

Exile's Blessing

by

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Prologue

The fire burned brilliantly, orange and red flames leaping from ground to rooftop in a matter of seconds. The man looked around and saw that everything burned. His entire village was going up in flames, and there was absolutely nothing he could do to stop it. Strange men rushed about gathering up those who had managed to escape the fires and tying their hands with a long, thick piece of rope that stretched from one person to the next. Women were separated from men, and those with small children were allowed to keep their hands free so they could hold the children who would be unable to walk on their own. He watched silently as a short, squat man with hair the color of straw and eyes the color of water herded his wife away from him and into the group of women with children. Their son, only a few moons old, lay silently in her arms. His eyes locked on hers for what he knew would be the last time, and he silently bade his small family farewell. As the women were herded onto a waiting boat, he stared around him at his burning home, grief and rage filling his broken heart. He knew what would come next for him and those other men around him who had yet to be bound, but he also knew that he could not let his son live the life of a slave, bound to strange men from an unknown land.

The signal was almost imperceptible, but they all saw it and moved as one. With a mighty surge, the unbound men ran toward their captors, knives drawn to attack. Men fell all around him, but he saw only the one in front—the short man with straw colored hair who had herded his wife and child into the boat, where the women stood tearfully watching as their men fought for freedom. He felt his knife hit its target just as a sharp pain blossomed in his chest. He pulled the spear out, roaring with pain, and threw it aside even as he fell to his knees. Looking around him, he saw brothers, friends, and neighbors who had fallen before him, intermingled with the bodies of their slain captors. They had fought, and lost. He heard a scream as he lost the last of his strength and collapsed onto the bloody grass, and his eyes sought out his family standing on the boat. Finding them, he locked his eyes on them, determined to make them the last thing he saw in this world, that he might find them

again in the next. The pain had drifted away to numbness, and as his eyes drifted shut, he watched his wife and son sail away into slavery.

I

The stranger sat beneath the spreading branches of a rowan tree, the light from the flames of the Samhain fire casting shadows on his face. His brown eyes gleamed brightly in the darkness, and a trim brown beard shadowed a tanned and only slightly lined face. For all his youth, his face told the story of many travels. It was two nights before Samhain, and the festivities had just begun. Young girls sat a safe distance from the fire, the light from the flames illuminating them as they played hand games and plaited one another's hair, and the boys chased each other and the many household dogs. Adults chatted and milled about, and older youths sat talking and pretending not to notice those of the opposite sex. There would, after all, be plenty of time for courtship between Samhain and Brigid's feast at Imbolc. It was now time for a great tale to be told by one of the druids present at the feast this year. It would begin tonight and continue for the next two nights, ending on Samhain Eve. The man beneath the tree had been chosen to weave this year's tale. At a gesture from the lord of the tuath, the man stood slowly and walked to a seat nearer the fire. As he sat, others gathered around him, children sitting before his feet, fascinated by the stranger, and others standing or leaning against nearby trees, suspicious of his appearance, but certain that the druids would not invite a man who would do them harm. He looked up, staring into the flames over the heads of his audience and began his tale.

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I was a slave living in Britannia, in the provincial capital, Londinium. I worked for a prestigious family there, spending my days among people who looked nothing like me. The people of Londinium had light hair, and the men were short and stocky. I, on the other hand, had dark brown hair and was taller by at least two hands than those for whom I worked. While the arms and legs of local men could be compared in size to a tree trunk, I had forever been more of a twig, perhaps reaching branch status somewhere in my late teens. Only in the evenings, among the other slaves, did I feel at home. There, my height was average, my hair the same, and my heart much

lighter. The other slaves were my family. Or they were until the people I worked for decided to sell me. This wasn't unusual, nor was it completely unexpected considering the matter of the small uprising I had tried to organize, that the slaves might attain freedom from their lifelong bondage. Still, I was slightly unnerved when, one night as I was leaving for the slaves' quarters in the lower city, the man I worked for stopped me and told me to report to the slave auction in the morning instead of coming to work. I was to be traded in for a younger, more obedient version.

As I said goodbye to my friends the next morning and left behind the only family I had ever known, my heart was filled with grief and rage. I wasn't mad at the eight year old boy who was to take my place—it wasn't as if he had chosen to be a slave and was merely struggling to achieve his dreams. Instead, I was outraged that one man would assume to own another, tearing apart his life at a whim, simply because he looked different. I held on to this rage, locking it away until the day I needed to call upon it to earn my freedom. Some day, I would be successful in attaining freedom for myself, and perhaps even for others like me. Today was not the day, I realized as I stood upon the auction block like a prized bull for sale. No, today was the day I would be bought and taken to a new city, where I would rebuild a life and wait for my opportunity. I knew that a slave doesn't get many opportunities, but even we get a few, and I knew that my next try would not be so ill planned as the first.

The man who bought me was from Cantiacorum. He was in Londinium on business for Cantiacorum's weapon-smith, Tiberius, and had paid for me with the profits from selling Tiberius's widely renowned weapons. I had heard of Tiberius before, as my previous owner had been devoted to the short swords Tiberius made and sold in the city. I thought to myself that, if I had to be a slave for now, why not a weapon-smith's slave? At least then I could learn something useful, and maybe some day.....Shaking off these thoughts, I picked up a small sack containing my meager belongings and followed my purchaser to my new life in Cantiacorum.

When I met Tiberius, who cared not what my status was so long as I worked hard and cost him no more than room and board, my dreams of freedom once again fought to surface. I pushed them back and devoted myself to learning and working. For fifteen years I worked each day from sun up to sun down for Tiberius. I never got into any trouble, and I lived what would be considered a respectable life for a slave. After about ten years, Tiberius even gave me my freedom. The last five years I was with him, I worked as a freedman, biding my time until the right opportunity came for me to move on. Then, one day, a woman fell out of her chariot across from Tiberius's shop. I dropped my tools and rushed to help her up. Once she was seated on a bench outside of the shop, I discovered that she was Viviana Livia Gallus, the daughter of Brutus Marinus Gallus, the Provincial Governor. I began to turn away, thinking of the trouble a freedman could get himself into for talking to a woman of such high social ranking, much less assuming to touch her, when she asked me to escort her on her errands, as she needed help carrying a few items from the shops to her chariot. She had a brief word with Tiberius, who, of course, agreed—nobody denies the Provincial Governor or his family anything—and we set out.

We went slowly from shop to shop, Viviana seeming to be in no hurry to finish her tasks. She talked to me as we went, and though I was hesitant to talk at first, I slowly warmed to the idea. By the end of the day, I discovered that Viviana did not believe in the justice of the slave system, and that she was determined to find a way to gain, at the very least, equal treatment for slaves and freedmen. I was impressed that a woman of such high standing would care at all, much less this much, about the welfare of slaves. Never had I met a citizen who believed such things. Since I genuinely liked Viviana, I decided that a friendship with her was more than worth the risk involved. After all, I had everything to gain, and virtually nothing to lose. We parted at the gate to Viviana's home, and I walked slowly back to the shop, none too eager to return to work for the last few hours of the day. A small smile lit my face—the first real one since my move to Canticorum—and I thought how nice it was going to be to have a friend.

Viviana visited often, asking Tiberius if I could escort her on her errands. If Tiberius suspected anything, he certainly wasn't going to question the daughter of the governor. Some days we went through the city visiting shops, as on the first day; other days we hastened out to the woods at the edge of the city, where we knew we could sit and enjoy each other's company without being caught. One day, we were sitting under a tree in a small clearing by the river when we heard the sound of a quickly approaching chariot. We both stood, knowing that if we were discovered by the wrong person not only was our friendship over, but very likely my life as well, at least in Britannia. The person in the chariot was, of course, the very worst of the wrong people: Marinus Gallus. He jumped out of his chariot and demanded that I step away from his daughter.

"Father..." Viviana began.

Marinus interrupted by bellowing a demand to know what was going on. Viviana tried to intervene on my behalf again, but I didn't want her to get herself into any more trouble, so I said, "Viviana, it's OK. Don't worry."

"Viviana?," Gallus exclaimed. "How dare you presume to call a woman of superior standing by her familiar name? She is Livia Gallus to you!" He stared angrily at me for a moment, and then, "What is your name, slave?"

I replied, "I am Bran Tiberianus, sir, and I am no longer a slave. I was granted freedom five years ago."

"Bran," he spat, "I hereby place you under arrest, by the power given to me by the Emperor." He then demanded that I be taken away to the prison until he decided on a just punishment.

Five days later, just before dawn, I stood at the Port of Cantiacorum, watching the gulls circle overhead in the faint pre-dawn light. In a fitting match to my mood, the waves crashed angrily against the waiting ship, and the wind tore at cloaks and blew away unguarded belongings. I was sentenced to exile and about to be loaded onto a vessel and shipped away. The official order was that I be sent to Hibernia, where I was to gather information on the people and their weapons. When I

returned, I was to make a report to Gallus on the possibility of conquering the land and her people. I wasn't really certain where this land was, except that it was one of the Unmapped Territories, but by all accounts, it was a fairly unpleasant place, full of barbarous people and treacherous lands where people disappear and are never heard from again. Everyone knew that Hibernia was an inhospitable place and that the Empire had no desire to conquer it, and I knew I was really being exiled as punishment for acting beyond my station; Gallus had assured that his daughter's friendship with such a man as myself was ended, while at the same time maintaining a more or less positive image for himself.

There were several other men waiting to board the ship, each of whom was a blond-haired citizen leaving of his own free will, to be dropped off in Caledonia on the way to Hibernia. Hibernia was probably as far away from the rest of civilization as they could send me. A Merc, one of the members of the Mercurian Legion, a guild of sea-faring traders, stood outside the ship and directed us to form a straight line to board. The other men bumped me to the back of the line, and I could tell this was going to be a long voyage indeed. I hunched my shoulders to protect against the wind and pulled the hood of my cloak over my head, and then I trudged up the ramp behind the others.

On deck, I felt one last tug of regret. I turned to scan the faces of the people in the crowd, hoping that among all those faces I would see the face of a friend, the face of the one who mattered most. The face was not there. *You fool*, I thought to myself. *Did you really think her father would let her come?* I laughed derisively at myself and hoped against hope that Gallus really was the reason Viviana was not there. As I listened to the gulls screaming overhead and felt the water crashing against the hull of the ship, I took one last look behind me at the land that never really was home, and I sighed and thought, *Oh well, maybe I'll fit in better in Hibernia. If not, what's the loss?* Turning away from the crowded port, my eyes caught sight of a woman, her head covered to guard against the wind. Something about her was familiar, but I couldn't see enough of her to know who it was. Then, she lifted her head toward me, and I saw the green eyes I knew so well. Viviana. She

had come to say farewell. I stared for a moment, a brief smile playing at the corners of my mouth. Were I to wave, I would only call undue attention to her. Not wanting to draw her father's eyes toward her disobedience, and knowing she would understand, I nodded at her and touched a hand to my heart. *You will be with me, here.* Then I turned away, not wanting her to see the tears glistening in my eyes.

Once we were all on board, we were shown our cabins. Mine, of course, was in the bottom-most part of the ship, in the crew's quarters. Though I knew this was not a luxury ship by any stretch of the imagination, I also knew the other men's cabins were most likely of a much higher standard than my own, which I didn't even have to myself. This did not, however, matter much to me. I was used to such standards of living, and as I was still quietly elated that Viviana had indeed come to say farewell, I didn't let myself be overly offended.

I finished unpacking and stowing my meager belongings in my corner and walked back up to the main deck. A Merc informed me that the noon meal would be served in the foredeck at the first bell following the off afternoon watch. Over the years, I had spent time with a few of the men who worked for the ship-wright, and thus understood that the meal would be served at half past the noon hour. I turned to watch the ocean from the forecastle deck. Standing there, watching the waves lap silently against the ship in the early morning hours, I fell into a silent reverie, dreaming of another life in which Viviana and I lived happily together and had the chance to be more than good friends. I stayed there for most of the morning, coming out of my daydream only when I heard the bell tolling the change of the watch and the noon meal. Shaking off my reverie, I wandered downstairs to the main foredeck and sat down with the other passengers. Each of them eyed me quietly then continued a conversation that did not involve or include me. I was a freeman, but that still didn't always equal acceptance among some groups of citizens.

After the meal, I resumed my position on the forecastle deck. A few minutes later I was joined by one of the Mercs. He stood beside me quietly for a moment, following my suit and staring

into the waves. His hair was a medium brown, and I felt a certain kinship as we stared into the waves together, our dark hair blowing in the wind. I saw him glance at me periodically, as if he wanted to talk to me, but waited for me to speak first.

I turned to him and said, "Bran Tiberianus. You can call me Bran. And you are?"

"Quintus Fidenas." He grinned and clapped me on the back, then said, "Call me Quin."

I soon discovered that Quin was one of the crew sharing my cabin. Glad to at least have someone to talk to, I agreed to his suggestion of a game of dice, since he was off watch.

Each day passed the same, with Quin and me playing dice during one of his off watches each day, and me staring into the ocean while Quin was on watch, until one day, about two months later. I began to notice from my post signs of civilization along the shore. Each day we got closer, and I began to see people in the small villages near the water. Five days later, our ship docked at a port in Caledonia, and a Merc requested that the departing passengers form a single line with their baggage and prepare to disembark. I ate my noon meal alone that day, and then Quin and I resumed our daily routine of silent wave watching and dice playing.

After we left the port at Caledonia, we slowly began to leave land behind. No longer did we sail along the shore of well known lands: now our ship bravely traversed the unknown and landless stretch of ocean between the eastern coast of Caledonia and the shores of Hibernia. Two months after our departure from Caledonia, I climbed to the forecastle deck to see a small island of land in the distance. I watched the approach of land that day, and the next, then packed my belongings into a small bag that I carried on deck with me the morning of the third day. On deck, I could now see land close to one side of the ship and in the distance on the other side. I was instructed to board a small boat that would take me to shore. Quin was one of the two guards who accompanied me and, after my feet were on the ground in the strange new land that was now to be my home, he gave me a gesture of farewell. Then, I watched as, once again, my only friend in the world faded into the horizon.

Before I had boarded the small boat that took me to land, I was provided with a single provision satchel, compliments of the Emperor. My satchel contained one full water-skin, a handful of walnuts, and two strips of dried goat meat—enough to last two days at the most—a tent tarp, and a thin, small square of blanket. With these supplies, I was to be left to fend for myself in an inhospitable land. The most I could hope for that day was to find a suitable place to pitch a tent before the sun set. If I was really lucky—and twenty two years of bad luck tended to suggest I would not be—I would find some source of water and natural vegetation. I picked up a satchel and started toward the steep cliffs surrounding the water.

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Here, the storyteller paused, picked up a cup of ale, and drank deeply. Then he stood, announced that the tale would end here for the evening, and resumed his original seat under the birch tree. His audience sat quietly by the fire, taking in the story and wondering at a place where they and their lands were thought to be barbarous and treacherous. They also wondered at the storyteller himself. He was a foreigner—that much was clear from his clothes, his accent, and the story he told—but at the same time, he looked like he belonged. If it weren't for his clothes, none would be able to pick him as an outsider unless he spoke. Furthermore, certainly only a true Hibernian could weave a tale so wonderfully. Some of the older people bore faint glimmers of recognition in their eyes, a glimmer only the druids noticed or understood. Women picked up small children and carted them off to their beds, while the men clapped one another on the back in farewell until the next day. The storyteller sat observing all of this, still somewhat caught in the tale he had woven tonight; the memories still sat open and fresh in his mind. He noticed a few people lingering by the fire looking his way, and he felt, for a moment, as if they saw something inside him that even he could not see. Shaking himself, he decided it was time to retire for the evening and followed the last of the druids to their rooms.

II

The next day dawned brightly, and the tuath bustled with activity from dawn to dusk. The storyteller spent his morning in the forest, whiling away the hours in contemplation by a small pond. He returned to the great hall for the noon meal, spent a few hours in discussion with his hosts and the druids, and then returned to the forest to sit again by the pond. As the sun sank below the horizon, he returned once more for the evening meal, after which he sat again under the rowan tree to await the time when he would resume his tale. The firelight flickered pleasantly and cast excited shadows that jumped and moved amongst the trees as if they were themselves living beings. Children once more played their games in the light and warmth of the fire, while adults again used the time of festival to catch up on missed times with distant family and friends. When the time for storytelling came, the lord once again gestured to the storyteller who, as on the night before, took up a seat beside the fire. After the people gathered close and arranged themselves around him, he continued his tale from its stopping point the night before.

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I picked a particularly promising looking stretch of mountainous rock and began climbing. It was hard to keep track of time. Although the sun must have risen at some point over the peaks all around me, it was difficult to discern through the dense fog and cloud cover. Icy rain continuously pelted my face and froze my body through the thin layers of my clothes. After what I estimated to be about five hours of climbing, I reached the summit of the mountain and found a small cleft just big enough to sit in for temporary shelter from the rain. I stopped just long enough to drink a bit of water, eat some of my meat, and regain some feeling in my fingers. Once I had done this, I forced myself to keep moving, convinced there had to be some place hospitable enough to provide adequate shelter for the night. I stepped out of the cleft and turned to begin my descent on the other side of the mountain. After several more hours of alternating walking and climbing down the mountainous ground, I gained somewhat even ground. Though I could tell I was still on the mountain, I figured I

must be in some sort of valley because the vegetation was much richer. Out of the corner of my eye. I saw a small patch of shadow about two hundred paces in the distance. I stopped, wiping the rain out of my eyes, and looked again. I stumbled closer, looked again, and thought, *If this is a hallucination, it's a bloody good one.*

As I got closer to the shadowy patch, I saw that it was a large stand of oak trees, and it looked to be at least three thousand paces in diameter. I dropped my satchel and collapsed under the nearest tree. The trees provided a welcome relief from the biting cold, and I soon warmed up enough to begin to feel my fingers and toes once more. I was so exhausted from my eight-hour climb through the mountains that I fell asleep, and when I woke up the sun had begun to set. I heard the sound of gently running water and looked around. There was no water anywhere I could see, so I picked up my satchel and began exploring. I was hoping, at the very least, to find a safe place to pitch my tent. As I walked, the water sounded louder, and I quickened my pace. Before long, I came to the mouth of what looked like a small cave. Since I had no other options, I stepped inside.

Twenty paces in front of me ran a small, calm stream. I dipped my water-skin into the stream, and it warmed my icy skin. With my water-skin full, I found a suitable looking spot and set up a makeshift bed. I gathered some wood from the mouth of the cave and managed, after about an hour of vigorously rubbing two sticks together, to light a fire. I sat in front of the fire gnawing on my last strip of meat. I was mildly pleased with what I saw as the first bit of good luck I'd had in twenty-two years. Later, I lay in my bed and thanked Jupiter once more. The temperature in the cave was considerably warmer than outside, and it actually stayed at a comfortable enough level that my thin little blanket, together with the heat from my small fire, provided a surprising amount of warmth. I soon warmed up enough that I fell into a deep sleep.

The next day I awoke shortly before the noon hour. Surprised that I had slept so late, I realized that the climb through the mountains must have taxed me more than I admitted to myself. I rose from my makeshift bed, walked over to the water, and quickly bathed myself, hoping to make

some sort of progress toward something that day. Progress toward what, I wasn't sure, but I also knew that any progress would be good. After I was clean, I dressed in my only spare set of clothes, washed my dirty ones, and laid them out to dry in the sunlight at the mouth of the cave. Then, I went in search of food. By the time I had accomplished these tasks and had enough food and water to last me for a couple of days, it was time for the evening meal. I ate some of the nuts and winter berries I had managed to find and sat down by my small fire to make some sort of small animal trap out of spare bits of wood—I knew I wouldn't last long on just nuts and berries, and I had seen several small, edible-looking animals running around the woods. Sometime around midnight, I finally managed what I thought would be a working trap. I yawned, stretched my back, put out the fire, and went to bed. As I drifted off to sleep, I heard a quiet, female voice whispering in my ear.

“Welcome to Emain Macha, Bran the Blessed,” she said.

I snorted and chuckled to myself over this addition to my name, then I drifted into a deep, restful sleep.

An entire week passed in this fashion. Every other day I gathered food and wood enough to survive for two days. On the days in between, I sat in the sunlight at the mouth of my cave and pondered my fate in this land. Each night, as I fell asleep, I heard the same woman's voice whispering in my ear. I wondered if the voice was real or a product of my loneliness and overactive imagination. Not that I wasn't used to being alone. I actually spent most of my time in Cantiacorum alone in Tiberius's shop, my sweat the only company to be had. Somehow, though, this seemed vastly different. Probably because the thought had often crossed my mind that, despite rumors of this land being inhabited by many ruthless barbarians, I could very well be the only human being alive in Hibernia.

One night, about two weeks after my arrival, there was a full moon so bright the shadows receded to the farthest corners of the forest. I had long considered the light of the moon to be a powerful tool of discovery, although I was sure this opinion was just one more factor that had set me

apart from the other people in Londinium and Cantiacorum. Since it seemed appropriate, and I was feeling a bit restless, I decided to explore my new home by the light of the full moon. The forest seemed to be never ending, and I walked for two hours before reaching a clearing. In the clearing sat a small well-like pond with a large silver birch tree standing over it. There were a few good-sized stones around the outside of it, and the moon was reflected completely on the smooth, glassy surface of the water. Awe overtook me at the beauty and peace of the place. I had never seen anything like it. Actually, that's not saying much, because I hadn't seen many things in my short years.

My restlessness seemed to have lessened, and I felt strangely at ease. I was more at peace than I had been for a long while, although I couldn't really explain why the pond had such a calming effect on me. Perhaps it was the pure simplicity of the place. I stepped closer to the pond and peered down into its depths. After a few minutes, I realized that, although there were no reflections in the water other than those of the moon and my face, I was not alone. I looked up, and five feet in front of me, standing on the opposite side of the pond, was a tall, beautiful woman. She seemed powerful somehow, but I couldn't quite explain why I had this feeling. The woman was almost as tall as me and had glossy black hair down to her waist; she was wearing a thin silver circlet around her head. Once more, I was overtaken by awe. I had no idea that this mountainous land held such beauty and possibility. To be honest, the Emperor, the Governor, and the people of Britannia probably didn't either, or they would have sent me to a more hopeless and despicable place.

I stepped slowly toward the woman, hand outstretched, and stopped inches from her. She gazed at me silently and calmly, with a small smile playing on her lips. As I advanced toward her, she lowered her head in what appeared to be a type of bow. I knew I must be crazy, thinking that anyone would ever bow to me. Bran the Blessed indeed. Bringing myself back from my thoughts, I saw that the woman was no longer in front of me. She was now standing to the left of the pond, just beside the largest stone, and she was staring into the water at this spot. I walked over to her and noticed that the place she was staring at was actually a shallow pool, separated from the rest of the

water by a large stone. There was a small figurine of some sort in the pool. When I reached for it, my fingers cut the surface of the cool water, and suddenly everything was flooded with light.

Consciousness slipped away.

I came to after what felt like ages, and when I looked around I was a bit disoriented. I was still in the woods, in a small clearing surrounded by natural rock faces, yet everything looked strange and new. I was lying on the ground near a pond, a large stone sitting just above my head. Upon closer inspection, I noticed that the stone was covered in engravings of wolves and men, and they seemed to be telling a story, but I wasn't quite sure what the story was. There were boats, strange looking men, and a baby in some scenes. In others, a man led a great army. Slowly, I sat up to take stock of my immediate surroundings. When I managed to gain my feet, I looked around and saw a man-sized opening in the rock face in front of me. I cautiously stepped inside, where I saw the figure of a woman sitting beside a small fire in the cave. It was the same woman I had seen before. She smiled slightly and motioned one slender finger, indicating that I should come closer. I stood and waited for her to speak, amazed that, in this strange land, I had finally found someone who looked like me.

“Welcome to Emain Macha, Bran the Blessed,” she said.

I stared at her. Nothing registered through the shock. Her voice was the voice I had heard every night for the past two weeks, and she had said these exact words each time. Many thoughts ran through my head: *What does this mean? Am I going crazy? Maybe I'm still in the mountains, lying in the rain waiting for the carrion to devour me while I hallucinate about caves, forests, magical ponds, and people with strange powers.*

“You are not hallucinating,” she said. “Everything you see is real. Perhaps not in the sense that you mean, but everything is, nonetheless, real. We have waited for you a very long time. Your coming has been prophesied,” she said calmly, as if she were discussing what we were going to have for the noon meal.

“Waiting for me?” I asked, still confused. “Why have you been waiting for me? What are you waiting for?” She only kept her gaze level with mine. *Maybe I should do a trick*, I thought.

She replied, “We haven’t much time. I must explain. The water in the pond serves as a gateway between the world in which you are living, and that in which you now find us. When you are in the other world, the only way we can communicate is while you are unconscious. At that point, the barriers in your mind are relaxed, allowing the transfer of information and images from one world to another. We need you to reunite our world with the world with which it is supposed to exist. I believe you know it as an inhospitable mountain world. All of that can change, and you can join us. First, we need you to obtain an object for us, make your way back to the pond, and grasp the figurine. If you have the object in your possession when you touch the figurine, this world will automatically be reinstated.”

“Umm...and what would this object be,” I asked. “Like...a magic spell book? Are you a witch of some sort?”

“No. Not in the sense in which you mean. You will soon learn, however. You must return to the cave. It is there you will find the object you seek: a silver chalice. On the chalice is an inscription. That is how you’ll know you have completed the task. This is of the utmost importance. Can you do this?”

Why not? I thought. *I don’t have anything better to do with my time here. How many silver chalices could there be?* I said aloud, “Sure. I can try. What is this chalice?”

“You will soon find out,” she said. “Please, just find it and do as I have instructed.”

Suddenly, everything began to fade. I reached out...and hit air. When I came to, I was lying on the ground once again. Only this time, I was lying just beside my own pond, under the birch tree.

I thought, *Ok, Bran the Blessed. Time to head to the cave and find this magical chalice. I wonder, though...*

I walked over to the pond, to the place where the figurine lay in the shallow pool, and reached my hand in to grasp the figurine. I thought perhaps I could skip a step and make things better for them and me all that much sooner. The deeper I thrust my hand, however, the farther away the figurine seemed. I felt as if I had just failed a test of some sort.

The woman's voice sounded in my head, *Patience, young Bran. You must do exactly as I have instructed, or all will be lost.*

All I could do was sigh, feeling just a little bit ashamed of myself for trying the shortcut, and start walking back toward the cave.

Oddly enough, the full moon was still high in the sky, as if only a few moments had passed. I reached the cave about an hour later, surprisingly in only half the time it took me to reach the pond earlier. Inside the cave, I walked to the middle and stared at the walls around me, wondering where to begin. The whole story about two separate worlds confused me, and I wasn't quite sure what to make of it, but since I really didn't have anything else to do, and because I was intrigued, I decided to do a preliminary search of the room where I had set up camp. When I stopped an hour later for water, I glanced around. There still had been no sign of a silver chalice with inscriptions, and I was beginning to feel a bit like a lunatic. Maybe this was the real hell of this place. You're alone for so long in a strange land that you begin to go crazy. *Or maybe they put some sort of poison or strange herb in the water?* I was amazed that none of this had occurred to me before. I mean, seriously, this whole thing about joining two worlds and my being in some sort of prophesy was quite absurd. I had only been there a week, and already I was losing it. I decided to call it a night and see how I felt about the whole thing in the morning. As I closed my eyes and willed sleep to come, I heard a familiar voice. *Don't give up Bran. You're our only hope.*

That night, I had strangely peaceful dreams of a man and woman I had never seen before. Although they were strangers, I felt recognition stir somewhere deep inside me. The woman was tall, slender, and had clouds of wavy auburn hair. She smiled and held out her hand to a tall, dark-haired

man beside her. In her arms was a small bundle. When I looked closer, I realized it was a baby. I was a bit confused about why I was having the dream, when the woman suddenly spoke.

“Our son. Isn’t he beautiful?”

The man answered, with a look of great pride in his eyes, “Yes, he is. He’ll be a fine and strong young man.”

Then the images in my mind jumped, and, once more I saw the man and woman. This time, the woman was standing on a ship, the baby in her arms and her eyes filled with tears as she looked to the ground where the man lay bleeding. All around him the bodies of other men lay, and flames enveloped the village behind him. He looked intensely at her, his own eyes glazed with pain and tears. Finally, his head fell, and his chest stopped rising. The woman looked down at the baby, her tears soaking the edge of the blanket he was swaddled in. Then, she spoke, and as she did so, she put a necklace of leather cord around the baby’s neck.

“You shall never truly be a slave my dearest one. Never. Stay true to yourself dear Bran.”

I woke with a start. After lying in the dark, I reached into my shirt and pulled out a necklace of leather cord. At the end of the cord hung a thin wooden medallion with one word engraved in it: Bran. A shiver ran through my spine as I traced my thumb over the familiar letters. Could these people be...? Was this the key to my life of misery and being cast out from society...a society that was not my own? But, it couldn’t be. I was Bran Tiberianus, a freedman of Britannia. Even as I argued this with myself, I asked myself how I had become a slave in the first place, and I knew the people I had seen were, indeed, my parents. Though it brought me pain to know I had been deprived all my life of the love I saw so clearly in the eyes of this man and woman—my parents—it also brought me joy to finally understand why I was so different. I thought, *Ok, you have my attention. I’ll try again tomorrow.*

Good, came the reply. And, for now, you may call me Dana.

.....

Here, as the night before, the storyteller paused the story, drank deeply from the cup of ale and retreated to his seat under the rowan tree. As he sat and turned to gaze into the fire, he noticed his audience did not leave as quickly as the night before. They seemed to have questions for him. *All in time*, he thought, *all in time*. He noticed that more than a few now looked at him as if seeing him clearly for the first time. Shaking his head and feeling sorrow for his loss, he stood and walked to his bed.

III

The storyteller woke a few hours before the noon meal. Surprised that he should have slept so long, he realized that last night's tale had indeed made him more tired than he had admitted. The room was empty, as the druids had surely risen many hours before, so the man rose, dressed quickly, and made his way to the great hall. Within, he found excited chaos. Tonight was Samhain Eve, and there would be a feast, as well as the ceremonial relighting of the fires by the arch druid. He spent the rest of the day visiting with his hosts and their families to make up for his absence that morning. When the time came to feast, he sat at one end of the table with the druids and, like everyone else, ate quietly and spoke in subdued tones. Not all of the food here was for human consumption; some of the food was collected as an offering of supplication to the gods. He had been told that the boundaries between their world and the spirit world were the weakest tonight, and he wondered if the spirits of his parents sat somewhere at the table with him tonight. He hoped they were and silently pleaded with them to give him strength to finish his task.

After the feast, he immediately took his seat next to the fire, which had been relit along with all the hearth fires by the arch druid and, when all had gathered close, began the end of his tale.

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The next morning I woke feeling more at peace with myself than ever before. I moved into the back rooms of the cave and began searching. I searched every day from sunrise to sunset for three days. On the fourth day I paused for a quick lunch of cold water and leftover meat from my last hunting expedition. As I stood up and stretched my back, preparing to resume my search, I caught a glint of silver out of the corner of my eye. Amazed, I walked over to the source and pulled a bundle of cloth out of a small crevice in the cave wall. The cloth had fallen back a bit from the base of the chalice, explaining the glint I caught. I unwrapped the rest of the cloth and checked for inscriptions. There did indeed appear to be inscriptions on the base of the chalice. Without taking time to try to read them, I ran out of the cave, chalice in hand, and headed back to the pond in the

clearing. An hour later, I arrived at the clearing, panting and exhausted. I was so anxious to find out what would happen that I didn't pause to rest. I walked confidently over to the shallow pool at the edge of the pond. I thought for a moment, remembering the never-ending depth of the water from my last experience, and decided to use the chalice to scoop out the water. After all, what had I to lose? Either this worked and I gained something, or it didn't and I retained my status as a crazy exile in a forsaken land. I held tightly to the chalice and dipped it into the water. After several times, I managed to empty the pool to a few drops of water and the small figurine. I reached out, cautiously, and grasped the figurine. Because I knew what was happening, I could feel the twisting of world changes pulse through me this time. Everything glowed brightly, and then there was nothing.

Slowly opening my eyes, I expected to see everything changed. *Surely things change when two worlds collide*, I thought. But the pond sat peacefully in front of me, reflecting the light of the full moon. I glanced up and, across the clearing, saw the woman from my previous encounter. Around her, stood a group of people, mostly men, but some women too. All of them wore identical white robes tied at the waist with silver cord. The woman, Dana she had said her name was, beckoned me toward them. I stayed where I stood, feeling more free than ever, but also confused. I wondered, *Who are these other people? What has happened? What was the chalice for?* Whether she heard my thoughts or merely saw the confused and torn expression on my face, I did not know, but she came toward me, the others staying where they stood. When she reached me, she spoke:

“Bran. I know you are confused, but please, come with me. There are people you should meet, people who can explain everything to you. I was merely a guide to help you discover your path, if indeed it was yours. I know now that it is.” She reached out and touched the leather cord around my neck. The questions began to bubble up in my throat, but she raised one slender hand in a gesture to stop, so I did.

“I know that you have many questions, but they shall be answered in time. I must leave you now, as my task is complete, though yours has barely begun. Go with the druids, they will teach you.”

Druids? I thought, What is a druid?

An old man, easily the oldest of the people in front of me, stepped forward.

“I see that you require answers now young Bran. Much like your father, you are. The short of it is that there is a prophecy in this land. It tells of a man, one from two lands at once, yet at the same time from neither. This man has a great task before him, but it is one that only he can accomplish: He will unite the tribes of Hibernia and lead them to conquer another land. In doing so, he will unite the two lands that he calls home and strengthen the realm of his people infinitely, as well as the tie that binds his people together.”

He paused here, looking at me. I thought I understood him, but didn't see how it was possible. The druid must have seen my disbelief, because his eyes gleamed as he spoke:

“That man is you, Bran. You are the man prophesied to unite your people!”

“But..,” I stammered, “I have no people. I'm just a freedman from Britannia. You must have the wrong man!”

“What you claim is quite impossible young Bran. You see, your trials in the mountains and the forest were a test. We believed the prophesied one had finally been sent, but we needed to be sure. Only to the true one would Dana have appeared, and only he would have been able to accomplish the task she set him. It is you, Bran, and you must accept this.”

I stared at him for a moment, then looked at the others. Each stared solemnly at me, waiting for me to acknowledge my place.

“Alright then,” I said, “What do I have to do?”

“I have another task for you,” he said. “You must now go to the lord of the neighboring lands, the tuath, and share your story. The people must know that the prophesy has been fulfilled.”

Once you have established who you are, they will accept you. Of that there is no doubt. You see, prophesy and tradition are powerful and strong in the hearts of the people, Bran. Use that knowledge, for it will help you accomplish your task.”

I camped with the druids that night, listening to their stories, told around the large fire they built in the middle of the clearing. The stories told me much about the people who were my own, and I felt a sense of peace and homecoming. Yet, at the same time, I felt a pang of regret for the two friends I had left behind and would probably never see again. The night felt like a new beginning. I slept fitfully that night, thinking about the task that awaited me, and when the dawn awakened the druids, I was awake and ready.

We traveled for many days across a now beautiful, though still mountainous, stretch of land until we reached a new forest. Each night was a repeat of the first, and I learned many tales and began to understand the skill involved in weaving a story. The night before we arrived at our destination, I heard a familiar voice in my ear: *Continue on Bran the Blessed, these men and women know your duty and will help you. You travel to the festival of Samhain, the beginning of our New Year and a time for reflection. This will mean much to the people, who know that this is a time when margins between their world and the next may be more easily crossed. Tell your story Bran. Unite your people.*

.....

With that, Bran finished his story. The people stared, awestruck. They understood now who this stranger was. This storyteller was the one who had been prophesied for ages. The people looked at their lord, waiting to see what he would do. He stood, raised his cup above his head, and shouted, “We are united! Let us give thanks that this Samhain has indeed been graced by the arrival of the one we have long waited for! Be glad, and accept the truth of this man’s story.” The people cheered and began celebrations anew.

Bran sat by the fire silently until the last of the celebrating people had retired to bed. *Well, they certainly took that well*, he thought to himself. He was still a bit incredulous at how easily these people had accepted his place as the man of their prophecy, the one who would unite their people. *In Britannia, they never would have...* but he interrupted himself here because, as the thought had occurred to him, images of a woman whispering to her young son and a man lying dead on the blood-stained ground flashed across his mind. *Bran, you are no longer in Britannia. You are truly where you belong now, and you must do this for your mother and father, if not for yourself and your people.* In that moment, it seemed as if all his many years of unhappiness and loneliness were erased. He now had a world into which he might fit. His exile had indeed proved to be a gateway to his acceptance in a wonderfully new old world. Hibernia was no longer a punishment—it was home. His happiness was muted, however, by the knowledge that his task had only just begun. He didn't know much about this land, but if it took a prophesied man to unite the people of Hibernia, they must indeed be divided. Bran stared into the flames, seeing once more the image of his father as he lay dying, staring with all the life left in him at his wife and young son. He saw his mother's tear-stained face and heard her words once more: *You shall never truly be a slave my dearest one. Never. Stay true to yourself dear Bran.* In his mind, he saw others of his people, those still living in Britannia under the bondage of slavery, imprisoned by the will of those like Gallus and the Emperor. He vowed to himself that he would not only unite those of his people here in this land, but also free those in another. With these thoughts, he stood and walked away from the fire.

IV

Far from the appearance given by the easy proclamation of “We are united!” that night three weeks ago, Bran found uniting the tribes of Hibernia to be quite a challenge. There were, of course, those that readily flocked to his cause and supported him in his quest to unite their people, but there were also many who did not. Those were the leaders of other tuaths, most of whom resented his arrival and viewed it as an intrusion on their lives and a threat to their power.

“You see, my lord”, began Finbar, an advisor to the local lord, “these men find it hard to entertain the thought of giving up their power to a stranger—a man who, by his own admittance, was not familiar with their customs. Despite the prophecy, in their minds, a foreigner could not possibly be a better leader than they. They were, after all, Hibernian born and raised, and they are convinced they know their land better than you could ever hope to. The prophecy was widely accepted, but the idea of a prophesied man who would save their land and the reality of him are two very different things.”

If only you knew how right you are, Bran thought to himself before speaking aloud.

“First”, Bran said tightly, “and for the hundredth time, please do not call me ‘my lord’. I am just a man, the same as you, and I don’t see any reason why you shouldn’t treat me as such. Second, I have said time and again that I do not wish to usurp the power of any of these men. Why can they not understand that?”

He was feeling very strained from the pressure of the past few weeks. While he had agreed to the huge duty of uniting the Celtic tribes, he hadn’t realized just how exacting it would be simply to get them to talk to him. Half of these people wanted him to take power and be their new lord—one lord over all of them—and the other half resented his presence and viewed him as a power hungry usurper who would like nothing more than to ruin their lives. *Why can’t I make them understand!*

Finbar looked at the other Hibernian lords standing around the table. He wore a look of confusion, which was returned by all but one man—Connor, the lord of the tuath and home in which they now stood. Connor looked slightly abashed.

“Has no one explained the full extent of the prophecy to you my...ahem...Bran, sir?” Bran winced at the “sir”, but Finbar continued, apparently taking Bran’s pained expression as a definite “no”. “You see, the prophecy proclaims that the man—that would be you—would not only unite the tribes, but would be high lord—king if you will—of the larger united peoples.”

Bran felt a little light headed and sank onto the bench behind him. This was indeed news to him. Apparently Connor had neglected to inform him of this, perhaps thinking—and maybe not wrongly—that it might scare Bran away from his purpose. *I can’t lead the whole of the Celtic people! This isn’t what I wanted...I’m not a king! I’m a freedman and a poor one at that.* He interrupted this train of thought, reminding himself that here, in Hibernia, he was not a freedman. Still, he wasn’t a lord either, so surely he wasn’t entitled to a kingship! *How quickly life can change.* At this, he excused himself from the company of the men gathered around him and found his way to the chambers that he had been given. Suddenly, the richness of his accommodations struck him with new meaning. He realized that the huge feather bed with fine linens was likely not the standard guest room—rather, it was likely that Connor and his wife had given up their own quarters to house their new “king”. *I need a drink and a nap.*

.....

The dream was a vivid one—it was a dream of remembrance. Bran walked into the slave quarters of Londinium tired from a long day. Still, tired as he was, he noted with a twinge of excitement that some of the other men were waiting for him at the entrance to the large building that housed the slaves. He followed them to the far end, where they sat at one of the long tables that served the purpose of dining. The boards creaked as all four of the other men sat down across from him. This was a bit odd. Why did no one sit next to him, as they normally did for these

conversations? It made it easier to talk without being heard. They all looked at him for a moment, looking as though they expected something, and he felt as though he had forgotten to do something. Suddenly, Seamus spoke, “Bran, we have spoken with the others, and we have decided that we would like you to be our leader. If we hope to gain any kind of audience for our complaints, we need someone to speak to us and for us. So, there it is. We would like you to do it. Will you accept?”

First, Bran felt relief—he hadn’t forgotten anything!—, and then he began to swell with pride. These men, some of whom were old enough to be his father, were asking him to lead them and to help them gain an audience with the provincial leaders in Londinium, in hopes that the leaders might address some of the slaves’ issues and bring their living standards at least up to subsistence level. In the back of his head, another thought niggled at his brain: *This could be what I’ve been waiting for my whole life—a chance to fight back against our bondage. If I gain that for all of these people...* He stopped himself there. He would not let himself become caught up in visions of personal glory. That was not the goal, nor was it the point of what these men were asking him. Besides, their decision likely had as much to do with his master’s rank as a high official as it did with their confidence in his ability to lead. Making up his mind, Bran reached out his hand, clasped it on Seamus’s arm, and said, “I swear that I will uphold this duty that you have given me to the fullest extent that the bonds of life allow.” We did not mention the bonds of slavery in our oaths. Somehow, it seemed to mean more if we made the oath simply as one man to another. The others all nodded and, satisfied that their duty was done, retired to their pallets. The next day would dawn very early.

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He woke up slowly and struggled with confusion for a moment. The soft bed under him felt nothing like his pallet, and he couldn’t hear the soft snores of other people surrounding him. When realization struck him and he came fully back into the present, he sat up and looked at the window on the other side of the room. It was dark, so the nap had apparently stretched out longer than he had

intended. He had meant only to rest for an hour or so to clear his mind so he could approach the other men with more preparedness. Since it was full dark, he knew he had missed dinner. Strangely, though, he wasn't at all hungry. He rather thought his lack of hunger was a direct effect of the memories hinted at by his dream and what came after the meeting that night. *No, I don't want to think about that. I won't.* With that determination, he lay back down to sleep, since that was surely what everyone else was doing at this hour. Even the moon appeared to have gone to sleep, and the sky outside was lit only by a vague twinkling of stars. Within minutes, he slipped back into sleep and the world of his dreams.

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It had been another long day, but he knew he had duties to attend to before he could find his pallet and slip into oblivion. As he made his way through the slave quarters, stopping by the pallets of his fellow slaves, he took mental notes of their grievances. Most were the normal product of his weekly inquiries. Since the death of her husband the month before, Sorcha had not been getting enough food rations to fill her children's bellies. Angus complained that his wife, who was still not back from her master's house, was not allowed enough time for rest and small duties like mending their clothes and that, because of it, she walked around in only a thin and tattered dress and was always sick. The grievances continued in this vein until he reached the back of the room where a woman sat with her head in her hands, sobbing silently. Bran crouched down, took her hands, and made her look up and tell him what was wrong. She was one of the new slaves, and her five year-old son had been taken away from her that day and sold to someone in a far away town. She was crying because she had already lost her husband—the men who had captured her had killed him—and now would likely never see her son again. At this, a familiar stab of rage went through him, along with a painful picture of his own mother's face. He hastily assured her that he would do what he could and ended his rounds for the evening. Lying on his pallet, he nursed his anger at these men who called

themselves masters and tore families apart without even blinking. Why should any man assume that right over another? It was not right, and he determined that he would do something about it.

The next night, he met with the other men and told them his plan. The short of it was that, in a week's time, they would all make an attempt at freedom. Most agreed with Bran that it was time to act and stop watching their families be torn apart. So caught up were they in their planning, that they did not consider the logistical difficulties of getting the women and children around them safely to freedom, nor did they consider the fact that, whether out of fear of being caught or merely out of excitement, someone might give the plan away. None of them saw the pinched face of the little boy eagerly soaking up their words. None of them considered how difficult children find it to keep secrets, especially exciting ones.

Here, the dream jumped to a vision of angry faces lit by torches, women screaming, children crying, and men bleeding and dying. The officials of Londinium rounded up those who had already made it to the rendezvous point outside the city and cut down those that tried to run or defend their families. In the midst of it, Bran stood, hands tied and nothing to do but watch with horror. He had done this. These people died because of his leadership. His vision was blurred with red, some from the torches but even more from anger, despair, and the blood of men who fought to give their families time to run or hide—time to find their freedom. Seamus ran at one of the guards, a small knife raised above his head. A high pitched scream tore from Seamus's mouth as the guard stabbed first him, then his wife, as she saw he was hurt and rushed toward him. Seamus fell to the ground and crawled to his wife where she lay dying on the ground. The screaming would not stop.

.....

Bran woke with a start and realized that the scream was his own. Hoping no one had heard and would, therefore, not come running to his aid, he wiped the sweat off his face, scrubbing as if trying to rid himself of the vivid and nightmarish pictures still playing in his mind. True, not many had died that night—they were, after all, valuable property—but those who had died had done so

because Bran led them to it. *Yes and such an excellent king you will make. Look at how well you did the first time around.* The fear hit him suddenly as he realized that he was being asked to lead again and that many more would likely die this time around. He did not want to be their leader! He hated knowing that people would die for what he told them to do, and he was not sure he could live with the guilt of that happening again. But then, maybe this was his chance to make it up to Seamus and all those others. This was his chance to follow through on his plans for freedom, and to make sure that it went well this time and that the goal was accomplished. *First, I can get rid of this bloody soft and cozy room and get a pallet somewhere. I need to remember who I am this time. I can't forget my story or my purpose. Pride will not overcome me this time, I won't let it!*

With these thoughts, he grabbed the blanket from the bed and arranged a makeshift pallet on the floor by the still glowing embers of the fire. He had realized his fear and decided on a course of action, and that was enough for tonight.

“My lord, you cannot do this,” cried Finbar. He still slipped into calling Bran “my lord”, but that didn’t bother Bran so much at the moment. What bothered him was the staunch resistance he was meeting from Connor, Finbar, and the other lords. All he wanted to do was allow his host to sleep in his own bed and seek a room more suited to his needs. *Why is this such a bloody problem?* He had, after all, agreed to let them call him “my lord” and to lead them and be their king once he had unified the Celts (Jupiter help him if he tried to deny *that* part of the deal!).

“Really, I just want a simple bed with a couple of wool blankets. The room doesn’t need anything other than a window to let in fresh air. I find that I can keep my mind on the task at hand more easily if I live simply,” Bran insisted.

Finbar stared at him in disbelief and Connor pursed his lips thoughtfully, but neither gave any indication of giving in to Bran’s request of one of the extra rooms on the ground floor, facing the stables.

“Look, I will be more accessible in an emergency,” Bran pointed out. “I will be near the stables, so when messengers from the other tuaths come, I can meet with them that much sooner.”

“Yes, but you will also be more accessible to those who might not want you to claim your power! Don’t you understand?” Finbar looked quite put out by the fact that he knew Bran did not understand. “If you hope to accomplish your goal, you must protect yourself and take hold of the power given to you by the prophecy. You must use this power and live in a way that shows the people you are their lord and will be their king! If you want to make use of your power, you must live like the king you would have them see you as.”

“No,” Bran yelled suddenly, slamming his fist on the table. “If I hope to accomplish *our* goal, I must not forget my story! I must not forget where I come from and who I am. If I would have people follow me, I must show them that I want power not for the riches and comfort it will bring me, but for the life it can give them. I do not want the distraction of soft mattresses and fluffy

bloody pillows! Put me in the bloody stables with the bloody horses if you will not give me the plain room. The smell of the horse filth will remind me of the squalor many of our people are forced to live in, and the scratch of plain woolen blankets will remind me of the chafe of bondage our people feel every day. That is the point!”

Finbar looked properly abashed and astonished at this outburst, and Connor, who had seen the fire in Bran’s eyes and thought he understood from where it might come, agreed to move him to one of the extra rooms on the condition that Bran agree to a guard outside his door. Bran nodded at this arrangement and sighed a deep breath of relief. Then, he heard a soft “ahem” from behind him. Finbar, Bran, and Connor all spun around to see who stood at the door. It was one of the stable boys.

“My lord Bran, you have a visitor.” Upon making this announced, the boy scurried out the door and headed back toward the stables.

“Shall we go see who it is?,” Finbar asked, obviously glad for a break from the previous conversation. Before he received an answer, he was out the door, leaving Connor and Bran behind.

Connor looked thoughtfully at Bran, then, as if deciding something, he said, “A wise leader must use the pain of his past defeats to bring joy to his future victories. He must add them to his story, learn from them, and move forward.” With this, Connor followed Finbar to the stables with Bran, stunned, following slowly behind.

When he got to the stables, he sensed tension from Connor and Finbar, who stood together, a wall of defense between Bran and whoever this strange visitor was. Feeling slightly annoyed at this, Bran stepped around the two men and stopped dead as he saw who the visitor was. Then, a smile lit his face and he rushed forward to embrace his friend, Quin.

VI

“What are you doing here? How did you get here?” Bran was full of questions and not a little astonished at this sudden appearance of one of his only friends.

“Well, I do not think I can really give a good answer for that. I was sitting on the ship one day, and I felt that I should find you again. Far be it for me to doubt orders from the Gods, eh?”

Despite his jocular tone, Quin seemed a bit unnerved by the thought that it really might have been such a message.

“Anyway, I sailed back to the spot where we dropped you, and those men were standing on the shore, like they were waiting for me. So I walked up to them, asked them if they knew where you were, and they brought me here.”

Looking in the direction Quin pointed, Bran saw three of the druids standing at the edge of the trees beyond the stables. They nodded, turned, and were gone.

A message from the Gods, indeed. “Well, I’m not really sure why they brought you here, but I also can’t say that I am not a bit glad to have a friend at hand! Would you like to hear a funny story?” With this, Bran took Quin’s arm and led him to the kitchens to get food and tell him what had happened since he had been dropped off on the shore.

VII

“So, I must convince the rest of the tribes here to follow me and, in doing so, ensure unity in Hibernia, before I attempt Caledonia and Britannia. My problem is figuring out how to get men to Britannia.”

Quin sat silently looking at the ale he swirled in his cup for a moment, and then he looked at Bran with a smile and a gleam in his eyes and said, “Well friend, I suppose it’s good that you have me then.” At Bran’s confused look, Quin continued, “You see, I recently purchased my own ship, and my crew are mostly freedmen who have joined the ranks of the Mercs. They will not object to your purpose, of that I am quite sure. Besides, you will be needing someone with shipping expertise, and who better than a Merc for that?”

As realization dawned on Bran, he felt a brief flutter of excitement at the prospect of his friend at his side through this. *Maybe friendship is the key. With a strong friend like Quin, surely I cannot fail as miserably as the first time?* Then, as images of the first time entered his mind, vivid as they had been in his dreams, he quashed these thoughts and said, “No, Quin I can’t let you do that. If anyone discovers that you have aided us, your life is over. The officials would see you executed for treason, surely!”

Quin laughed and looked at Bran speculatively. “Have you not heard?” Seeing the blank expression on Bran’s face, he said, “Well, no, I guess you haven’t at that. You are quite a ways off, eh? Many of the officials and army have gone. They were needed more to protect the emperor in their own home land, so the Brittanians and Caledonians have been left largely to themselves, with only a few governors left scattered. The Wall has certainly been abandoned for the most part.”

Connor and the other lords, who had gathered to hear this stranger’s story, looked up sharply at this. “Do you mean to tell us,” asked Connor, “that they have prepared a path for us? This is excellent news! Surely this will bring many of the other tuath lords around. They will see it as a sign from the Goddess that we are to follow Bran and that his plan is destined to succeed!”

“Well,” Quin answered, “I sincerely doubt that was their goal, but yes, I suppose they have prepared a path for you...for us.”

Bran nodded, a little shocked that everything was moving so quickly. He ordered messengers sent to those lords who still held out, and then sat at the table with Quin and the lords that already supported him. The battle plans were well under way, and now they must begin preparations for departure as soon as they heard from the other lords.

VIII

A messenger from the last of the lords had just arrived. His news was highly anticipated, and it did not disappoint. They had been waiting for months now for word of the emperor's retreat from Britannia to reach the southern lands of Hibernia, and for word from the last withholding tuath lords to come. Now, at long last, the young messenger had announced that he rode only days ahead of the lords of the southern tuaths, who had brought small armies of their own men. Just as Connor and Finbar had hoped, Quin's news from Britannia had pushed the last few lords to acquiesce and join Bran's cause. Perhaps it was true devotion to Bran, or perhaps it was simply a desire to be a part of the conquering of this new land. Either way, Bran didn't care so long as the tribes of Hibernia were now, in some fashion, united. He'd begun to get anxious about time, as Quin had quietly told him days before that they only had a matter of weeks to set sail, or they would lose the favorable winds to give them a swift passage. He now breathed a quiet sigh of relief. *Thank the Goddess for small blessings such as this.* Pausing after this thought, he realized that he had, at some point, stopped using the Britannian habit of attributing great fortune to Jupiter and was now considering such things the realm of the Great Goddess. *Well congratulations, Bran. You're officially a Hibernian when you place your life in the hands of the Great Goddess...or in a skinny stranger who tells a nice story and fulfills a prophesy.* Since he was most definitely beginning to have faith in both said people, he supposed he really was a Hibernian now. He smiled to himself and joined Connor, Finbar and Quin around the table in Connor's private study.

Tacked to the table was one of Quin's maps of Britannia and the surrounding land masses. Using all of the information Bran could give about Britannia south of the Wall, combined with Quin's knowledge of Britannia as a whole, they had planned a shipping route that would take them to a small village on the western end of Hadrian's Wall. A thick red line now snaked its way through the waters on the map all the way to Maia Bowness, the largely Celtic village where they would begin their work.

Staring at the map, thoughts whirled in Bran's mind. *How many men do we need? How many can we take? Can we get them there safely?*

Seeing the troubled look in his friend's eyes, Quin cleared his throat and spoke, "Bran, you needn't worry about the traveling part of this. I have that covered. I promise, I will get you and your men to Britannia as quickly and safely as possible. I've been thinking over the numbers, and I think, with supplies and weapons accounted for, we can carry about one hundred men over on my ship. Of course, we could always send back for more, but reinforcements will be a long time coming, should we need them." Pausing for a moment, he looked at Bran and continued, "You know my opinion Bran. I don't think you'll need to send for more men. The people of Britannia have been left largely without leadership, and the presence of a strong leader will definitely attract them. If you handle this correctly, the people of Maia Bowness and the other tribes from close by in Caledonia will be a sufficient boost to your army."

Bran had thought about all of this a million times or more, and although he was still wary of leading other men to what might well be their deaths, he trusted Quin. Quin assured him that they would meet little resistance from the Emperor's forces, as there were few enough of them left. These assurances would simply have to be enough. It was time that he let go of his fear and committed himself to action. Looking up from the map, he looked at each of the other men and spoke, "Tell the other lords to ready themselves and their top ten men, no more. Each will bring his own weapons and rations for the trip. We leave for the shore two days hence, at dawn."

VIV

The trek to the shore was an arduous one, but not nearly as much so as it had been when Bran had done it alone and in the opposite direction almost half a year before. *A bit less lonely too*, Bran thought to himself as he walked next to Quin.

When they reached Quin's vessel, sitting calmly in the water, Quin quickly became the leader, instructing their small army on where each would find their quarters. The food and a large majority of the weapons had been brought to the ship the day before and already sat safely stowed below-decks. This trip back to Britannia would be considerably shorter than Bran's trip to Hibernia, since their landing point was on the western, rather than the eastern, shore. They had only to sail across what Quin called the Hibernian Sea and up around the Isle of Man. From there, they would make landing at Maia Bowness.

Once safely on the ship, Bran used the weeks of travel to go over plans with the other lords and to acquaint himself with the men each lord had brought from his tuath. It was important to him to know the men he could be leading, despite Quin's assurances, to their deaths. He would know before they stepped foot on the shores of Britannia who had children and wives, as well as where each man came from so that, should it become necessary, Bran could arrange for care of the families left behind. If necessary, he would travel to each family himself. *This time, I take complete responsibility, and no one will feel any hardship that I can, in any way, prevent.* This was the bargain he made with himself, and so he kept himself busy on the journey to Britannia.

X

They had rounded the Isle of Man two days before, and the ship was now sitting in a calm harbor just off the shore of Britannia at Maia Bowness. Before allowing all of the men to disembark, Bran, Connor, and Quin would make land, talk to the people, and try to ascertain if they and their cause would be embraced. They pulled the small boat up onto the shore and headed in the direction of a large cluster of huts, each of which showed a plume of smoke from what would surely be the fires for the morning meal. Quin had been here before and done a small bit of trading, so he knew the people and their customs, at least better than did either Bran or Connor. Having obtained an audience with and acceptance from the clan leader of Maia Bowness, the three men signaled back to the ship, and the other men began making their way, for the first time, to the shores of Britannia.

XI

After the people of Maia Bowness joined their cause, accepting Bran and his men as replacements for the absent Emperor and his army, other tribes quickly joined as well. Part of the ease with which the people fell into step with Bran was due to already formed alliances called upon by Odocullin, the clan leader at Maia Bowness, and part was due to the fact that the people were ready to accept organized leadership. They saw Bran as a positive alternative to the Emperor and his raiding armies, and they also realized the opportunity he presented for a united peoples. Surely this would make their lives more peaceful and, perhaps, prosperous. After all, with a trade route to the land of their new brothers, the Caledonians and Britanniains saw the world begin to open to them. In addition, they would regain their lands from those who had invaded and taken charge. In all, Bran's arrival was a blessing, and they saw in him a great leader.

Odocullin noted one evening, as the ever growing group of followers sat around the fire listening to Bran share the story of his voyage to Hibernia and back again to Britannia, that Bran had one quality that showed, better than any other qualities, his ability to lead: He was a great storyteller.

In his stories, one could see both reality and dreams. One could, Odocullin said, at once relive the battles of the greatest warriors and dream of a future without warfare that broke tribe from tribe. In Bran's eyes, he thought, lay the unspoken truth of great strength and determination. "Yes."

Odocullin told the other clan leaders, "I trust him with my life and my people. Any man who can weave such tales as to make war-chieftains sit peacefully beside one another holds my confidence. He has brought with him hope and much blessing. May we soon see a great kingdom arise under him, for he was truly born to unite his people. He was blessed with this gift, to be our king, Bran the Blessed."

XII

News of this man they called Bran the Blessed had reached Cantiacorum, where Viviana Gallus still resided with her ailing father, the Provincial Governor. Although the Emperor had recalled most of his army and people back home to help protect the failing empire, a few had remained in Britannia, especially in the southern areas, near Londinium. Brutus Gallus had been one of those to stay behind, although this had been more of a forced decision because of his illness than it had been a dedication to the land or people of Britannia.

Frankly, Viviana was quite intrigued by the rumors of this great chieftain who was gathering the Celts together in the north. She wondered what kind of man he was. Certainly her father would be put out when he heard the news, but, despite her place as a high ranking citizen of the empire, she found herself quietly cheering on the Celts and their new leader, this Bran the Blessed. In her mind, Britannia would be a better place if only the people could learn to work together against the outside forces rather than against each other. Her father would do well to realize this too, but she knew he was too set in his ways to ever even consider such a preposterous idea. She smiled to herself. As much as she loved her father, she deplored his ideals more often than not, and she found her new situation quite pleasing. She was, because of his illness, Brutus's mouth to the outside world. That she sometimes proclaimed her own words as his when she felt it would benefit the people could certainly not be held against her, could it? She was saddened by her father's ailing health, but she took advantage of the opportunity it presented her nonetheless.

Not that she used the power because she was eager for glory. That she certainly was not. She had lived long enough in the limelight of her position as the governor's daughter that she appreciated solitude and quiet more than many. However, the opportunity that power presented her with, to help improve the lives of others, was certainly not something she would pass up. This thought reminded her of words she had spoken several years before to a young freedman who had become her closest friend before he was exiled to Hibernia for that friendship: *I want to help the*

slaves and the freedmen. There is no reason for them to be enslaved in the first place, and I hope some day to help abolish that practice. I'm not sure how, yet, but I will do it. Until then, though, I seek equal treatment here in Britannia for all those taken from their homes and given the name "slave". This is my purpose Bran, more than anything else, and I truly believe that I was born to the provincial governor for a reason. Think of the influence I can have, Bran! I promise you this today: I will seek, every day for the rest of my life until the goal has been achieved, to make life better for those you call family and friends. I promise.

Her reverie was shattered by her father's voice in the next room. She sighed and dropped the comb she had been using on her hair back onto her bedside table. He was undoubtedly shouting at the servants again for some small task they had, in his eyes, not completed perfectly. These days, he had nothing else to do but to scrutinize everyone around him, and she found him more and more intolerable every day. *Just as well he refused to let me help him with anything except being his public face,* she thought. *Because if he shouted at me like that, I just might drown him in his bath!* She smiled to herself at this. Yes, she did love her father, but that did not mean she particularly liked him, especially at times like this.

She left her dressing robe on the lounge chair and climbed into bed. As she lay there, her thoughts drifting drowsily in her head, something occurred to her that made her jolt awake and sit up in bed. *Bran the Blessed.* And rumor held it that he was a tall, dark man from Hibernia. Could it be a mere coincidence that this man's description matched that of another man that she had lost almost two years before? *Perhaps the provincial governor will take an interest in these affairs and send his daughter to speak to this Bran the Blessed,* she thought to herself. The thought of a trip appealed to her, and she began formulating a plan in her head as she lay back down to sleep. In the morning, she would make preparations and head north to Hadrian's Wall before the week was through.

XIII

Bran sat in what had once been the senior tribune's home at this section of the wall before the emperor had recalled his army. It was quite comfortable and, despite his protests that the other lords use it too, he had it to himself. Quin occasionally slept here too, but it was largely Bran's. He sighed to himself and, for the hundredth time that day, repeated the reminder that had become something of a mantra: *I agreed to this responsibility, and with the responsibility comes certain...perks...that I shall have to suffer.*

As he looked at the list of the clans who had joined next to the one of those from whom they had still not heard, he felt his heart lift again. Caledonia and the northern part of Britannia had already committed themselves to his rule, and he had been named the King in the North. When he looked outside into the courtyard and saw the children of the different tribes playing together and the women trading secrets, he could overcome, if only briefly, his discomfiture at being called "Lord Bran". *If a small bit of discomfort is what it costs me to gain such alliances and peace between the different tribes of my people, then I will accept it with a smile.* His thoughts were interrupted by the arrival of a rather breathless Finbar.

"My Lord Bran," he panted, "A messenger from the provincial governor has arrived from Cantiacorum and wishes to speak with you." He motioned to the door with his head.

"Thank you Finbar," Bran said softly. His head was whirling a bit. *The provincial governor from Cantiacorum? Surely it couldn't be Brutus Gallus?* Bran couldn't see Brutus Gallus as the kind to stay behind in Britannia when the emperor pulled out his officials. Gallus was the sort who considered all but the citizens of the empire to be barbarian, godless heathens. Overcome with curiosity, he asked Finbar to show the messenger in and moved back to the planning table to await the messenger's arrival. He didn't want to appear too anxious when the messenger came in. *I wonder if it is someone I know? One of the other slaves?* A few moments later, Bran heard the door behind him open as Finbar announced the visitor and quickly shut the door again. Turning around to

see the visitor, Bran's breath caught in his throat. He had been most unprepared for this surprise, and the green eyes that stared back at him showed a hint of the same shock mixed with amusement.

"So it *is* you!" Viviana's cheeks blushed with excitement and her green eyes burned brilliantly. "I wondered...but I had dared not hope! How did you get back, and with such a following? I...come Bran you must tell me everything!" With this, she threw her arms around him and gave him the first hug he'd had in years.

It's amazing how much difference something as simple as a hug from someone who loves you can be, Bran mused as he returned her embrace. He had dreamed, but had never really thought to see her again. This thought reminded him of something.

"Why are you still in Britannia? I wouldn't have placed your father as one who would stay when the emperor pulled out. Is everything alright?"

"Yes," she replied slowly, as she stepped away from him and walked toward the window. The light from outside made tiny fires burn brightly in her golden hair, and he resisted the urge to reach out and touch it. She looked back at him with determination and said, "Bran, we are still here because my father was too ill to make the journey back. So, the emperor left him behind. A sick old man is expendable enough, and if he thinks he still has power in the name of the emperor, he may even do some good for the Empire's dying cause. My father is still the provincial governor, but I do most of his job for him. He thinks he still makes all of the decisions, and I let him. It makes my life easier, and I have his power at my disposal, and the people of the south look to me for guidance." She paused here, looking at him imploringly. "Bran, don't you see what this means? I can help you. Together, we can join your North with my South and make one united kingdom of Britannia! No more slaves, freedmen, and citizens, Bran. Don't you see? Everyone would be equal. We can do this. I have talked to the people in the south, and they have agreed on the strength of this purpose. So I have come to offer my aid and alliance to your cause."

Bran didn't speak for a long time. For a moment, he simply stared at her, and then it was his turn to look away. He walked to the fireplace, his back turned to her. Staring into the fire, he saw the faces of those who had died for him and his causes in the past. He saw Seamus, his eyes gleaming with pain and rage as he watched his wife die and felt the life ebb from his own body. He saw his father's face, bloody and slack, and he saw mother's, tearstained and etched with grief. Then, he saw Viviana's, her golden hair dyed red with blood and the light gone from her green eyes. *For my parents' sakes, I will continue with my purpose until the people of Britannia and Caledonia became one, but with the memory of friends like Seamus who have died under my leadership, I cannot allow Viviana to take part in all of this.*

"I accept the alliance you offer, but I will not allow you to become involved in this, Viviana. I won't see you get hurt should someone decide to try to take Britannia from us once we are united. Have you not heard the rumors of the people they call the Saxons? That they are coming to 'rule the leaderless Britannia'? War is a certainty, Viviana, and I won't have you associated with the leaders of the opposition to these invaders." At this his voice rose, and he turned and slammed his fist down on the table. "You are a woman! Your fate would be worse than the death that awaits a man, Viviana! Surely I do not need to explain this to you? Leave your father and go to the emperor. Seek a position there, where you'll be safe."

He was startled at the anger he saw in her face. Despite the emotion in her face, she walked slowly to him, hands on her hips, and stared up at him. Although she was much smaller than he, he felt fear clutch at him. An angry woman was certainly not an entity to be toyed with or taken lightly. Her words were sharp, and she spat them at him like tiny little daggers that stabbed at the little bubble of his ego and made him feel progressively smaller until he felt as if it was *he* looking up at *her*.

"You stupid, foolish, bloody oaf! Just like a man to use the argument of sex. And what, pray tell do you think I have been doing in your absence? Lounging in a chair, having servants wait on

me, and cutting myself off from the outside world? I would think that you, of all people, would know that I certainly have not done that, Bran. No matter what you *decree* is right for me to do, I am *already* associated with the leadership of the opposition. I *am* the leadership in the south. Are you really this simple, or has kingship mottled your brain, *Lord Bran*?" She managed a surprisingly adept imitation of Finbar with her "Lord Bran". Bran found himself blushing.

"Viviana, I..." She cut him off here, and spoke once more.

"I'm not finished! I have a few more things to say to you, and then I am leaving you to make your decision. I have met the man they call Quin, and I know who he is to you. Are you going to tell me that you will allow a *male* friend to put himself in danger to help you, but not a *female* friend who is just as devoted to the cause, if not more? You forget, Bran, that this has been my purpose for a very long time. So, here is the decision you must make. I come with the alliance. If you want all of Britannia, then you must let me join you. The people of the south expect such, and I will allow nothing less. Think about this Bran. It really is for the best, and I know you could use the help and support. I'll be outside. When you have decided, please send for me, *my lord*."

With this, she exited calmly, a small smile playing on her lips. If she knew him as she thought she did, his decision would not come quickly, but it would be in her favor. He would see the reason of her argument and the benefit their alliance would have for the people. All she needed to do now was wait, and she could do that. She'd certainly had enough practice over the past two years.

XIV

He found her in the stables, apparently having a lively conversation with one of the mares about the virtues of being a female horse rather than a human of the sex.

“...and when he is being stubborn and foolish, you can just kick him, and nobody would think less of you, because you’re a horse and that’s quite acceptable in the realm of horse behavior. Think of the reaction, though, if *I* kicked him! Definitely not acceptable. Say, beautiful, we couldn’t arrange some sort of deal could we? I mean, I’m sure it won’t be hard to arrange for him to be stubborn, and then you could kick him for me.” She chuckled merrily to herself at that, and the horse whinnied and nuzzled the apple in her hand.

“Now, Viviana, it really isn’t nice of you to arrange for my demise by horse kicking so early in my reign.”

Viviana whirled at the sound of Bran’s voice, and it was his turn to laugh. *This is the Viviana I know*. Then, he sobered a bit and spoke. “Viviana, I have made my decision.” He held out an arm to her. “Would you care to walk?”

“Why, yes my lord, I’d be delighted.”

At this, they linked arms and walked out of the stables and through the courtyard together. Bran was silent at first, and then, as if he had reached some final point in his decision, he stopped walking, turned Viviana to him, and said, “I accept the alliance that you offer, but I make a condition of my own.” Here, he paused, looked at her for a moment, and then continued, “Viviana, before I tell you my condition, you must understand why I make it. I will not have you put yourself in harm’s way without enforcing some sort of protection. You may not understand, but I can’t let you, or anyone else for that matter, join my cause unless I feel that they can protect themselves or I can protect them. So, my condition is two-fold. First, you will take weaponry lessons with Ewan. He is one of the men from Hibernia, and he is a master of the sword. Of course, you won’t be expected to

handle the bigger swords, but I will ensure that, should the time come, you know how to handle yourself against men with weapons. Do you agree to this part?"

"I...well, yes I do. How could I not agree to so small a requirement when such an important alliance depends upon it? Of course I accept."

"Alright then, that takes us to the second part of my condition. And please," he put his hand up, "don't interrupt me until I am through." He took a deep breath, grasped Viviana's hand, and said, "Marry me. That is the second condition. I have reasons for it, and I will tell you one of them now. Please consider this logically. How much safer would you be as a king's wife than as just a leader? If you were to be captured by the invaders when we do battle with them, they would surely not kill you. Ransom, perhaps, but I sincerely doubt they would kill you, at least not immediately. It need only be a marriage in name, but I would at least give you such protection as my name can, for once, offer." At this, he exhaled heavily and looked at Viviana. "So? What do you say to the second condition," he asked with a lopsided smile on his face.

Viviana only stood there for a moment, staring at him as if she could think of nothing to say. Finally, she withdrew her hand, lifted her chin, and spoke. "I say that I would give anything to be a horse right now! A marriage in name only? A marriage only for the sake of protection? Well how very practical and thoughtful of you! I have news for you Bran: Women don't want a practical and thoughtful proposal! And I will not marry only so I can hide behind my husband's title. I've done well enough on my own, thanks."

"Bloody hell! Will you not give me a chance?," Bran asked. *Why is she making this so difficult? She never used to be this way with me!* "You used to listen so well, but now you bristle at everything. Since you're already mad at me, and likely to always be at the rate we're going, then I'll tell you the other reason for that condition. You'll remember I said there were two?" He waited for her nod and burst out, "Well, it was because I wanted to bloody marry you! I didn't, however, wish to offend you by being so upfront about the whole bloody thing!"

He turned away, breathing hard, and felt Viviana's hand on his shoulder. He stopped silently repeating the words "bloody idiot" to himself and turned, a confused look on his face at the smile he saw on hers.

"Well, Bran. Now I can't say as I've ever heard the word "bloody" so many times in such succession, but I think it's close enough to passion to be romantic. So, I accept the second condition."

He stared at her for a moment, muttered something about women, and led her to her room in the guest quarters.

XV

The next day, Bran woke to hands shaking him and a familiar voice shouting his name.

“Bran, wake up! Wake up now!”

I bet the sun is not even up. As king, I shall make a decree that none shall wake me before the sun rises. Let them wake the queen instead. Smiling to himself, he opened his eyes just enough to see who it was shaking him. Seeing the concerned look on Quin’s face, he sat up, rubbed his eyes, and said, “What is it? What’s wrong?”

“Bran, it’s them. Our reports say that the Saxon ships will be close enough to make landfall in about three weeks. We must do something now if we hope to repel their attack.”

“Alright,” Bran said, struggling into his pants and a shirt. “Call the others together, we’ll meet in the next room. And send a messenger back to Cantiacorum to let the people know that an alliance has been made with their leader, Viviana Gallus, and that they are now one with us. Ask them to raise their fighting men and prepare to protect their new kingdom from an invasion. One more thing, Quin. I’d like you to be my naval commander. Will you do it?”

“Yes, I will. Thought you’d never ask.” With a grin on his face, Quin left to gather the other lords and dispatch a messenger to the south.

I must find Viviana. There will be no time for weaponry lessons or a wedding. I must send her somewhere safe, but where? Not to Hibernia. It would be the safest, but getting her there with their ships involved in fighting off the Saxons, there would be no available vessel to take her, nor men to man such a ship. He knew it was hopeless and that she would refuse to leave, even if he could arrange for a way. Sighing to himself, he decided he would simply have to make sure there was always a warrior with her for protection. And when he went with the army to defend the shores, he would leave her here with a small detachment of men. He’d appeal to her by offering her the role of commander of the fort until his return. He smiled to himself, knowing she would see through it,

but would agree anyway because her only other option was being sent away to hiding, and she would never agree to that.

Epilogue

“The fighting had not been quite as bad as expected. The people, strengthened by the knowledge that they were now fighting to protect *their* land from new invaders, and determined to maintain possession of Britannia, had managed to present an impressive front against the Saxons. For their part, the Saxons, having seen that someone had beaten them to establishing new leadership in Britannia, and discovering that Caledonia, too, was part of this new empire, gave up relatively easily. That is, they fought Bran and his army for only three months before realizing the hopelessness of their cause. They were fighting something they could never really hope to beat—a united people who shared hope and a common story. As they fought, each man reminded himself of the story of King Bran. Common men and lords, Britanniains and Caledonians alike, fought together to maintain freedom from this invading force. In their hearts, they knew that never again could they be satisfied with being slaves to another people, nor could they forget that they were writing the story of their newly forged country.

“And as for Bran and Viviana,” the storyteller said, his brown eyes twinkling as he looked above the heads of his children at the green-eyed woman sitting next to the fire, “Well, that is a story for another time.”