DAGGER'S DESTINY

LINNEA TANNER

BOOK TWO IN THE CURSE OF CLANSMEN AND KINGS SERIES


Britannia
River Trent
Corieltauvi
River Wensum
Great Ouse
River
Iceni
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Noviomagus
Gaul
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I

TREASON

July, 24 AD, Southeast Britannia

The image of her father being wounded at the prisoner exchange haunted Princess Catrin as she entered the cave's dank womb where warriors had secretly carried the casualties. Under the illumination of a flaming torch, she found several men hovering over the king's motionless body. She feared the decision to use the dark forces of the Ancient Druids to alter the future could doom her father and people.

Catrin trembled as she knelt by her father and studied his blood-smeared face. A chill of foreboding sliced down her spine. Just that morning, she had made love with Marcellus on what could be her father's death-bed. She placed the palm of her hand on his forehead. His skin was cold and clammy, but he was still alive.

Feeling the bloody streaks on his tunic, she pulled her fingers away and turned to Cynwrig, the king's most-trusted guard. "Help me remove the tunic. I need to stop the bleeding!"

Cynwrig supported the king as Catrin cut the fabric from his chest. The ghastly crisscross cuts and deep abdominal gash made her cringe. A stench like rotten eggs assaulted her nostrils.

King Amren fidgeted. "Fetch my Druidess."

"No!" Catrin snapped. "Agrona is a traitor. We can't risk letting anyone know we've rescued and are tending you. There are herbs near the wall that will help reduce the swelling."

Catrin clasped her father's icy hands and noticed his sunken, bloodshot eyes. She looked to Cynwrig. "Heat a knife so I can seal his wounds. I also need water from the river."

"Do what my daughter says," rasped Amren.

Cynwrig pointed to the cave's opening. "I'll start a fire over there and get someone to fetch the water."

While Cynwrig prepared the fire, Catrin rummaged through several pouches, searching for the proper herbs. After a warrior returned with a bucket of water, she soaked several strips of willow bark in the container, then crushed dried blackberry, borage, and sage stems in a ceramic mortar. She finally added vinegar to the powder and stirred the contents with her finger into a green paste.

She looked at Cynwrig. "Is the knife ready?"

Cynwrig pulled the glowing red blade from the flames. "It looks hot enough."

"Then bring it to me."

Catrin took the knife from Cynwrig, who then restrained the king's arms. She pressed the searing blade on the wounds, methodically moving downward. The king writhed in agony, his eyes as wild as a wounded animal's as he fought Cynwrig's restraint. Concentrating on her task, Catrin swallowed the bile in her mouth and handed the dagger to Cynwrig to reheat the blade. Light-headed and in a cold sweat, she leaned into the hard wall to brace herself, then applied the paste dressing over her father's reddened wounds. Even with her gentle touch, his muscles flinched. Observing the anguish on his face, she placed a blanket under his head and gave him chamomile and poppy in water to ease his pain.

She continued the treatment by placing bark strips on the dressing until the king's grip around her wrist stopped her.

"We need to speak about Marcellus," Amren said with a growl from deep within his throat.

Catrin winced, apprehensive her father knew about her relationship with the Roman hostage placed under her charge. She warily studied the king as he closed his eyes and breathed deeply. He waved Trystan, his second-in-command, over and whispered to him. With a nod, Trystan ordered everyone away.

The hairs on Catrin's neck prickled. The only reason her father would order warriors away would be to reprimand her. She wilted under the king's burning glare as he began questioning. "Trystan told me when we were imprisoned together that Cynwrig found you unconscious in Marcellus's arms. I want to know what happened between the two of you."

Catrin hesitated, fearing her revelation would anger her father and cause his condition to deteriorate. "You should rest now. We can discuss this later."

"No. Tell me now!" Amren snapped.

Catrin could feel the king's eyes probing her like a sharp-edged scalpel for the truth. She bit her lower lip to stop it from quivering. "When I was stricken with the falling sickness, Marcellus came to my aid."

"Trystan said the Roman was found naked with you, and Agrona accused him of bewitching you with an amulet!"

"Marcellus had just finished bathing," Catrin answered, suddenly feeling queasy.

Amren cocked an eyebrow. "Bathing?"

"Yes."

"And that is all that happened?"

Catrin froze under her father's cold stare.

"Answer me!"

"You can't trust what Agrona says," Catrin replied.

"And why is that?"

"She is a druidic spirit from your past."

"Get to your point," Amren grunted.

"Remember Rhan, your former Queen? She possessed Agrona at the time you executed her for treason."

Amren's brow furrowed. "How do you know this?"

Catrin nervously shifted her weight. "I had a vision. Under the blood moon, you walked on a pathway of red-hot rocks around a towering fire. A woman with a wolf pelt draped over her shoulder approached you between two lines of people chanting, "Rhan, Rhan, Rhan."

"What did this woman look like?"

"She had coppery hair and wolf-like eyes just like Marrock's. He was also there, just a few feet in front of her. He looked to be about eight years of age."

A lump formed in Amren's throat. "What did you see next?"

"You accused the woman of treason and cut off her head with your sword. Her head flew off and through the arms of a girl standing next to Marrock."

"The girl was Agrona," Amren interjected, his face now as pale as a corpse. "How do you interpret the vision?"

"When Agrona touched the severed head, Rhan's soul entered her. When I confronted Agrona about it, she drugged me so I wouldn't tell others. She also wanted to steal my powers." Catrin cringed, recalling the slimy feeling of Rhan's thoughts crawling in and out of her mind like a maggot.

Amren mumbled, as if struggling to comprehend what Catrin had just told him, and then continued. "I believe the gods speak through Agrona. She was born mute but spoke for the first time after Rhan's execution. Agrona declared me to be the king of truth and light. I implicitly trust Agrona on all spiritual matters. She has told me things only Rhan would have known."

"She tricked you just like she tricked me," Catrin said.

"I'm not so sure . . ." Amren squeezed his eyes shut and groaned. "Give me more poppy for the pain."

Catrin brought the cup with the poppy mixture to her father's lips. Moments later, he relaxed and asked her to help him sit more comfortably. She helped him lean against the stone wall. Though he spoke more slowly, his voice seemed stronger as he continued his questioning.

"What are your feelings toward the Roman?"

Catrin couldn't answer, her stomach twisting into knots from dread of what her father might do.

Amren narrowed his eyes, targeting on the truth. "Trystan told me that your mother questioned Marcellus about what he had done to you before you were found stricken with the falling sickness. He confessed that he loved you and that you had both . . . had . . ."

With a sob Catrin blurted, "Yes, I love Marcellus."

Amren frowned. "You did this knowing I was negotiating your betrothal to Cunobelin's son?"

A wavering shadow cast by a burning torch seemed to descend on Catrin. Shaking, she said, "Yes. I felt betrayed you did this without telling me."

"What in the name of the gods have you done?" Amren grimaced. "Your mother showed Trystan the dagger inscribed with Rhan's curse. The blade glowed as if it had just been pulled out of a furnace. Words melted away as others were being formed. Your mother, afraid the curse was again altering, locked the dagger away to stop the transformation."

This revelation stunned Catrin.

Amren then accused, "I believe you altered the curse when you slept with the enemy."

Dumbstruck, Catrin shook her head in denial. *No. No. This can't be. Our love is blameless. Something else caused the curse to alter.*

"Speak!"

Catrin knew that no matter the consequences, she had to tell her father what shifted the curse. "Altering the curse has nothing to do with Marcellus. When you were gone, the Raven—my raven guide— explained how the powers of the Ancient Druids worked."

"What powers?"

Catrin drew in a long breath and exhaled slowly. "I can travel to other spiritual realms in the Raven's mind. One place is a transitional barrier where the mortal world and the spiritual Otherworld join. It is called the Wall of Lives. On its surface, life threads for every living human weave in and out of a fluid tapestry. This is where the Past, the Present, and the Future merge into one. I discovered that I could change the Future by manipulating the life thread."

"How is that?"

"When I pulled the life thread of a person fated to die out of the portal leading to the Otherworld, I extended his life," Catrin explained.

"No mortal has that power," Amren said incredulously.

"I have that power. But I don't know how extending a person's life will impact the Future."

"Whose life did you extend? Mine?" asked Amren.

Catrin's voice cracked with emotion. "I saved Marcellus."

"Cursed gods!" Amren's eyes blazed with fire as he pointed to the gash in his belly. "This wound was inflicted by your lover's blade. He almost killed me!"

A sense of dread overcame Catrin.

Marcellus couldn't have done this! He knows how much I love Father. Why hadn't I foreseen this?

She averted her eyes from her father. "I never meant to harm you!"

Amren snarled. "But I just saw Marcellus fall with an arrow in his chest."

"No, Father, he is alive. I rewove his life thread so the death arrow wouldn't pierce his heart."

Amren sunk his fingers into the cave's dirt floor. "This is the disloyal act of a stupid girl blinded by love—not a noble princess I raised to put family and kingdom first. I must now go to war against my banished son, Marrock, and King Cunobelin. The Romans will likely join their cause after what we did to their soldiers today at the prisoner exchange. Just when I needed you, you betrayed me and my people when you helped the Roman enemy. Your act of changing the future might have altered Rhan's curse. In what way, I can't be certain until I inspect the dagger's inscription. You've left me with no choice but to charge you with treason."

Catrin felt as if a mule had kicked her in the stomach. She gasped. "Father, you can't do this."

"I can and I will," Amren said coldly. "I will serve you the same justice as any subject who betrays me."

"Have mercy on me," Catrin implored, grasping her father's hand. "I will do anything you ask to regain your trust!"

Amren's face softened for an instant, but then his glacier-blue eyes hardened. "Trystan!"

The commander walked from the shadows. Amren's face turned leaden. "Detain Catrin as a prisoner until her trial . . ."

Amren went limp as he rolled over on the cave's muddy floor.

Conflicting emotions of shock, fear, love, and hate whirled inside Catrin as she pressed her trembling fingers on her father's neck. Feeling no pulse, she pressed harder.

Suddenly, the king swatted her hand away. She recoiled in terror when his eyes fixed on her like a venomous snake. "Trystan, take my daughter away now!"

Horrified, Catrin pleaded to the commander for mercy. In his scowl, she could see none.

Trystan clenched her arm and dragged her to the cave opening.

Once outside, Trystan ordered a warrior to bind her to a tree until the next morning, when they would return to the capital. In the long night's gloom, unforgiving rain washed the tears away from Catrin's face. Branded as a traitor for loving the Roman enemy, she must share Rhan's fate for treason unless she could find a way back into her father's heart.

2

BETRAYAL

At times feverish, Marcellus had languished during the arduous five-day wagon ride to the Roman encampment near the Catuvellauni capital of Camulodunon. The constant jostling aggravated the pain in his chest wound. The soldiers' open contempt for him grated like salt on a lanced boil. After he had first been injured, one soldier spat on a bandage before applying it, disregarding that Marcellus was a nobleman from a powerful family.

Another cavalryman with two swollen black eyes also offered Marcellus another round of sputum on his bandage earlier that morning before saying, "Why did you save that Celtic cunni after she led our men into an ambush at the prisoner exchange?"

If his chest hadn't hurt so much, Marcellus would have knocked the foul-mouthed horseman off his mount and whip-fisted him. Weakened, his mobility limited by stabbing pain, he only had enough rage to grumble, "Keep your nose out of my affairs."

The badger-eyed horseman gave the ugliest scowl Marcellus had ever seen. "The other day, I buried five of my companions. Two had their eyes gouged out by those demonic ravens." As the cavalryman reined his horse away, Marcellus overhead him mumble, "Traitor."

The word "traitor" disquieted Marcellus still. He couldn't explain why he had attacked one of his own men who had hurled Catrin on the ground and stomped her abdomen. At that instant, his only thought was to protect her from harm. He never even considered this as treason. He drew in a deep breath and sighed.

Love can make a man lose all reason.

Not until he met Catrin had he understood how the unbridled passion of his great-grandfather, Mark Antony, for Cleopatra could make him forsake his Roman heritage. Even his grandfather, Iullus Antonius, had been forced to fall on his sword for his scandalous affair with Augustus's daughter, Julia. As a consequence, Marcellus's father, Lucius Antonius, was banished as a young man to Gaul for the sins of his forefathers.

Marcellus recalled his father's excitement after Emperor Tiberius pardoned him and allowed his family to return to Rome when he was a gangling twelve-year-old boy. Marcellus never quite meshed with his more sophisticated peers in Rome. Loneliness plagued him despite the city's bustle of one million inhabitants.

That all changed when he immersed himself in weapons training, military strategy, and oratory skills. He ultimately caught the eye of Eliana, the consul's wife, twice his age. An exotic, dark haired beauty, she invited him over to her villa so they could read poetry together. In her bedchamber, she undressed him and stroked his hardened shaft in elegiac couplets as she read Ovid's *Ars Amatoria* aloud:

Woman cannot resist the flames and cruel darts of love, shafts which, methinks, pierce not the heart of man so deeply. Pluck, then, the rose and lose no time, since if thou pluck it not 'twill fall forlorn and withered, of its own accord.

Once, during the Lupercalia Festival, Eliana's drooling, silver-haired husband with crippling gout almost caught Marcellus in bed with her. Hearing the consul's shuffling feet entering into the bedchamber, he scrambled to hide behind a large vase.

Even though Marcellus barely escaped with his life, he still believed he was invincible until death almost claimed him in Britannia. The image of Catrin's father lunging at him during the conflict at the prisoner exchange flashed into his mind. He had no choice but to defend himself against the king or be killed. Just when he had lost all trust that Catrin could alter his fate to die at the prisoner exchange, she summoned the raven to take the blunt force of a death arrow aimed at his heart. Just as he realized he had

found his true love, she was snatched away. Their relationship was now impossible.

With the dark clouds billowing above, Marcellus's mood spiraled into a vortex of gloom. Loneliness dug into his soul. His chest stabbed with relentless pain; his head throbbed with the constant clack-clack of wagon wheels on the rough roadway. Upon further reflection, he acknowledged he had given little thought to his mortality and the consequences of his reckless actions. He lifted his eyes toward the parting clouds, and the sun's brilliance shone through. Believing this was an omen that he had another chance to fulfill his destiny with honor, he silently prayed.

Apollo, show me how to rise out of the ashes of my ancestors and ascend to the heavens.

No longer willing to wallow in his glum thoughts and listen to the wooden wheels, Marcellus shouted to the driver, "Stop. I need to get out!"

"No need," the driver said. "We're almost there."

Marcellus pulled himself up against the wagon's side to look over. Ahead was the rectangular Roman encampment on top of a rolling hill. Riding beside the wagon was Decimus, who wore a perpetual scowl on his scarred face. The close-lipped tribune was an enigma. Rumors abounded in Rome that his political career had suffered as a result of his marrying a Gallic commoner who died giving birth to their daughter—a tale of caution for any nobleman considering marriage with a foreigner beneath his status. Marcellus had to admit he had grown to respect the commander's rock-solid demeanor since their initial confrontation with King Amren. Still, the tribune's silence on the journey to the Roman camp roared disapproval of what Marcellus had done to save Catrin. And shortly, he would face his own father, whose soldiers accused him of treason.

Decimus reined his horse closer to the wagon. "You look pale as a corpse. What did those savages do to you back there?"

Marcellus hesitated revealing what he had endured as a prisoner; it could disrupt the political balance and endanger Catrin. He shrugged. "Not much worth speaking of. The bleak weather puts me in a bad mood."

Decimus cocked an eyebrow. "Weather? The bruises on your face tell me otherwise."

"It happened at the prisoner exchange," Marcellus said, looking away from the tribune's probing eyes.

Decimus pressed further. "Those bruises were already there before the conflict broke out. I'm baffled as to why you attacked Priscus to save that sorceress."

Marcellus bristled. "Catrin helped me to escape."

Decimus spat on the ground. "Those Cantiaci warriors who ambushed us tell me otherwise. As I recall, you shouted the alert."

Marcellus grasped the side of the wagon as it jerked over a rough area of the pathway. "Catrin didn't know this would happen. Besides, the Romans were ready to do the same."

"You mean ambush?"

Marcellus nodded.

Decimus's jaw tensed. "As the military commander, I must prepare for any surprise. Don't fool yourself. That Briton siren knew exactly what she was doing. She lured us into a trap. It's best we got you away from her wiles. The only reason I can think of why you turned on Priscus is she bewitched you."

Marcellus glared at Decimus. "She never bewitched me. I saved Catrin because she helped me to escape. I betrayed no Roman."

Fidgeting with the horse reins, Decimus said, "She blinded you to what she is—a sorceress with dark powers. She summoned the ravens that attacked our soldiers at the prisoner exchange. I've never seen so many demented birds dive into midst of battle like that. Two of my soldiers were pecked to death by these creatures. Catrin is just as deranged as her brother, Marrock."

"Her half-brother," Marcellus corrected. "You malign Catrin, but my father and you bargain with that monster, Marrock. He ignited the firestorm while I was held hostage. He must have stolen my father's insignia ring and imprinted our family's wax seal on the fake message that the queen intercepted. She only threatened to kill me when she read the lie that my father

had imprisoned Amren and threatened to attack her. Didn't you consider this when you broke the agreement at the exchange?"

"Of course, I did," Decimus grumbled. "But anyone could have sent that forged letter."

"It was Marrock," Marcellus insisted. "You're a reasonable man. I'm surprised you support my father in his dealings with that barbarian."

"As a loyal servant to your father, I do what I'm told," Decimus said bitterly. "Between the two of us, this cursed island should sink in the ocean along with its brutal warriors and sorcery. We should not be dealing with any of them."

"Oh, I see. You are of the same mind as I," Marcellus said, suspecting a falling-out between his father and Decimus. "Is there something I need to know?"

Decimus pressed his lips together and stared straight ahead at the Roman encampment. "Let me just say, your father's friendship depends solely on how well I serve him to elevate his political standing. If anything goes wrong here, I will be the scapegoat."

Marcellus winced from a sudden pain in his chest. Gripping the edge of the wagon side, he cursed, "Damn the gods! I can't let Father see me helpless like this."

"Perhaps a good meal and some wine will put you in better spirits," Decimus said in a lighter tone.

"I almost forgot how I missed Roman comforts." Marcellus grimaced in pain as he leaned on the wagon's edge to ease his discomfort. "Is there a horse I can ride into camp? I would like to present myself as a nobleman, not a barnyard cat."

Decimus cracked a smile and barked at a nearby cavalryman. "Give this patrician your horse."

A lanky horseman climbed off his black-spotted gray pony about fourteen hands high. Marcellus gingerly crawled out of the wagon and lumbered to the pony. Mounting, he felt a sharp pain shoot through his chest. For good measure, he cursed the gods again and reined his horse closer to the tribune.

Decimus sniffed and wrinkled his nose. "You are starting to stink like piss and shit."

Not sure how to take the tribune's comment, Marcellus scratched his bristly beard that had incessantly itched the previous three days. He decided to explore further the possible discord between his father and Decimus.

"I need a shave," he said off-handedly. "Have any other envoys from Rome joined my father at the headquarters?"

Decimus frowned. "Senator Marcus Crassus Frugi is there. He has the same mind as your father regarding Britannia."

"Which is?"

"Now is the time for Rome to invade this god-forsaken island."

Concerned that Catrin could be slain in an invasion, Marcellus felt his stomach clench into a knot. "Invasion is a bad idea. The sooner we leave the better."

"I've argued this point with your father. His response is that I'm only here to serve him. He can as easily bring me down as he raised me up."

"Did you confront him and say that we should leave?"

"Yes. That is when I learned Tiberius has the same opinion as mine. Ask your father about the emperor's mandate. Right now, I could use some of your support."

"What mandate?"

Decimus shook his head. "No matter . . . I don't want any further troubles with your father."

Without saying another word, Decimus kicked his horse and galloped toward the encampment.

What Decimus had said troubled Marcellus. If his father disobeyed the emperor's mandate, it would be construed as treason. He had to convince his father otherwise or their family's legacy could be destroyed forever.

3

CHIMERA

Marcellus dismounted and handed the reins of his horse to a stableman at the center of the Roman encampment. With the approach of nightfall, a misty chill hung in the air as he walked to the tented pavilion headquarters where his senator father was waiting outside. He noted his stern glare but nonetheless opened his arms to embrace his father.

Lucius, stiffening the arms at his side, spurned the warm gesture. He instead greeted Marcellus with a sarcastic tinge in his voice, "Thank the gods you are alive. Your mother would never forgive me if I left you dead in Britannia." He cast a glance at Decimus. "We need to talk before I speak to my boy."

Marcellus glowered. *You call me "boy" after what I've been through!*

He begrudgingly followed his father into the main chamber, which was sparsely furnished with two tables, foldable stools, and multiple shelves. Behind the elongated table was a scarlet tapestry with an embroidered gold eagle.

Lucius pulled back the tapestry to reveal a smaller bedchamber. "You can clean up in here while I speak with Decimus."

Marcellus avoided his father's eyes as he entered the room about half the size of the main quarters. At the back were two couch-like beds, end tables, and corner shelves. He took off his tattered tunic and inspected his chest bandage near the light of a flaming oil lamp on an end table. He winced from the pain of touching the pink-tinged cloth and cursed, "Sons of Hades!"

Retrieving a wash cloth from a shelf, he rinsed it in a bowl of water and cautiously lifted the bandage to wipe the yellowish discharge off his swollen

wound. Once he finished the painful task, he noticed a platter of cheese, bread, and berries set on another table. With his appetite returning, he gobbled the food down and rummaged through shelves of folded clothes, brushes, strigils, razors, and jars of cleansing oil until he found a scarlet military tunic to wear. As he slid the garment off the shelf, a scroll dropped at his feet. He set it on the bed while he finished dressing.

Marcellus picked up the scroll to inspect the broken wax seal of what appeared to be the imprint of the intaglio portrait of Emperor Tiberius. He wondered why his father had placed such an important document with his personal effects. Considering it further, he surmised it was the emperor's mandate that had caused the disagreement between his father and Decimus. To confirm his suspicion, he unrolled the parchment on the table and read:

Emperor Tiberius Caesar Augustus orders all diplomatic negotiations in Britannia to cease immediately. Return to Rome for further instructions. All cohorts under the command of Tribune Decimus Flavius must report to the military fort at Gesoriacum, Gaul, for further assignment.

Marcellus felt his mouth drop. He couldn't fathom why his father and Senator Frugi were still planning an invasion if the emperor had recalled them. The ramifications of his father disobeying an imperial mandate rattled in his head. Defying the emperor was treason. Nobles had been banished—even executed—for such acts. No wonder Decimus had been so disgruntled with his father.

A sudden movement of the tapestry divider caught the corner of Marcellus's eye. He hastily rolled the parchment and tucked it into his sleeve.

Lucius walked in. "It looks like you found something to wear."

Marcellus nervously readjusted the scroll into his sleeve to conceal it better. "Yes, but most of my belongings are still at the Cantiaci capital."

"I will have my body slave find you some other clothes," Lucius said, rubbing the back of his neck. His eyes froze on Marcellus. "Tell me what happened when you were held hostage."

The cold tone of his father's voice made Marcellus bristle. "No warm greetings . . . just an interrogation?"

"You expect a warm greeting after your misbehavior?"

"Misbehavior?"

Lucius's jaw clenched. "King Amren told me you had been found naked with his youngest daughter. He accused you of rape and ranted your Apollo's amulet cursed her with the falling sickness."

After the ordeal of Cantiaci warriors brutalizing him for defiling their princess, Marcellus was in no mood to defend himself again with his father.

"That is an utter lie!"

"Did you seduce her to get the information I asked for?"

"No, I befriended her. That is all it took to learn that Marrock is a debauched man whom you should not be dealing with."

Lucius glowered. "I deal with any barbarian who serves my ambition! Why did you help Amren's daughter to escape at the prisoner exchange? I wanted to capture her to use as a bargaining tool after you were released."

"I thought the exchange was to calm the political storm between you and the Cantiaci. It appears you never intended to honor your agreement with Queen Rhiannon to release Amren."

"She betrayed us," Lucius snorted. "Decimus told me the conflict broke out after the queen's warriors ambushed us. Even so, you assaulted a centurion so that whore could escape. You did this without any regard for the safety of our troops. The soldiers accuse you of betraying them!"

Marcellus stepped within a few inches of his father's face. "She is no whore, and I betrayed no one. The centurion was trying to kill Catrin. She had no knowledge of her mother's plans to ambush us."

Lucius huffed. "You idiot, she lured us into a trap!"

"If the queen had trusted you, none of this bloodshed would have occurred," Marcellus retorted.

Lucius roughly grabbed Marcellus by the arm. "No one threatens my family and lives!"

Marcellus jerked away, but his father continued ranting. "That queen wanted to butcher you—to sacrifice you to her war goddesses. I swear to Jupiter above, that bitch will pay dearly!"

"What do you plan to do?"

Lucius pounded his chest with a clenched hand. "I want vengeance! I want that pompous king and all his family to suffer for what they have done to me!"

"The queen acted like any prey cornered by a predator," Marcellus lashed. "You would have done the same—defend your family in any way you could."

"You imbecile! I had to grovel like a mangy dog to that mad bitch. I should have trampled her beneath my heels! Why didn't I do this? Let me tell you why . . ."—Lucius raised his fist at Marcellus—"To save your ungrateful arse!"

Marcellus knew by the fury in his father's eyes that he was determined to destroy Amren and his queen. He recalled another heated dispute between his father and a political rival. A few days later, the patrician's bloated body was found floating in the Tiber. At the time, he believed his father had no connection to this man's death, but now he wasn't sure. Standing before him was a three-headed chimera speaking from whatever head served him best.

Determined to stop his father from going down a destructive path, Marcellus pulled the scroll out of his sleeve and waved it at him. "Tell me about this! How can we remain in Britannia when the emperor ordered you back to Rome? You can't ignore his decree so you can avenge King Amren for what he did."

Lucius reached for the scroll. "Where did you get this?"

Marcellus pulled it away. "It was in plain sight with your personal belongings."

"You impudent boy!" Lucius shouted. "I brought you here so you could learn how to deal with foreign rulers. But you threw it all away on a foreign whore."

Marcellus shoved his father. "As I said, Catrin is not a whore! I owe her a debt for saving my life."

Lucius shot a seething glare. "And you paid that debt by fucking her! Don't think you were her first. Marrock claims she bewitches men."

"Why should that monster's opinion matter? The issue before us is the emperor. If you defy him, you will be charged for treason."

Eyes ablaze, Lucius slammed Marcellus into the table, knocking scrolls and goblets all over the red-carpeted floor. "You ungrateful bastard, you know nothing of my plan to convince Tiberius otherwise. Who are you to challenge me, boy?"

Marcellus raised his fist. "Back off or I will lay you flat on your back!"

Lucius answered the challenge with a hammer punch to his son's chest. Marcellus gasped from the burning pain in his lungs. He crumbled to the floor, the scroll dislodging from his fingers.

Lucius scooped the scroll into his hand and waved it over a burning candle, setting it afire. The edges of the parchment charred. Smoke filled the room, exacerbating the burning pain in Marcellus's lungs. He pushed himself up to a sitting position, leaned over his knees, and hacked until he spewed bloody mucous.

A bone-chilling growl from the adjacent chamber rumbled into the room, startling Marcellus and his father. They both gawked at the tapestry swaying between the chambers.

Large red-furred paws appeared beneath the fabric. Loud barking and snarls mixed with stomping footsteps and banging metal erupted from the other chamber.

Fear overcoming his pain, Marcellus sprang to a defensive stance.

"Who's out there?" Lucius shouted.

The paws disappeared beneath the tapestry but were soon replaced with leather-strapped boots shuffling back and forth. The emblazoned gold eagle on the crimson tapestry appeared to fly as the fabric whipped back and forth.

A soldier yelled, "Jupiter's balls!"

"Look at the size of that wolf!" another man shrieked.

Decimus's voice shouted, "Corner him and spear him!"

The creature's red-furred muzzle appeared beneath the bottom of the tapestry.

Lucius tapped Marcellus on the arm and handed him a dagger. Marcellus scanned the room for more weapons and cast a glance at his father. "Get me the spear at the back."

Just as Lucius scrambled to retrieve the weapon, the tapestry shot up. A massive beast with bared fangs and eyes glowing like red embers pounced into the room. Panic sheared into Marcellus as the mammoth wolf leapt at him like a red flame of fur.

The next instant, Marcellus found himself under the wolf's lead-heavy paws. Sharp pain spiked through his lungs and he almost passed out.

But then, a powerful force shot into Marcellus like a burning ember. His hand now had a will of its own as he thrust the dagger blade into the beast's underbelly.

The wolf's jaws snapped within inches of Marcellus's face, its demonic eyes devouring him. He felt his hand jerk from the force of stabbing the creature's belly again. A supernatural force controlled his hand's movement as he stabbed the beast over and over again.

When Marcellus heard Catrin's voice cry, "Get away from Marrock," he realized she was the force in his hand.

No time to ponder.

The wolf's fangs lunged for his throat. Panic shot into Marcellus as he imagined his body being shredded. Then suddenly, to his amazement, the creature's weight lifted and its massive body hurled back as if caught in a whirlwind.

With renewed energy strengthening his muscles, Marcellus sprang to his feet. About ten feet in front of him was the dazed, gargantuan beast struggling to get up as two soldiers and Decimus surrounded it.

One of the soldiers threw a javelin at the creature's side. The direct hit did not stop the beast. It jumped upright on its paws. Before anyone could hurl another weapon, the wolf leapt into what looked like fog and disappeared.

Mystified, Marcellus blurted, "What just happened?"

He impulsively looked up to find Catrin floating over him like a translucent cloud. It dawned on him then her prophecy that he would escape Marrock's attack had been fulfilled. Reaching for her hand, he felt her essence radiate into him, but she faded into a hazy mist and her warmth dissipated.