." She pointed at the floor and then at a large basket that had been positioned to cover the trapdoor. One of the men kicked it aside and he and another descended the ladder.

Annabella was cowering in a corner of the tiny cellar. Vernogena, peering down the opening, allowed herself a smile of grim satisfaction as the witch was seized, dragged towards the ladder and then thrust upwards. Her face was white, Vernogena noted, and those devilish blue eyes finally were veiled with fear. It was a moment for Vernogena to savour.

"I'm sorry..." the other woman, the one with the child, tried to say but the witch gave no sign she had heard as she was hustled out the door and into the square.

Midnight.

A great roar rose up from Commius's army massed on the outside of the Roman Wall, rolled across the plain and reverberated up to the heights of Alesia, then nearly 200,000 men launched a hail of missiles onto the Roman defenders. To the hapless legionaries it seemed the Gauls had an inexhaustible supply of ammunition and in the darkness, where there could be no warning, the barrage took terrible toll.

Vercingetorix was unsure whether the prodigious battle cry was an intentional signal – he hoped so, but political paranoia suggested something else – nevertheless, he did the only thing he could. He ordered his carnyxes to sound and led the besieged army of Alesia down from the plateau to join the assault. First, however, they would have to bridge Caesar's defensive fossae on the inside of the walls – a major undertaking of itself – if sufficient men were ever to be brought to bear on the Romans to have a chance of breaching the wall.

The full horror and confusion of the unfolding battle was hidden by the night. Had he but known it, Commius might have kept his men at a distance. The artillery barrage they unleashed was doing fearful execution. Legionaries were dropping by the score, by the hundred, and had the Gauls been content to stand off and continue the hail of destruction, history might have come to be very different. But Gaulish warriors being Gaulish warriors, without orders or decision, their "honour" compelled them to close the wall to attack at close quarters, and then the situation reversed. It was the Romans and their close-order defences – the stakes, the man traps, the ditches, all invisible in the dark – that wreaked death and destruction on a pre-industrial scale.

By shuffling reserves up and down the ramparts from one crisis to the next, Caesar and his tribunes were able to prevent even the beginnings of a breach and the vast sweep of the conflict was reduced down to a multitude of bloody mortal combats in which the Romans, fighting from on high, had every advantage.

Dawn. A stormy dawn with threatening clouds and rising wind.

In the strengthening light, Commius surveyed the wreckage of his army and felt the nausea rising from deep in his stomach. And along with it, rage. Where was Vercingetorix? He should have been attacking from inside the circumvallation. He should have been splitting Caesar's forces. He should have been helping to catch the Romans between two fires, between the hammer and the anvil. But from the other side

of the walls there had been nothing. Here they were trying to save Vercingetorix's neck and he and his men had not even made it to the battle. It was unconscionable. It was cowardly. It was utterly contemptible.

Commius let forth a great cry of mingled wrath and pain, of outrage and creeping despair. He knew what Caesar would do next and he ordered what was left of his army to retreat accordingly. If the Roman cavalry again managed to take them in the flank it might be the end of everything, there and then, and Vergasillaunus would never be able to bring his secret force into play.

On the other side of the Roman defences, Vercingetorix heard the carnyxes calling off Commius's men. It was a shock as profound as any he had ever experienced. Surely Commius could hold just a little longer? Surely that vast great army could continue the battle for a few minutes more. He and his men had so nearly bridged the fossae. Just a few minutes more... That was all he needed. Then he and the army of Alesia would unleash the pent-up fury of the past weeks and take the Roman legions in the rear. They would wreak such revenge for the suffering that had been inflicted on them. Just a few minutes was all he needed... A pitiful few minutes...

Vercingetorix heard the still distant sounds of battle along the wall fading with astonishing rapidity. Commius and his men were indeed in full retreat. Raging, Vercingetorix similarly ordered his men to break off and return to the illusory safety of the starving oppidum above them on the plateau. It was his most bitter defeat. He and his men had not even made it to the fight. Their return through the gates of Alesia was marked not by the crisp tramp of boots marching in rhythm, but the shuffle of shame.

Vernogena watched the despondent procession back through the gates with a joy she could barely contain, a joy that she had to struggle to hide from those around her. This defeat, such a defeat, was monumental in its meaning. It confirmed for her a lifetime of belief, a lifetime of study and personal sacrifice, as opposed to third-party sacrifices.

The Stag Lord had not been propitiated in any sort of fashion prior to the battle, never mind appropriately. And he had vented his displeasure accordingly. Commius's defeat on the plain was a disaster indeed, but out of such disaster came the opportunity to prove once and for all the power of sacrifice, the power of Cernunnos, the power of the gods in general... And most significant of all the power of intercession by those adept and skilled in communion with those awful beings.

A manic gleam came into Vernogena's eyes as she turned to survey progress on the Man. The great bowl of the belly was taking shape now. Vernogena summoned Ruffos and demanded an estimation of when it would finally be complete. Ruffos scratched his head theatrically.

"Midday?" he said hesitantly. Vernogena nodded and mentally revised what she regarded as a thoroughly over-optimistic projection, produced to placate her. Mid-afternoon, she thought, not before, which meant holding the sacrifice at sundown – so appropriate. And she began to rehearse all that still remained to be done, not least the matter of delaying the next battle until Cernunnos had received his proper due.

The fear was crippling. Annabella could think nothing, feel nothing except the pounding of her missing finger and the lesser bite of the scorpion on her shoulder. She knew with absolute certainty that she was fated to be sacrificed in the Wicker Man, that once again she must face the terror of rampant fire, the unbearable pain, and worst of all the end that could never be an end. Death was one thing. As ghost Basil had remarked: "When you're dead you don't know it." But it was not the threat of death, however excruciating, that most petrified Annabella. It was the endless living hell which would follow any such attempt to kill her.

She had feared and fought against coming to Alesia because of what Caesar would do to the refugees forced from the oppidum. The fate that now awaited her was infinitely worse. Of the many dark and impossible situations life had thrust upon her, this was the absolute nadir. It was crushing, completely crushing. Annabella had been hurled down a black pit and lay at the bottom, utterly shattered. She had been crushed before but never like this. In the past, somehow, with or without help, she had always managed to put herself back together and emerge the stronger for it. Now, the shards and fragments of her soul lay scattered about, lost in the pitchy darkness which was all that remained of her sanity.

The pounding of her non-existent finger brought to mind an image of the creature who had taken it, Hassan-i Sabbāh, and what the boiling mud of Baluchistan had done to him. Also unable to die because of al iksir, he had become a demented fiend with one, only one, surviving purpose – vengeance. What would the raging fire of the Wicker Man do to her? What would she become?

It was a thought, vague, half-formed, quite unfocused, but nevertheless, a thought.

Would she too end as a monster? Bent only on terrible revenge? If so, it would serve the Druids right. Vernogena... It would be justice to hate her, to hound her, to drive her screaming into whatever afterlife she cared to believe in. Alternatively if she were truly to be reincarnated, then Annabella would still be around to greet her when she returned from the dead, delighted to hound her all over again. That would be true justice. Eternal justice.

Far down as she was, defeated and broken as she was, and though she quite failed to realise it, Annabella again was looking to some sort of future, however hideous it might be.

Reluctantly, Vernogena again delegated overseeing final construction of the Wicker Man to Ruffos and made her way to Vercingetorix's headquarters, there demanding audience with the King. In the circumstances, quite impossible, she was told. On the contrary, she retorted, it was of vital importance to the future prosecution of the war.

In the end she was taken to Orceterix where pretty much the same conversation was repeated.

"What?" Orceterix growled in the end. "What is of such vital importance?" And Vernogena, realising she would get no further unless she justified herself, launched into an account of the Wicker Man and its overriding and essential significance.

Orceterix finally agreed that she might put her case to Vercingetorix himself. It was then mid-morning.

Vercingetorix was alone, slumped on a settle in a small side room, surroundings so modest that Vernogena was almost surprised into an exclamation. Vercingetorix's face bore the marks of deep anguish and he gave no sign when she and Orceterix entered the room, merely continuing to stare at his boots. He looked so forlorn that Vernogena, the least maternal of women, was almost moved to draw him close and offer comfort. Instead, she began a second telling of the Wicker Man and what it would mean.

At first, Vercingetorix showed no sign of response but as Vernogena's explanation proceeded he lifted his gaze and animation crept back into his face.

Hope, here was hope. When all else failed turn to the gods.

"How many?" he asked. "How many will the Wicker Man hold?"

"Fifty," Vernogena said, then amended: "Fifty-one..." Vercingetorix leapt to his feet, infused with a new energy.

"When will it be ready?" he demanded.

"Sundown," Vernogena said. "A fitting time for such an event. But..."

"But what?"

"Battle must be delayed until afterwards, for the sacrifice to have effect." Both Vercingetorix and Orceterix were startled by a Druid presuming to dictate military strategy, but after a moment's thought both took the point and so it was agreed.

The three of them then went into the practical arrangements of transferring the necessary felons from their imprisonment to the Wicker Man and loading them in. A certain amount of vehement resistance would be inevitable when they realised their fate. A swift voluntary sacrifice on the great altar was one thing, being burnt alive quite another.

Ruffos was looking hangdog when Vernogena eventually returned. Plainly the midday deadline was out of the question. There was less than an hour to go and work had slowed again. Weaving the top half of the body where it curved back over itself had proved more difficult than anyone had bargained for. In the end the carpenters had been forced to construct a work platform within the actual belly of the beast. Mid-afternoon was Ruffos's latest estimate, if all went well.

Vernogena threw a minor tantrum partly for form's sake and partly to ensure there would be no slacking, but privately she was not displeased with progress and when finished, the thing was going to be colossal, epic, a giant humanoid container full of humans. It was surely an offering Cernunnos could not ignore. Surely no grander offering had ever been presented to him. And the Wicker Man of Alesia would go down in the annals. Centuries from now acolytes would recite the verses composed in her honour and to the greatest sacrifice that had ever been conceived and performed. And as they recited, the acolytes would pray to be gifted with the same merit as Her Holiness, the Illustrious Vernogena whose epic vision had saved Gaul.

Beguiled by her intoxicating daydream, Vernogena was stunned when a distant roar came floating up to the plateau. The battle had resumed. She rushed back from the

edge of the plateau to the main gate and reached it just as Vercingetorix came striding up from within, leading his personal bodyguard with the rest of his army hastily crowding behind.

"Stop it!" Vernogena shouted at him. "You must stop it! It's too soon... Please stop it!" Vercingetorix looked at her helplessly and halted in front of her.

"How?" was all he said. "How can I stop it?"

"But the gods... Cernunnos... The sacrifice... We have to make the sacrifice or the gods will never grant us victory..."

"Perhaps the gods want it this way," Vercingetorix said, suddenly cold, and strode off, followed by the mass of his men.

Chapter 21

The resumption of the battle that so dismayed Vernogena was Commius's fall-back plan, his insurance, carefully prearranged with Vergasillaunus. In the improbable event that the all-out night offensive on the Roman walls should fail, recommencement of the assault at noon would be Vergasillaunus's signal to emerge from concealment behind the northern mountain and to fall on the incomplete section of Caesar's defences. This time the legionaries would be stretched to the absolute limit all along the line and if Vercingetorix could finally manage to get himself into the fight as well, then surely Roman resistance must be broken.

That Commius had not chosen to adopt this plan in the first instance was purely a function of the Gaulish warrior ethos. It was unmanly to attack an enemy where he was weakest – until, that is, it became the only possible course of action left. And doubtless it was a sentiment with which the thousands of already dead warriors queuing for reincarnation would enthusiastically concur.

With all the preparatory work that had taken place during the night – the disarming of the man traps, the filling of ditches, the laying of hurdles – Vercingetorix and the men of Alesia this time did manage to join the battle and were soon baying at the inner walls, leaving Caesar in control of only a narrow strip of land, beset on both sides by two massive armies, each of which outnumbered his legions. The situation was most delicately poised, made worse by the fact that legionaries facing one massed foe knew their lives depended on the legionaries behind them holding against the other massed foe, lest they be taken in the rear and summarily butchered. Men all the time anxiously looking over their shoulders do not fight well.

Then, finally, Vergasillaunus and his 60,000 elite warriors charged into the fray from the north with all the advantages of high ground, and the Roman situation went from delicate to desperate. All Caesar could do was station himself on the best viewing platform available and using a constant stream of runners direct reinforcements, rapidly diminishing reinforcements, to whichever section of the wall at any given moment was hardest pressed. It was going to be a long afternoon.

The ghul thought to be Cernunnos came to a final, unavoidable and irrevocable decision. He would depart his familiar forest intent on presenting himself to Iblis to seek redress from the blue-eyed she-devil. It was an enterprise fraught with unpredictable consequences. In taking this step, the ghul thought to be Cernunnos feared for his continuing existence, but if he delayed any longer, he knew he was inevitably doomed anyway.

Yet still he hesitated...

It was Vernogena's finest hour. The abrupt departure of Vercingetorix and the army left the Wicker Man in complete crisis. At first blush the premature start of the battle would seem to have rendered the whole project redundant, a huge waste of effort. Such a sacrifice, no matter how magnificent, would be essentially meaningless after the event. It would become simply a celebration fit for Petrocorios, not a nation-saving

intercession with the gods. And a mere celebration would certainly never secure Vernogena's place in the annals.

She stood shocked into speechlessness as warriors streamed past her, following Vercingetorix down the road from Alesia, trampling her place in history as they went. It was almost as though something were conspiring against her, some malign force determined to humiliate her... But of course... There was... Just that... The witch... This could only be the work of the witch, desperate to save herself. And no wonder Cernunnos had demanded her demise back there in the Grove of Gergovia.

Vernogena felt renewed energy and determination coursing through her. There was still time. The battle would not be decided for hours. And it might even be better this way. Who knew how the raging warfare down on the plain would develop? It was conceivable that Caesar might yet achieve a position from which he might prevail, in which case the Man could still prove the difference, the turning point, bringing the gods into the fray on the side of hearth and home.

Abruptly Vernogena swung on her heel and strode back towards her construction site. She found her workers standing around and giving every indication of imminent departure. She pushed her way through the muted gathering, climbed partway up the ladder leading to the Man's belly and turned to address them.

"Listen to me!" she said in a clarion voice. "Listen to me well! The fate of Gaul rests on this Wicker Man. Yes, still! The battle lies in the balance. Already Caesar has twice defeated our men. He will surely defeat them again unless the gods come to the aid of the nation. The only certain way to summon them and to beg their intercession is to finish the Man and to offer them such a sacrifice they cannot refuse their aid. This is the only way to victory. This is what we must finish. I could dismiss you now, send you to the front to fight and die like true Gaulish warriors... But that would be wrong. That would be criminal. You men would make little if any difference down there. Your duty is here. We are the last hope of the nation and we must succeed for the sake of our children and our children's children. If we fail, Caesar will win and Gaul will be no more. Who is with me? Let me hear you. Who is with me...?"

Well naturally, they all were. They were artisans, not warriors, and Vernogena's not so subtle threat to dispatch them to the front was all the convincing they needed, and forget the fine words. Vernogena dismounted from her perch and they went back to work with a will. She watched for some minutes and then, content there would be no slacking and gratified by the power of her oratory, departed for the temple and the guard which Orceterix had promised to put at her disposal.

Tahalra even today is a terrible place, a bleak, barren plain that stretches for mile upon endless mile of volcanic rock pitted like the skin of a corpse with the acne scars of ancient eruptions. It is seared by the sun and scoured by the wind sweeping in from the surrounding desert, and is shunned by even the scorpions. It is dead ground.

In an earlier aeon, however, it was very much alive. Eruptions of molten lava shot high from pyroclastic cones stretching far as the eye could see, wreathed in drifting gases and shuddering with the birth pains of the Earth Goddess below.

It was to this age that the convocation was summoned, to the Sword of Gibil and to the truth it would divine.

At first difficult to separate from the miasmas drifting from the multitude of active volcanic cones, the wisps of smoke that were the gathering djinn began to assemble themselves along the curve of the flaming blade until they resembled strange banks of cloud, reflecting the red glare from the larva below.

The Sheikh and Basil waited at the tip. The Sheikh had been enraged at discovering his sister's betrayal of his only son to Lilis. It was an act so monstrous it had taken all Basil's persuasive powers to prevent his father exercising summary justice there and then. Only one thing had saved Jamina: the hope, however remote, that the Sword of Gibil might induce her to reveal both Annabella's whereabouts and her whenabouts.

Time passed and the assembled djinn lining the curve of the blade began to whisper, then complain. Basil was on the point of despair and he could tell from the way his father shifted his stance impatiently that the Sheikh was only moments away from declaring Jamina outcast and subject to instant death.

"Please..." he murmured. "Please... Just a little longer..." The Sheikh gestured assent and subsided.

More time passed and now the crowd, the court, was on the point of open rebellion and dispersal. Again the Sheikh was gathering himself to pass sentence when another wisp of smoke materialised on his left.

It was Jamina. Finally. Basil felt relief flood through him. Hope of rescuing Annabella was not yet entirely dead.

Without the slightest acknowledgment of his sister, the Sheikh began to make his way along the glowing blade between the assembled djinn towards the volcano, the pommel, leaving the two litigants to follow in his wake. At the cone of the volcano the Sheikh turned about and faced the court. A sigh went up that might have been the sighing of the wind.

"We are met..." the Sheikh intoned. His voice carried effortlessly down the long length of the sword, reaching to the furthest members of the convocation.

"We are met," he repeated, "to wield justice as Gibil wielded the sword of fire. The power of the many will speak with one voice. For truth there is life. For duplicity, death."

Annabella was very thirsty now. She had had nothing to drink since being captured by the temple guard and that appalling priestess the evening before. If she was hungry, she didn't feel it. Hunger had been such a part of her life for so long that it had ceased to figure in the equation. Thirst, however, was another matter. She would suffer from it just the same as would any other human. The difference was that dehydration would never kill her. She would just suffer all the more. Al iksir was truly the most pernicious of potions. Except for one thing. Basil. Al iksir had once promised the two of them unending love and fulfilment.

Annabella wondered what Basil would say if he could see her now? Something sarcastic no doubt. He had little patience with human frailty, at least frailty that a human should be able to overcome. Strength was what Basil responded to. And

Annabella began to feel ashamed. Where was her strength? How could she let fear – however justifiable the fear – reduce her to such a pitiable state?

Always she had been acknowledged the brave one, so courageous, so indomitable. When truly, it had been Vivienne who had proved fearless, instinctively and unhesitatingly, throwing herself in the path of the swinging sword to protect her sister, her friend.

What would Vivienne say if she could see Annabella now...? Something caring, something kind, Annabella had no doubt.

She owed Vivienne. She owed Basil. She owed them for the unquestioning faith they had always shown in her.

Dignity. She owed them dignity.

And even though they could never know, it was a debt she would pay.

The prisoners intended to be the sacrificial victims for the Wicker Man were incarcerated in a bare compound surrounded by a stout palisade, too high and too thick for even men working together to scale or to break through without tools. And these were not the sort of men ever to work together even if there had been a chance of escape. Every army has scum floating on its stagnant backwaters, and the men here were the worst of it, those too stupid or too unlucky to evade authority.

Vernogena's guards forced them from the compound one by one, bound them hand and foot and threw them into a line of carts. The resulting language was sacrilegious in the extreme but Vernogena resisted the temptation to have them gagged. The more the screaming when the time came, the more Cernunnos would be propitiated.

There were no surviving horses or other draught animals left in the whole of Alesia, but on the flat plain of the plateau the carts were easily dragged by teams of two men each.

Vernogena escorted the cavalcade back outside the gate to the edge of the plateau with grim satisfaction. She was even better pleased when they arrived to find the Man complete and faggots being piled high about the base.

Now all that remained was to frighten the victims. And the witch.

The afternoon was drawing on and still neither Gaulish army had managed to make any effective impression on the Roman walls. Yet nonetheless the legionaries were flagging as was only to be expected. So many enemy and so few to repel them. Seemingly it should be only a matter of time before they were over-run but still the stubborn resistance continued.

Gauging his moment, Caesar donned his famous red cloak – deliberately the most conspicuous of emblems – and moved from area to area of the heaviest fighting, engaging briefly there, exhorting here, but bringing everywhere new confidence and courage, a new resolve. The word passed from man to man, century to century, cohort to cohort, legion to legion: Caesar is fighting. And the men responded.

A new mood, a new tempo, swept from one end of the Roman Army to the other. The legionaries noticeably lifted and correspondingly the Gauls sensed the tide was turning, the momentum shifting, and they began to flag in their turn.

If a poor general when it came to strategy and tactics, Commius was nevertheless an accomplished leader of men. He could read the diminishing energy of his forces. He knew they were on the cusp of losing. He made his one last throw of the bones.

By carnyx and runner, orders came to concentrate the attack on the northern weak point, the gap in the outer wall that Caesar had been unable to close because of the mountain. In turn, Caesar was forced to dispatch Labienus, his deputy, with reinforcements to counter this new threat.

Hearing the trumpet calls and kept informed by observers higher up the slopes of the plateau, Vercingetorix was made aware of the change. It was also now apparent that he had no hope of forcing a breach in the inner wall there on the plain. He, too, switched the point of his attack to the north, but concentrating on areas of the defences less formidably constructed because of steep terrain. And here, at last, he began to have some success.

He and his men were able to unleash such a barrage of missiles from closer range that the defenders were forced into cover, then allowing the Gauls to fill the ditches and so to come within reach of the wall itself. In the end, they made short work of tearing down the timber palisade and began to pour through the breach.

Again, Caesar was forced to commit reinforcements, first under Decimus Brutus – not the Brutus who would eventually become his assassin – then under Fabius, and finally under his own command. The time had come for Caesar, also, to make his final play. He divided his reserve force of cavalry into two wings, taking one with him to the immediate struggle against Vercingetorix and sending the other wing through the outer wall and on past the remaining screen of Gauls with very specific instructions.

The ghul thought to be Cernunnos, trembling with a trepidation that all but incapacitated him, finally set off to lay his humiliation before his liege lord and master, the Prince of Darkness, Iblis, the terrible, Iblis the terrifying, Iblis the totally capricious.

How he would react to a belated account of the blue-eyed she-devil was something the ghul thought to be Cernunnos could not begin to predict.

The Sheikh gestured to Basil, who ascended the volcanic cone, the pommel of the sword, and stopped, floating, above the crater. Molten lava pooled beneath him, seeping slowly through the crevice that led to the blade. The heat was ferocious even for a djinni but for the moment the volcano was relatively quiescent.

"State your charge," the Sheikh ordered. Basil paused. There was still time to withdraw, something not lost on the assembled djinn. The Sheikh was about to repeat the order when Basil forestalled him.

"I accuse Jamina," he said, his voice grating. "I accuse Jamina of abducting the human, Annabella Crabtree." The lava below him suddenly began to hiss and bubble. "...Of causing Annabella to be abducted." Abruptly the lava subsided. The charge then was seen to be something Basil genuinely believed, not vexatious.

"Who is what to you?" the Sheikh questioned.

"She is my true love," Basil said haltingly, aware that by this statement he would live or die, aware that any falsity would bring the volcano flaring to life. "She is my heart. She is my life." Still the volcano stayed quiescent. A sigh went up from the watching Marid, jointly passing unconscious judgement upon him. Jamina was seen to shift uncomfortably. Clearly Basil's declaration, absolutely uncompromising and absolutely fearless as it was, had taken her by surprise.

The Sheikh, for his part, was hard put to hide his relief and to maintain the magisterial disinterest required of him.

Basil lingered, hovering above the cone, until there could be not the slightest doubt that he had passed this most severe of examinations. Finally he glided down to rejoin his father. The Sheikh gestured to Jamina, who took Basil's place above the caldera, angrily defiant.

"Did you abduct Annabella Crabtree?" the Sheikh demanded of her.

"I had nothing..." Jamina began. The lava heaved beneath her and a jet of flame and molten rock spurted up, falling away just before it engulfed her. "Not directly," she amended. The lava seethed and bubbled.

"Explain," the Sheikh said curtly.

"I made her vulnerable to her own emotions..."

"Why?" Basil burst out. "Why would you do that?"

"Silence!" the Sheikh commanded. "You will remain silent..." He turned again to Jamina. "Where is she?" he asked.

"I have no idea," Jamina said. At this the lava subsided to an even surface, glowing red with golden fissures.

"What do you mean you have no idea?"

"Just that," Jamina said baldly. "Where the...young woman's emotional storms may have taken her is anyone's guess."

"And your reason for causing this to come about?"

"She is... She was..." Jamina began and then stopped. Again the lava was becoming threatening. She started again. "I judged her an unsuitable consort for my nephew." The lava subsided.

"And by what right do you presume to judge?" the Sheikh demanded, his voice no longer disinterested but shaking with suppressed emotion. Jamina, staring down from the height above the cone, regarded him with open contempt.

"Harun," she said, her voice scathing. "Why do you argue when you know I'm always right? I judged because you were incapable of doing so. I judged because I know best."

Still the volcano stayed quiet. Jamina evidently believed in the literal truth of her words, even if no one else did. The Sheikh paused weightily, gathering himself to make the last, damning indictment that could surely only have one end – the complete obliteration of his sister.

"And because you are so certain of your own righteousness," the Sheikh began quietly but his voice gradually rising to a roar, "you betrayed my son to the great ghul, Lilis, the scourge of the Desert of Death?"

Jamina hesitated. She knew now she was damned whatever she said. To deny it could have only one outcome. To admit it would have a different outcome, but only in the manner of its execution, her execution. She was doomed. Her only choice now was the manner of it. She made her decision and it was plain that she was about to speak.

"Wait!" Basil screamed. "Don't answer. Not yet." A last dreadful suspicion had flashed across his mind, the last piece of the puzzle, triggered by his father's word "betrayed".

"I'm not the only one you've betrayed," Basil charged. "Am I? You also betrayed Annabella to Lilis, and Lilis will have betrayed her to Iblis?"

The Sheikh froze. His own conscience was clouded with uncertainty. He had been adamant with Jamina that Annabella could not possibly be surrendered to Iblis to prevent the threatened war, adamant, he was sure of that. But what if inadvertently he had genuinely given Jamina the wrong impression, as she had claimed? Would she bring this out? And would the truth of the volcano support her? Where would that leave the Sheikh? Would he too end up on trial? And what would be the result?

The Sheikh metaphorically began to sweat. He never should have allowed this convocation. Convocations were notoriously unpredictable and tended to the catastrophic.

Jamina allowed her face to materialise, her patchy, pasty face. She disdained to look at her brother.

Impatiently, Basil repeated the question: "Have you betrayed Annabella to Iblis?"

Jamina's face assumed an expression of supreme satisfaction. Her head nodded assent but the word she spoke was: "No."

There was silence for long seconds, seconds that seemed to last an aeon, and then the volcano erupted in a fountain of incandescent magma and molten rock, which shot high in the air to fall back, spattering on the slopes of the cone below. When all was quiet again, of Jamina there was no sign.

"Arrogant," the Sheikh said eventually, breaking through the shocked hush. "She was always so arrogant..."

"I think you mean iniquitous," Basil muttered. Both were thoroughly shaken by Jamina's instant immolation. She had so long been a fixture in their lives, albeit meddlesome, cantankerous and generally insufferable, that her death, however justified by the law of the djinn, was deeply shocking. At last, Basil spoke.

"So what on earth do we do now?" he asked forlornly. "How can we ever find Annabella... Before Iblis does?"

"If he hasn't already," the Sheikh was forced to observe.

"Why would she have done that, betray Annabella?" Basil continued. The Sheikh shifted uncomfortably.

"We didn't tell you," he said. "Iblis was demanding she be handed over, that she be returned to Waq Waq. Basil was silent for long minutes. When finally he spoke, the agony was plain in his voice.

"Did you know what Jamina was doing...? Did you...ask her to do it?"

The question hung there in the noxious air.

Vernogena returned to the temple to supervise transporting the witch to the common. She was determined that Annabella should not have the slightest opportunity to escape again and Vernogena was equally determined that the witch be present for the whole ceremony of freighting the Wicker Man.

When the witch was dragged forth from the dungeon, Vernogena was disappointed to note that fear no longer clouded her eyes, those devilish blue eyes hinting at demonic sorcery beyond imagination. Her gaze was now clear and sufficiently scornful to have the bile bubbling in Vernogena's throat all over again. She had Annabella's arms roughly bound and, taking a spear herself, jabbed her all away back to the common. Blood was running down the backs of Annabella's legs by the time they arrived, but she had made no sound.

Vernogena, disappointed, gave one last spiteful prod and vowed to herself that the witch would be screaming for mercy soon enough. She gestured to two of her men and Annabella was thrust into the Wicker Man's head. A weaver sealed the opening with yet more withies and Vernogena carefully inspected the result. The witch was now caged like a captive bird, able to move within the tough wickerwork but with no possibility of escape. She stood gripping the strands and staring unblinkingly through the weave. Vernogena stepped back and was about to turn away when the witch finally spoke.

"Fire will not kill me," Annabella said quietly, "any more than water could. You remember that? You remember you tried to drown me. You failed. You will fail again now. But this time, I will come for you. This time I *will* seek vengeance. Do you hear me? Do you understand...?"

Vernogena had been standing stunned. She now drew back, hastily making the sign of Cernunnos.

"The fire will do terrible things to me," Annabella went on remorselessly, raising her voice. "But it cannot kill me and I will make sure that you suffer the same pain for the rest of your life. I will make sure that your life is as excruciating as it will be long." Annabella fell silent. Vernogena was walking rapidly away, her face white and strained.

...Which was some small satisfaction, Annabella supposed. Whether what she had promised would come to pass, she couldn't predict. What would be left of her at the end of it all was something best not thought about.

She watched grimly as the freighting of the Wicker Man began. One by one the hapless felons were hauled up by the crane to hang poised over the opening to the belly of the beast. Their bonds were severed and they were dropped screaming into the cavity to become indistinct shapes showing through the wickerwork. As more and more of the men were deposited so the pressure increased and those first in sought relief in the legs and arms of the hideous figure that Vernogena had caused to come into being.

At last it was stuffed full to the brim, to the point where a guard with a cudgel was required to dissuade those right at the top attempting to climb out. The head, with

Annabella inside, was carried across and hauled, bumping, up the outside, finally to be lowered into position and lashed down.

The Wicker Man was complete. Vernogena sighed with fulfilment and stood back to admire the crude, menacing shape standing stark and impressively tall against the lowering sky. It was the crowning moment of her life, almost. That would come when after conducting the ceremony – memorised so long ago – she finally set the flame.

Caesar was a formidable warrior in his own right. Taller than the average Roman, well built, hardened by years of combat and at the peak of his powers, he had all the physical requirements, coupled with iron will and utter ruthlessness. Some distance away, he spotted someone who could only be Vercingetorix, fighting beneath a standard and surrounded by a force of picked men.

At the point of a wedge of legionaries, Caesar began to cleave towards him.

Vercingetorix caught the blaring red cloak out of the corner of his eye and he too made to force a passage towards the man who had brought so much death and destruction to his people.

But however much the two strove to come to grips with each other, the swirls and eddies of battle conspired to keep them apart. At one point Vercingetorix roared in frustration but in the press of fighting could find no way to win through to confront his mortal enemy.

The brutal slaughter of the conflict went on and on. Blood, guts, stink, screams... Men fell in swathes to sweep after sweep of the collective scythe, only to be trampled by their comrades ravening to get at the enemy in their turn. The tide surged back and forth, the Gauls striving to penetrate the breach they had made in the Roman defences, the Romans equally desperate to keep them out, the whole great heaving, snarling mass of men, seized by battle madness, drenched in blood and gripped by a single imperative: kill or be killed.

Slowly the pressure of the Gauls began to tell. Their ranks were so close packed there was scarcely room to wield a sword and inevitably, by sheer weight of numbers they began to push the legionaries back. An inch here, half a stride there, now yielding a sword length, now retaking it, but inexorably gaining the critical ground.

There was absolutely nothing the Romans could do to stop it, except die where they stood. Caesar knew it. And finally, gloriously, Vercingetorix knew it. His men were going to win. Victory was his, victory and all that it would mean.

Chapter 22

The word raced around Alesia. The Wicker Man was ready and every last inhabitant who could still move rushed for the gates and the edge of the plateau, even those on the walls trying to make out the progress of the distant battle.

The storm that had been threatened all day was close now, darkening the sky and giving the light of late afternoon a strange crepuscular glow, both fearful and menacing. The Wicker Man towered over the gathering crowd, ugly, ungainly, and shaking slightly as though with suppressed energy. It was caused by the desperate men inside struggling to find some means of escape. The noise they made, begging, pleading, threatening, was a cacophony such that in a different religion the terrible construct might have been the Tower of Babel.

Imprisoned high in the head of Vernogena's terrible creation, Annabella had a fine view out over the surrounding countryside beyond the plateau. She had watched the battle for some time trying to make out what was happening, trying to divorce herself from the tumult just below her. In the end, however, all that was left to her was to hunker down and wait.

Vernogena had been again to the temple. She was now bathed and freshly gowned. At the head of the procession of priests and acolytes she swept through the gates and on through the gathering multitude. She was bright of eye and firm of tread, her supreme moment at hand. Her only slight disappointment was that Petrocorios had seen fit to emerge from his quarters and insist on joining her. Well, let him try to muscle in, she thought. The whole of Alesia, including Vercingetorix, knew who had been the driving force behind the greatest sacrifice of all times and they would bear witness, ensuring her proper place in history.

As she approached, she found the expectant murmur of the huge congregation almost as gratifying as the howls of supplication coming from the Wicker Man. This was truly her crowning achievement.

Annabella watched from outside herself as in a nightmare, except this was all too real. She saw herself mark the procession of priests as it emerged through the gates and, sundering the crowd, march towards her. She saw the panic welling within her, the all but irresistible imperative to scream, to beat her way through the seemingly flimsy withies which had her trapped like some small soft bird. Terror overwhelmed her. One word was left throbbing in her mind in time to the throbbing of her missing finger. Dignity. Dignity. All that was left was dignity.

And somehow, she managed to fight the fear back down and blessedly recapture the detachment of a dream.

Again she was watching herself watching. The procession halted, leaving Vernogena and Petrocorios to step forward to the base of the Man. They turned and Vernogena raised her arms. She spoke but her words were inaudible to Annabella over the screaming of the men just beneath her. Then the crowd began to chant and the words came to her above the noise, the same psalm that Annabella had heard in the sacrificial Grove. "Oh Cernunnos, Cernunnos..."

It went on for minutes until Vernogena seemed to be speaking again, something in the nature of an invocation. At last she turned to one side and an acolyte brought forth a blazing brand, the flame showing clearly in the gathering gloom. Petrocorios apparently made some protest. There was what appeared to be an altercation between the two Druids. Eventually a second brand was produced, ignited from the first and passed to Petrocorios.

The congregation began to chant again, this time with a swelling bloodlust that quite drowned out the desperate victims. The two Druids stepped forward and simultaneously thrust their brands deep into the oil-soaked faggots piled about the feet of the Man. Flame began to flicker and dance, smoke to rise. The frantic uproar of the victims now turned to frenzy.

Already fire was licking at those unfortunates who had ended up stuffed right down into the legs. Their shrieking rose high above the rest of the clamour, descant to a terrible discord of screams.

Already the smoke was beginning to catch in Annabella's throat. She was no longer standing outside herself. Again she was the small child caught in the burning house, her hair about to flare into nothing, the blazing beam about to fall.

The ghul thought to be Cernunnos prostrated himself and from the depths of his abasement dared to murmur the words: "There is a blue-eyed, she-devil..."

"Where?" The demand shook the ghul's pitiful being like a rag doll.

"Alesia, where Caesar..." was all the ghul managed to get out before a monstrous thunderclap of aetheric noise boomed and reverberated about him like the end of the world.

It killed him on the spot. Instantly. The sacrificial Grove of Gergovia would be haunted no more. And in finally, fatally, succumbing to Annabella's manipulation, the ghul thought to be Cernunnos, all unknowing, ended his life with one small act of redemption.

Basil and the Sheikh were still hovering above the sword of Gibil; Basil suspicious and appalled at himself for being so; the Sheikh angry at being made to feel guilty, yet horrified with himself that he did.

"Father," Basil repeated, his voice aching with emotion. "Did you know? Did you know what Jamina had done?" But the question went unanswered. The same aetheric thunderclap that killed the ghul thought to be Cernunnos assaulted their senses. It was like nothing they had ever experienced before.

"Iblis," the Sheikh said when the clangour of the aetheric echoes had finally died away. "That could only be Iblis."

"In a rage..." Basil added. "Such a rage... Why?"

The thought occurred to both of them simultaneously.

"Annabella!" they mouthed at each other.

"He knows where she is..." Basil exclaimed, but the rest of whatever it was he was going to say was lost as he aethelerated.

Only much later would Basil discover just how deviously Annabella had contrived finally to alert him to her presence.

The Wicker Man was well alight now. Men nearest the bottom had already died. Others were shrieking in extremis, the rest screaming in a tumult of fear. Flame was reaching ever higher. The congregation was silent now, watching in awe, coughing as the wreathes of smoke drifted wider, gagging at the stink of roasting meat, burning meat, human meat. Then, all at once, the crowd was no longer silent. It too was wracked by fear.

A second Wicker Man appeared, twice as tall as the original, a mass of solid flame, then a second, then a third until there was an even dozen. As they began a lumbering stride towards the sacrifice, people scattered in stark terror, stampeding in a rolling wave of humanity, spilling over the edge of the plateau, trampling each other, frantic to escape. Many were too slow and perished beneath the flaming juggernauts.

Vernogena watched with horrified fascination. The gods! Cernunnos and his disciples. She allowed herself a moment of the most intense self-congratulation. She had done it. She had caused a miracle to be wrought. Whatever the result, the appearance of these ambulatory Wicker Men was a miracle by any estimation.

Petrocorios, still standing beside her, whimpered and ran.

Caesar turned a thrust and caught his assailant with the automatic riposte, dealing instant death. Now, he thought. The cavalry must attack now or it will be too late. Another Gaul lunged at him. Something must have gone wrong, Caesar agonised as he killed the man. Too long, it was taking too long. Where was the cavalry?

He risked a glance to one side. Vercingetorix, or at least the standard that marked his position, was still too far away for Caesar to hope to reach. He was to be denied even that satisfaction, mortal combat with his mortal enemy. A pox on the gods! Where was the gods-damned cavalry...?

For long seconds, Vernogena watched the approach of the lumbering Wicker men, informed not by fear but by ecstasy. She stood her ground then abased herself, certain the gods must recognise her, the Chief Druid whose inspiration had brought them to manifest themselves as these flaming colossi.

"Lords!" she called in her most carrying voice. "You are most welcome, but it is not here, it is down on the plain where you are needed!"

Basil took an instant to assess the situation, then in his warrior guise speared through the inferno swamping the original Wicker Man and about to engulf the head. He wrenched Annabella's prison away from the body and arced up into the gloom of the sky, slashing at the cage with his scimitar. He seized Annabella, plucked her forth and let the hateful thing fall back to the ground.

Iblis roared in fury, a sound so terrible that it resonated for miles across the countryside. Basil, holding Annabella with the greatest tenderness, aethelerated. Iblis, consumed by impassioned wrath, stamped his great flaming foot.

Vernogena, transfixed, was still crouching there. She died beneath it, never knowing that it was not Cernunnos she had conjured, but evil incarnate.

It was not the longed-for notes of cornu and tuba, signals that his cavalry had arrived, that came to Caesar but an unearthly howl all the way from the distant oppidum. As one, every single warrior embroiled in the great struggle turned to stare, then to behold immense pillars of flame that appeared to be moving along the edge of the plateau, their reflections glowing crimson in the clouds above, shifting and shimmering with menace.

It was the most extraordinary thing that any man there had ever beheld. They stood lost in wonderment, and fear, the battle for the moment forgotten.

Then, finally, there came the calls of Roman trumpets and the cavalry Caesar had sent through the outside wall in a long loop right round the fighting smashed into the rear of Commius's army.

It was too much for Vercingetorix's warriors. Somehow the Romans had managed to circle behind them and were now apparently destroying the oppidum. On the other side of the divide, the determined Roman charge at the undefended rear of Commius's men meant panic and disaster. Both Gaulish armies for their separate reasons broke and ran and were slaughtered.

At that moment the war was finished and the conquest of Gaul was mission accomplished but for the mopping up.

The next day Vercingetorix would surrender himself to Caesar, eventually to be executed by strangulation in a Roman dungeon.

When captured, Petrocorios, as an arch Druid and therefore an arch enemy, would simply be crucified on the spot. His last thought would be to curse Vernogena who had contrived to bring this catastrophe down on them all.

Chapter 23

Bloody hell, Annabella said. *You took your time...* Basil simpered, then sighed with relief. This time there could be no doubt that he had the right Annabella. *Where on earth are we?* she continued, surveying the hellish surroundings. She was actually in intense pain with deep burns, particularly to her feet which had been closest to the flames. Also her throat and lungs had been badly seared by the superheated air of the fire. Nevertheless, she was determined not to show it.

Tahalra, Basil said. *Iblis will be on his way, with his posse, and we need reinforcements.* It was only then that Annabella realised many of the drifting wisps of smoke about them were actually djinn, not exhalations from the myriad volcanoes that stretched as far as the eye could see. They were on the slopes of the largest of the cones from which a strange scimitar slash of red-hot lava stretched away into the distance. A wraith drifted towards them. It was the Sheikh.

"Annabella," he said with great concern. "Are you hurt?"

"Yes," Annabella said, truthfully. "But I'm all right, for the moment anyway. What's going to happen?"

"Iblis is demanding you be returned to Waq Waq," the Sheikh said.

"There will be war," Basil said.

"Not on my account," Annabella said forcefully.

"Not your decision," Basil retorted. "Is it?" he demanded of the Sheikh.

"Absolutely not," the Sheikh said, but there had been the slightest of hesitations, enough to give Basil pause.

"We should go," Annabella said to Basil. "Flee..."

"He'll follow," Basil said. "This time he'll follow and he'll catch us eventually. Better to face him now, with help."

"How do you know he'll come?" Annabella demanded.

"We made him look foolish in front of his minions. Iblis, especially, can't afford to look foolish."

"How long?"

"Right now," Basil said, raising his voice over a burst of aetheric noise. And the twelve flaming Wicker Men materialised as he spoke, six on each side of the Sword of Gibil. They were now absolutely gigantic, twice the size they had been at Alesia. They began to march towards the volcano.

The Sheikh drifted forward.

"Far enough," he said. "Stop there!"

"I see you, al Yazid," Iblis thundered, addressing Basil, not his father. "Still it is not finished between us. Still the woman is owed to Waq Waq..." Other vague shapes were beginning to materialise in numbers – 'ifriths. The Sheikh's Marids drew together in a tight defensive position.

Put me down, Annabella said to Basil.

He will not, the Sheikh said. Annabella had quite forgotten that her private conversation with Basil would be apparent to every other djinni there.

"Put me down!" Annabella repeated. "This is not your fight. I was the one who escaped from Waq Waq. And I will answer for it."

"Dear Annabella," the Sheikh said. "You truly are a most remarkable young woman, but this is out of your hands..." As he was speaking, however, Iblis and the 'ifrifs again began to move forward.

"I said, halt!" the Sheikh roared. "We will settle this by single combat..."

"Then I choose you!" Iblis roared back, unmistakably pointing at the Sheikh.

"Father," Basil said urgently. "Take Annabella, and don't let her do anything stupid..."

"No," the Sheikh said. "Not you. You defeated him once. He won't fight you again. It has to be me."

"Father, you can't. You're too old to fight Iblis." The Sheikh gestured at the blazing Wicker Men and the army of 'ifrifs waiting impatiently behind their leader.

"I told you," the Sheikh spat. "He won't fight you. It's me or all-out war..."

"But you'll lose and then it will be all-out war anyway."

"I won't lose. Trust me."

"Sir," Annabella said. "I can't let you do this. I just can't. Put me down, Basil."

"It's not your decision," the Sheikh replied with utter finality. "Silence, both of you! Basil, you must be ready to do what I say the instant I say it."

"What?" Basil demanded. "Father, what must I do?"

"That last question, the one about Jamina, the one I didn't have time to answer... Be ready. Now enough."

"Father, I love you. I can't let you do this."

"I love you," the Sheikh said, his voice purest crystal. "And Annabella. I love you both. It's why you must let me do this."

The Sheikh moved away from them until he was hovering over the volcano, the pommel of the sword of Gibil, where he too became a giant flaming figure, though it was plain he was yet smaller than Iblis and flared less brightly. How he could possibly prevail, Annabella could not imagine. She found herself clutching her elbows, her knuckles white, shivering violently the while with fear for the elderly djinni she had come to love as a grandfather.

Iblis began to flow forward along the blade of the sword and then he, too, ascended the volcano. He paused and his blazing limbs seemed to swell even larger, pulsing with ferocious strength. His great head arched back and he hurled a wordless war cry at the noxious sky. Then he charged.

Simultaneously, the Sheikh moved forward but too slowly. He was caught by an arm and a leg and whirled high above Iblis's head, to hang there suspended before being smashed down across Iblis's knee, his back to be broken and crushed. Again, Iblis threw back his great head but before he could loose his war cry a second time and finish his great enemy once and for all, the Sheikh called to his son, his voice calm and clear:

"Ask me now." Basil hesitated for the merest flicker of a heartbeat, yet a time that was endless, that encompassed all that he and his father had been to each other. How could he do this? How could he possibly do this? Yet he did.

"Did you know?" he shouted, his voice breaking. "Did you know what Jamina had done?" In his turn, the Sheikh paused for an instant, an instant that was farewell to life and everything he held dear.

"No!" he said in a voice that resonated louder even than Iblis's roar.

Instantly the volcano perceived the lie and erupted in a writhing column of molten lava the like of which had never yet been witnessed. When it finally subsided, of the Sheikh and of Iblis there was nothing.

Now leaderless and thus more or less powerless against the might of the assembled djinn, the wicker men and the 'ifrifs vanished.

Epilogue

But for al iksir, Annabella would have been dead. Just the smoke of the Wicker Man would have been enough to asphyxiate her, to say nothing of the heat and the flame. Soon after the Sheikh had so heroically destroyed Iblis, she had drifted into unconsciousness in Basil's arms.

For his part, Basil could not bear to leave the volcano for what seemed like a lifetime, but finally, his heart so heavy that he seemed in a dream, and still bearing Annabella, he followed his brethren and also vanished into the aether.

It was a great mystery, and forever remained unsolved.

Suddenly the siren on an empty ambulance in the hospital parking lot began to wail. The driver, hurrying to cut the offending noise, glanced through the open rear doors and a moment later was speeding the vehicle to the hospital's emergency entrance. A team was waiting and Annabella, with Basil the merest wisp of smoke hovering unseen above, was rushed to the burns unit.

She was kept in a coma for many days and then began a lengthy course of skin grafts and rehabilitation.

How she had come to be so emaciated and so badly burned, how she had come to be in the ambulance, she couldn't say. Nor could she remember her name or anything else and the hospital psychiatrists came to a unanimous diagnosis: total amnesia induced by intense trauma.

Basil stayed with her the whole time, of course, and slowly they worked their way through all that had happened, sharing their grief at the deaths of Vivienne and the Sheikh, bathing their wounds with each other's tears.

I suppose you'll have to be Sheikh now, Annabella had said at one point. Basil nodded. *And is Iblis really dead too?* Again Basil nodded.

But there will be a new Iblis, a new Prince of Darkness, he said soberly. *There always is. There's never any shortage of applicants...*

At last the time came when Annabella was fully recovered. The scarring had disappeared completely except for the soles of her feet, which had borne the worst of the heat from the Wicker Man. The medical staff were amazed at just how well she had healed and were greatly impressed with the efficacy of their treatment, not knowing that the greater part was due to the restorative effects of al iksir. The night before she was due to be transferred to a mental institution she and Basil left for the Sinai, leaving behind in the locked ward a chest of gold ingots.

Thus the mystery of the strange young woman's arrival was greatly exceeded by the mystery of her departure.

Home at last in the tower and after a long, joyous period of reacquaintance, Annabella turned to Basil.

"So you really are the Sheikh now?" she asked again. Basil nodded unhappily and she rested a consoling hand on his arm.

"Why do you ask?"

"I remember you saying: Only the Sheikh can create life. Sometimes. Jolly rarely. In extremis..."

"And...?"

"So can I have my wish now, please?" she asked.

"What wish?" Basil said, rather mystified.

"The one you offered me right back at the beginning, well you agreed to three, actually... Under pressure..."

"What wish?" Basil repeated, this time thoroughly wary.

"Can't you guess?"

"No," Basil said. "I can't."

"You owe me. Three wishes... I want one. Just one..."

"But what?" Basil demanded, with mounting aggravation.

"Vivienne," Annabella barely whispered, her voice cracking with intensity. "Can you bring her back?"

The end.



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