

Chapter One

THE COUNCIL OF WAR

It began with a look. Anna had never seen two people look at each other like that. Uter, the war leader of the British, was looking at Anna's mother, Ygraine. He was asking for something with his eyes. Her mother was flushed and frightened. Then she whirled and pushed her way into the crowd to get away, but she kept looking back at Uter. Uter was watching her the way a wolf watches a lamb.

It was a look Anna had never seen before. One day it would be the destruction of Britain.

UTER had been nice to Anna when she'd met him in the big tent. He hadn't seemed nearly as fierce as the stories her father, Gorlois, had told about him: the battles he had won against the Saxons, or the villages of theirs he had burned. He wasn't tall, like her father, and his nose was a small pug nose, not long and Roman like her father's. But when he looked her in the eyes, he was really looking

at her, as if she mattered. As if, she thought, he liked looking at her.

It was a huge tent, bigger than her father's villa back home, almost sixty yards long, and it was filled with hundreds of soldiers and warriors drinking and boasting. The governors of all the provinces of Britain had sworn to send their soldiers to drive the invading Saxons back across the sea to the Continent. Outside, there was a city of tents, thousands of them, and more soldiers and warriors from all over Britain. You could hear the murmur of their voices and the roar of all their campfires. And Uter had been picked to lead them all in the war against the Saxons.

Anna's father was talking with Uter as a few tall Picts walked past in a knot, gawking at everything. They were wild barbarians from the north, beyond Hadrian's Wall, with strange tattoos all along their arms, and long beards. They made respectful but strange gestures at Uter as they walked past. They were the enemy, as bad as the Saxons.

"What are they doing here?" Anna whispered to her father.

Uter grinned at her, as if she was very smart for asking. "I guess they're hoping to pillage the Saxons instead of us, for a change."

"And if we lose?" asked her father. "Who's going to make them go back home?"

"Who said anything about losing?" Uter said, and his grin got wider, so that it was a little scary. Anna could see why people wanted him to lead them into battle.

"Is that Marcus Cunomorus?" her father said, and got up abruptly. People were throwing their arms around a tall scarred man with grey hair who'd just come into the tent. "I'd better go talk to him."

"Have you two been fighting?" asked Uter, amused.



“I caught his men moving boundary stones,” said her father. He meant the stones that marked out the lands he governed. Marcus Cunomorus had been trying to nibble away at his lands by moving them.

“If I caught men stealing my lands, I’d have them flayed alive,” Uter laughed.

“It’s stupid and pointless,” said her father. “They’re not his lands or mine. We’re not kings. We govern in the name of Rome.” He turned sharply and walked off. That was his way. He wouldn’t argue with you. He’d tell you his point of view and then head off before you could make a fool of yourself trying to contradict him.

“Rome died,” Uter called after him. “Haven’t you heard?”

It was true. The last Roman soldiers had marched out of Britain a hundred years ago. Barbarians had sacked Rome a few years before Anna was born. Still, her father insisted that he was the governor of a Roman province. His departure left Uter grinning at Anna. “Looks like he forgot you,” he said. He didn’t seem to mind being stuck with an eleven-year-old girl. “Have you ever seen this many soldiers?” he asked.

“You must have almost a whole legion,” she said, anxious to show Uter that she knew what she was talking about. Her father liked to talk to her about strategy and tactics. “How many cavalry do you have?”

But suddenly Uter wasn’t paying attention to her anymore. He stood up, staring. Anna followed his gaze.

It was her mother, smiling graciously in the centre of a circle of laughing soldiers. She was wearing robes of Syrian silk that fluttered as she moved. “That’s my mother,” Anna said.

Uter didn’t seem to have heard her. “Who in the name of Venus is that?” he asked.



“That’s my mother,” Anna said again. “Her name is Ygraine.”

“Go find your father,” Uter said. Then he surged into the crowd toward her mother. What was he doing? There was something wild in his expression.

Anna scrambled after Uter. She saw her mother through the thicket of arms. Ygraine had stopped moving. Her smile had faded. Her face was flushed red. She spun away.

What did Uter want from Anna’s mother? Why was Ygraine so upset?

Anna left the pavilion where all the soldiers and warriors were feasting and drinking, and walked out into the tent city that sprawled across the hill. Around the hilltop were the remains of a legionary fortress, from when the Roman legions still garrisoned Britain a hundred years ago. Now the rotting wooden walls held soldiers gathered from all over Britain: from the Cantaccii in the southwest, whose lands the Saxons had already taken, to her father’s soldiers from Trigos on the Cornish peninsula in the far west, to the Brigantes in the north. There were hundreds of tents laid out in neat rows. The muddy lanes between them were bustling with men. Below the hill-fort, the tents of the Picts spilled into the river valley, in no particular order; they weren’t proper soldiers, only warriors.

Anna found her mother in their tent, alone. She seemed worried. “Is something wrong?” Anna asked.

“No,” her mother said. “Are you scared about the war?”

Anna shook her head. She’d never seen so many soldiers and warriors in one place. Her father had said there were mobs of Saxons flowing into Britannia, but surely no mob could defeat all these tough-looking soldiers.

“I am,” said Ygraine. “You never know what will happen in war.”

But Anna's mother wasn't telling her what was really wrong. There was something strange in her voice.

ANNA'S father stayed out for hours, maybe plotting strategy with the other governors. Anna wanted to wander through the tent city. She'd never been this far from home, and it was exciting. But her mother said she couldn't. She just wanted to comb Anna's hair, so Anna let her. Ygraine sang to her, and in the heat, Anna got sleepy lying on her blankets on the soft grass.

Her mother began to sing a lullaby. Anna wanted to wander around the camp, to hear men tell war stories—she could hear them out there, laughing and boasting. But her mother's voice was a spell that wove the soft grass and the warm blanket into an embrace. She wasn't sure if she was asleep yet. And then she was.

SOMETHING was rustling right outside the tent. It was dark; the crickets were out in force. And there was her mother's voice, and a man's. Was her father back? The murmuring was quiet, low, but it had a kind of urgency to it. Her father was like that.

But why were they talking outside the tent? They didn't want to wake her. That was it. They were thoughtful that way.

No. Something was wrong. Anna opened her eyes. From the firelight outside, she could see their soft shadows against the tent canvas. The man was shorter than her father. Stocky. And very close to her mother. They had stopped talking.

Where was her father?

Suddenly her mother turned away. She seemed to be wrestling with the man.

“Ygraine,” the man said. It wasn’t her father’s voice, and it was urgent, and something in it scared Anna.

Then she heard a slap.

“Mama?” she called, and she got up from the blanket. “Mama!” Somehow she got tangled in the blanket and fell down again.

She ripped the blanket off her feet and ran out, slapping the tent flap aside. The man was already striding away. He was wearing Roman armour. She saw soldiers nodding their heads respectfully as he went by until he disappeared into the shadows.

“Are you all right?” Anna asked. Her mother’s face was pale in the firelight. “Who was that?” Her mother didn’t answer. “Did he kiss you?”

Ygraine pulled Anna into the tent, and sat down abruptly on the grass, trembling.

“What’s wrong, Mama?” Anna asked. She ran her fingers through her mother’s hair, trying to comfort her, but Ygraine didn’t seem sad, just upset. “Who was that?” Anna whispered again.

After a long time, her mother finally spoke. “Please don’t tell your father,” she said, her voice cracking.

BÛC Ygraine must have told him, because only a little later, Gorlois was whispering to his wife in harsh low tones.

Anna was frightened. She wanted to wedge herself under the folding table, but she wasn’t a little kid anymore. The name Uter burst out more than once, and she heard her father curse, though he never cursed.

So Uter had been the man in the shadows. Anna had liked him. But he had tried to kiss her mother.

Why?

Her father burst out of the tent, but there was no shouting. That was his way. He just started waking his centurions up, going into their tents or rousing them from their campfires. And, long before the dawn broke, Bretel, her father's senior centurion, was rushing everywhere whispering orders. The men were tightening saddles and shoving bags back onto carts, stepping carefully, holding the horses' bridle bits from jangling, looking every few minutes at the brightening east.

BEFORE the sun even broke the tree line, her father's army was marching away from the old legionary fortress, its rotting battlements looming black against the pale red sky.

On the way here, Anna had ridden on her own pony. But now she had to ride in one of the supply carts. Its iron-ringed wheels made a racket on the stones of the road. Her mother was far ahead, at the head of the column. Her father was riding back and forth, barking orders to the men.

What had happened? The Saxons were not in this direction. The men hadn't eaten. Her father had them pass loaves of bread down the line, so they could tear off pieces and eat while they marched. Why were they running away? She didn't understand.

When they finally stopped, it was midday. The sun was hot. Eight hundred men had covered a score of miles. They were exhausted. Anna was ashamed. It wasn't like her father to sneak away in the middle of the night. Anna felt humiliated, and she hadn't even done anything wrong.

Three riders came up the road. Everyone tensed, but soon Anna recognized the riders on the left and right as her father's. The

centurion in the middle carried a long lance pointed up, a white pennant flapping from its tip. His brass breastplate was polished and gleaming.

The horsemen guided the rider to Gorlois. The centurion dismounted and put his fist against his chest in a salute.

Her father saluted back. He gestured for the rider to follow him to the shade of some trees. Then he stopped and gestured at the centurion's sword. The centurion looked surprised, but he unstrapped his sword and handed it in its sheath to the horseman to his right.

Anna slipped off the cart and snuck into the shadows along the edge of the woods. She made her way quietly toward the men.

Her father was leaning against a tree, his face set in frustration. She knew that look.

The centurion was standing ramrod straight.

"You can't leave," he was saying. "We all swore an oath to stay with the army."

"I didn't break my oath first," her father said sharply.

"An oath is an oath," said the centurion, barely moving a muscle. "You know me, Gorlois. I don't love Uter any more than you do. But if you leave us—wearing that—" he said, gesturing at her father's legionary armour, "then what will those half-naked barbarians make of their own oaths? There goes the whole war."

Anna could hear the man's discomfort. As if he hated being the one to say it. But it was about honour. Honour was what made men better than they were. Without honour, a man was nothing. With honour, he sometimes had to do things he hated.

Her father's voice was edgy. "Don't talk to me about honour. I could have called him out. That would have been the honourable thing to do."

“Why didn’t you?” asked the centurion.

“You tell me,” Gorlois said. It was his habit, making you argue his side for him.

“The war against the Saxons,” said the centurion.

“Uter or I would be lying on the ground dead. Maybe both of us,” said Gorlois. “He has a gift. People like him. Hades and Tartarus, I used to like him. He knows how to fight a war. We’ve forgotten that. We need that.”

“Then come back. My commander and the others will make sure he leaves your wife alone.”

Anna could see that her father was thinking about it, trying to find a way to agree. “One day I would find myself and my men accidentally cut off somewhere and massacred, while Uter wins a great victory and goes to console my wife.”

“He wouldn’t do that.”

“You wouldn’t do that. But him? It’s better if I just take myself—and her—out of the equation.”

The centurion frowned, never losing his rigid bearing. “He’ll order us to pursue you.”


“Then he’s violating his oath to everyone.”

“I’m telling you what he’ll do. And some of the tribes will come along with him. They don’t care who they plunder.”

Anna found herself shivering. Her father was nodding sadly, with that bull-like stubbornness she knew meant he would not turn aside. Something horrible was going to happen. And neither of these men would do anything to stop it.

“What would you do? If it were your wife?” her father said.

“I would have killed him on the spot. That’s honour,” said the centurion. “But you have a reputation for being wiser than the rest of us.”



“Maybe that’s my downfall,” said Gorlois. “Go back to your commander. If he’s as good a man as you, he won’t come after me. Maybe no one will follow Uter except his own men, and he’ll come to his senses.”

The centurion frowned. He saluted again, and headed back down to his horse.

Anna’s father sat down. She could see how weary he was. Anna had a tremendous urge to run to him and kiss him and make him laugh. But she was cold with dread, and she couldn’t take a step in his direction.

When she could move again, she ran back to the carts. Her father got the men back on the march before the centurion had even disappeared into the distance.

