Dear Reader,

I wonder what you have heard of the British rebel queen, Boudicca? She is famous for taking on the might of the Roman Empire in the first century and – almost – liberating the Britons from colonial rule. Boudicca's rebellion was profoundly shocking to Rome, not only because she won a string of devastating victories, but because she was a *woman*.

As a Londoner, I have always been fascinated by her monumental, belligerent statue which stands on Westminster Bridge, facing the Houses of Parliament. One of its peculiarities is that it looks as if Boudicca is about to drive her war chariot straight at the heart of the British government, in an attack upon her own. On reflection this is more fitting than it first seems. In her rebellion against Roman rule, Boudicca sacked London, burning the city to ash. Many Britons will have been killed in that assault, the line between colonised and coloniser blurred by ties of marriage, trade and proximity. The statue's position is a reminder that Boudicca's resistance to foreign invasion is not always a simple tale of villains and victims.

Another peculiarity of the statue is that the number of people you can see changes depending on the angle from which you view it. Standing behind the queen are two young women. They are Boudicca's daughters, who both played a key role in the revolt yet were left unnamed by Roman historians. It is their unknown story which has long fascinated me. What might it have been like to be Boudicca's daughter? And what would it have meant to survive her?

This book is my answer to those questions. I want to tell you the story of Boudicca's eldest daughter, who I have named Solina, a woman who lived in revolutionary times and faced extraordinarily challenging choices. I invite you to ride with her through Britain's ancient forests and to travel to Rome, walking the glittering – yet deadly – corridors of the Emperor Nero's palaces. Sometimes I will change the angle from which you see Solina's story, shifting the focus to her mother Boudicca or to Paulinus, the Roman general who fought them both. All three characters inhabit a world that is morally grey, where virtue must be abandoned if you are to survive. There are no straightforward heroes or villains in these pages; it is for each reader to decide where they stand.

Solina's time was radically different to ours in so many of its customs and attitudes, but human nature is less changeable. The desire for freedom, for love, for justice, for vengeance are all impulses the ancients felt too. And like us, sometimes these impulses would have been in conflict within a person's heart. On her journey, Solina comes to realise that both revenge and redemption exact their own cost. I wonder, reading this story, which you might choose?

I am immensely grateful to you for supporting my book – and I hope you enjoy Solina's adventures.



BOUDICCA'S DAUGHTER

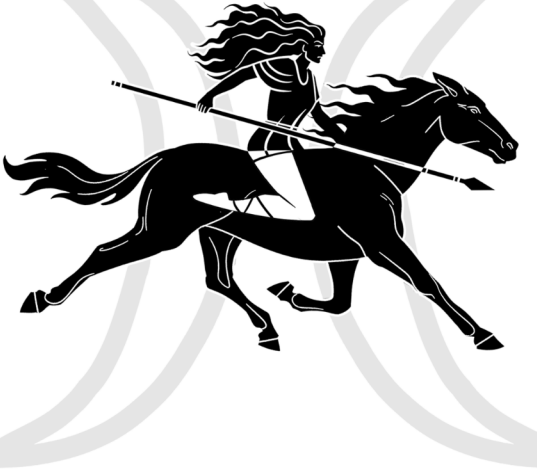


ALSO BY ELODIE HARPER

THE WOLF DEN TRILOGY

The Wolf Den
The House with the Golden Door
The Temple of Fortuna

BOUDICCA'S DAUGHTER



ELODIE HARPER

HEAD of ZEUS

An Apollo Book

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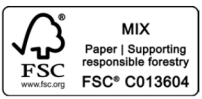
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For Juliet, Fiercest of Friends and
Queen of the Literary Agents

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Elodie Harper

Dramatis Personae

Iceni

Solina – Boudicca's daughter
Catia (Boudicca) – Solina's mother, a warrior
Prasutagus – Solina's father, Druid and client king to Rome
Bellenia – Solina's sister
Riomanda – Solina's aunt, a warrior
Isarninus – a warrior
Diseta – distant cousin to Catia
Caratacus – leader of an earlier failed uprising against Rome
Vatiaucus – a warrior, Solina's ex-lover
Cunominus – Catia's younger brother; Riomanda's husband
Aesu – Solina's first cousin on her father's side
Cartimandua – Queen of the Brigantes
Vassura – Aesu's mother, sister of Prasutagus
Senovara – a child (known as Britannica in the Wolf Den trilogy)
Mandubracius – Catia's chariot driver
Lais – a Greek woman in London
Saenu – Druid, advisor to Vassura
Andraste – Iceni Goddess of the tribe
Esus – God of rivers and the rising sun
Epona – Goddess of horses, moon and souls. Bride of Esus
Taranis – God of the Sky and Time

Rome

Gaius Suetonius Paulinus – Legate of Britannia
Agricola – Paulinus's tribune
Pliny – Paulinus's dearest friend in Rome (the 'Elder' Pliny of historical record – the same Pliny who appears as a character in the Wolf Den trilogy)
Fulvia – Paulinus's wife (deceased)
Catus Decianus – Procurator of Britannia
Matu – Paulinus's translator, Catuvellauni tribe
Alpinus Classicianus – Britannia's new procurator, from Gaul
Cosmus – Paulinus's steward in Rome
Thais – Paulinus's former mistress
Julia Pacata – Alpinus's wife
King Togidubnus – client king of the Atrebates
Nero – Roman Emperor
Tigellinus – head of Nero's Praetorian Guard
Octavia – Nero's first wife
Poppaea Sabina – Nero's second wife
Claudia Augusta – Nero and Poppaea's infant daughter
Otho – Poppaea's former husband, later Emperor
Ressona – a Briganti slave girl
Corbulo – a Roman general
Secundus – Pliny's steward
Alexios – a Greek slave boy
Lucan – a poet, author of *Pharsalia*
Polla – Lucan's wife
Vespasian – Paulinus's old friend, later Emperor
Antonia Caenis – Vespasian's lover
Henna – a German slave girl
Frida – a German slave girl
Messalina – Nero's mistress
Fabius – a slave boy
Calpurnius Piso – a Roman senator
Vestinus – a consul, husband of Messalina
Vitellius – former consul, later Emperor
Aulus – steward at Paulinus's estate in Pisaurum
Tita – Aulus's wife
Galba – Roman general, later Emperor

Silvanus – Polla's steward
Gaius – an unruly soldier
Verania – widow of Galba's appointed heir Licinianus
Caecina – Vitellius's general
Camilla – Italy's mythical warrior queen
Atalanta – a mythical female warrior from Greek legend
Mars – Roman God of War
Diana – Roman Goddess of the Hunt, the Moon and Childbirth
Salus – Roman Goddess of Safety
Nortia – Etruscan Goddess of Fate

Note on Place Names

I have used the Latin names for Colchester (Camulodunum), St Albans (Verulamium), Lyon (Lugdunum) and Pesaro (Pisaurum) but not for London or Rome. Both capitals have loomed so large in Western history, and their current names are so familiar, I felt Latinising either would be a distraction. In the case of London in particular (and perhaps because I am a Londoner), I found it useful to remember that while the city appears here as a beleaguered colony, eventually it would become the nerve centre of one of the world's most aggressive colonisers. The meaning of a name shifts, the ebb and flow of history never ceases, and none of London's identities proved permanent, yet traces of them all still lie on the shores of the Dark River at the city's heart.

"Virtue is incompatible with absolute power. He who is ashamed to commit cruelty must always fear it."

Lucan, *Pharsalia*

Beginning

Her name is rarely spoken, and yet I know people remember. Her shadow lies across me still.

It is there in the suspicion I see in men's eyes, in the flicker of their fear.

Boudicca.

I remember when that one word had the power to drown out every other sound, when the ground shook with it, the raised voices of thousands, chanting her victory. She terrified me, the way she fought, lit by the rage which consumed her, and yet I could not look away. Not even when she burned the temple, when the air was thick with smoke and the screams of those trapped inside.

A monster. That's what they called her. And perhaps she was.

But I have other, earlier memories. The lightness of her laugh, the way she spun when she danced, so fast nobody could ever catch her. How she crouched down to meet a

child's eyes, and the warmth of her smile, when all you wanted was the sun brought by her presence.

This is the story I want to tell you. About the time before she was Boudicca.

When she was a woman called Catia.

When she was my mother.

Part One

Virago

"They do not distinguish between the sexes when choosing commanders."

Tacitus on the Britons' military tactics,
Agricola

"All this ruin was brought upon the Romans by a woman, a fact which in itself caused them the greatest shame."

Cassius Dio on Boudicca's rebellion,
History of Rome

1

Solina



The twisted branches flash past, swift as shadows, yet solid as spears. I don't have time to feel afraid of falling or being struck by deadly low-hanging trees. Instead, I cling to Tan's mane, my heartbeat racing to the thunder of his footfall. A horse gallops faster than thought, and nothing exists for me but the exhilaration of his speed. The force of it hits me like fire, filling me with joy. Around us the wild wood, stripped of its leaves, glows green from the moss which rolls over waves of roots and stone in a luminous sea. Then Bellenia's scream rings out, startling Tan, sending the last of the birds scattering. I turn in the direction of her cry. My sister has managed to overtake me, weaving dangerously through a narrow gap in the woods, more reckless than I would ever dare to be. Before I can urge Tan to go faster, Bellenia's horse Kintu shoots onto the path in front, kicking up clods of earth, blackening the way. I don't have the guts to try and shoulder her aside – either of us could be snared in a savage tangle of roots and whip-like boughs. Anger fills my heart as my vision shrinks to Kintu's powerful haunches, the dark rope of his tail, the gold of my sister's blonde hair.

White sky burns through the thinning trees, the green

glow fading, then we burst out onto the plain. Open space excites Tan, giving him another burst of speed. Bellenia is ahead but not out of reach. I shout at my horse, encouraging him to gallop faster, but Kintu is still swifter, and the two waiting figures grow more solid in the distance. Beyond them the target also looms, the curved husk of a wide, blackened log, upended in the boggy ground: a dark imitation of a Roman invader. I see Bellenia hold out her spear, poised, an image of grace before she throws. Iron sinks into bark and she wheels off, screaming in triumph. I raise my own arm, bracing against the weight of the weapon, urging Tan to gallop directly at the target. He shears off at the last minute, but I ride him so close I hit the chalk daubed at its heart.

Unlike my sister, I canter towards Riomanda and our mother in silence. They sit tall on their horses, watching. Tan's breathing is heavy, sweat lathered into foam at his sides, his coat drenched. Bellenia is already dismounted, weapon drawn, leaving Kintu untethered, the horse's sides heaving like bellows. I leave Tan, drawing the weighted wooden sword from my back. Not a real weapon but still banned, still reason enough to train out here, where the grey fingers of the sea reach into the land, and no spies will watch us.

"The aim is to disarm," Riomanda says, raising her voice over the wind.

I glance over at Riomanda and my mother, sisters by marriage and two of the most formidable warriors of the Wolf Tribe. Rome has forbidden the Iceni from bearing arms, but my mother once told us this is like commanding the sun not to rise. She has brought my sister and me here to learn how to fight, just as she and Riomanda once learned, tracing the thread of their knowledge back through time to the god of our people, Andraste. Riomanda's dark hair is

tied in a knot of plaits, her face hard, like the one shaped in metal on the hilt of her knife. My mother, Catia, is cloaked in a wolf pelt, its fur grey as winter clouds. Her eyes are on Bellenia. As always.

My sister's cheeks are flushed, eyes bright with excitement as she waits for me. We circle each other. She strikes first, as I knew she would. The force of her blow jars up my arm, but I keep hold of my sword. Bellenia begins to shout, aggression transforming her beautiful face, making her look as vicious as the carved head of a carnyx.

"You are slower than a badger, Solina! Even if I cut off one of Kintu's legs, I would still beat you!"

I circle her, dodging another blow.

"Are you silent like a Roman?" she taunts. "Perhaps you are not Iceni at all."

I say nothing, knowing that will enrage her more, and keep my eyes on her blade. The next time she hits out, I dodge in anticipation, and she lurches forward. Before she can recover her balance, I knock her over, sending her sprawling into the mud. Then I pounce, resting one boot on her stomach, the other on her weapon.

"Who's slow now?"

"You sneaky piece of shit!" she exclaims, angrily wiping the mud from her trousers as I help her to her feet. Then she catches my eye and laughs.

"I'm glad you both find fighting so amusing." Riomanda's voice is ice. "Solina, that is a poor way to win, without daring to strike a single blow. Bellenia, if you fight like a fool, you will fall like one."

I look over at our mother. She says nothing, which is even more ominous. Eyes narrowed, she dismounts, murmuring something to Riomanda as she hands over the reins of her horse. She walks over to Bellenia.

"Raise your weapon." My sister swiftly obeys. "You strike well but you lack sense," she continues, drawing a wooden weapon from her own back. "Fight me now, without signalling where you will hit."

I watch them both, envy burning in my chest. Nobody can handle a sword like our mother, not even Riomanda. Yet, somehow, when Bellenia faces her, my sister draws strength from the encounter rather than falling to pieces as I do. I watch my sister's thrusts and parries grow bolder and know how much pride our mother must feel; I know exactly why she will never love me as much as she loves Bellenia.

They end their bout. My sister did not manage to score a hit, but still, she came close. Our mother's face is lit by an affectionate smile. "Better," she says.

I brace myself, knowing it is now my turn. "Solina." My mother turns to me. "You fight like a coward. In silence. Without striking a blow."

The unfairness stings. "And yet I just won."

"You have no fire," she replies. "How would you survive in battle?"

I hit out in rage. She blocks my impulsive blow with ease, then rains down on me, just as she did with Bellenia. But while this inspired my sister to fight back, it only makes me shrink, my moves becoming ever more defensive.

"Do you have no insults?" my mother shouts. "Where's your passion? Where's your fury? What sort of warrior comes to battle like a mouse?"

"*Quasi tuba inanis!*" I scream back, swinging the sword at her, nearly scoring a hit. I see her face flush red – not at the words, which she would not understand, but because I have spoken in Latin. She knocks the sword from my grasp as if it were a reed, then slaps me across the face.

"Never speak their tongue to your own with a weapon in your hand," she says.

Shame floods through me, scalding my cheeks. Latin is the language of our enemy, the language used by the centurion who murdered Riomanda's brother. I want to apologise but cannot bring myself to do it. My mother's face hardens at my lack of remorse, then she turns her back. I stare after her, watch her swing herself into the saddle, then startle at an unexpected punch to my arm. It is my sister.

"Why would you do that?" Bellenia hisses, her voice low. "How could you shout at her in Latin? Like one of *them*. What did you even say? It sounded so ugly."

"You would know what I said if you had paid *any* attention to our father's lessons!" I snap back. "It was nothing that bad, anyway. I just told her she sounded like an empty trumpet."

Bellenia can't help snorting. "That's a pathetic insult. Just as well nobody understood."

I roll my eyes, but I'm grateful to her for lightening the mood. Tan edges away from me when I go to fetch him, tired from galloping through the woods, but I seize him by the reins. He lets out a long, heavy sigh when I swing myself up onto his back, sounding like a phlegmy old man. Bellenia laughs.

"Tan sounds ready for battle."

I wallop Tan on the backside so that he lurches towards my sister, who trots off with a shriek. I laugh, then look nervously towards our mother and aunt, who have already set off. They do not turn around.

We ride together across the marshland, back towards the Town of the Wolf, through the northernmost edge of Iceni territory. Our mother sets the pace, picking out the path over the wooden causeways, guiding us through the treacherous,

watery ground. It is not long past midday and yet the sky has a washed-out look, as if the veil to the Otherworld were already thinning. By nightfall it will be no more substantial than the mist creeping over the plains, and the spirits will walk with us. I stare out over the marshes, at the feathered reed beds which stroke the low-lying cloud, and the iron grey of the sea which lies beyond. I think of Esus the river god, squinting to see if I can glimpse one of his birds, the long-legged herons which wade through his waters.

I have long since abandoned hope of meeting Esus himself – though perhaps this year, at the Winter Solstice, one of the gods will finally speak to me. As Solina, the daughter of Druids, I still lack the *sight* to match the meaning of my name. Riding beside me, her golden hair brighter than sunlight, Bellenia looks the very embodiment of her name: *strength*. I glance down at Tan's neck, my heart heavy, ruffling his mane. His coat is white and red, both colours which mark him as a servant of the Otherworld. But Tan has never led me to any gods.

The closer we come to the town, the more marks the landscape shows of the mortal realm. Salterns stretch towards the horizon, and here a few men, women and children bend over pools and smoking fires, extracting white treasure from the bog's briny water. I see a girl grasping a bucket with red chapped hands, and feel thankful to be safely up on my horse instead of toiling in a freezing trench. The Romans pay dearly for our salt: my father told me once that their soldiers even measure their wages in it. *Salarium*. I murmur the foreign word under my breath, feeling its shape.

"What are you mumbling about?" Bellenia demands, always too sharp-eared to miss anything. She has always been this way, my little sister, full of curiosity and mischief.

"Nothing," I say.

"It sounded *foreign*." Like our mother, Bellenia cannot speak Latin. She has no patience for my interest in the Roman settlers who have seeped into our country, embedding themselves in the land like leeches. They invaded when my sister and I were small children, and now I cannot remember life without their shadow, their casual violence and endless theft. We were raised to hate them, and I do. Yet, unlike Bellenia, the invaders also fascinate me. Our father was gifted slaves when he agreed to serve Rome, and I became fond of one, a woman named Salvia. But while I sat beside her as a child, encouraged by our father to learn about her language and her gods, Bellenia refused to join me. Salvia is dead now, as is her knowledge.

"It was a prayer to Esus," I say. A lie, but not an unlikely one. Bellenia used to tease me for my love of legends about the handsome river god. So many stories tell of him walking among mortals, as if he were an ordinary warrior, granting gifts to his favourites or inviting them to the Otherworld. I spent years hoping I might find him.

The track becomes a road, marked by wheel ruts, boots and hooves. We pass a cluster of roundhouses surrounded by fields, and a gaggle of foraging children run to the roadside to watch us, firewood clutched to their chests, their faces eager. My mother lays her hand over her heart in greeting, bowing her head as if they were kings. The children grin, nudging each other in delight, making me smile too.

On the vast, flat plains of our kingdom, covered by an even vaster sky, the town is visible long before we reach the gates. It rises above the fields, surrounded by steep earth embankments and wooden walls. Sheep graze up to the edge of the settlement's encircling ditch, and thatched rooftops peek over the ramparts, like sentries keeping watch.

Travellers grow in number the closer we get, a stream of farmers and traders from nearby villages, heading here to celebrate the week-long Feast of Darkness. A few stare at me, giving Tan a wide berth. One old man even makes the sign of the evil eye. His fear doesn't offend me. I know I make an uncanny sight at any time, but especially today. White skin, red hair, eyes dark as a raven's wing. Marked in the colours of the Otherworld, like my horse.

A growing hubbub of human voices drowns out the birdsong. We ride through the deep trench that cuts through the town's defensive ditches and reach the wooden gatehouse. The beast of my mother's people is painted at the top as a mark of respect for the goddess Andraste, giving the place its name: *Town of the Wolf*. I look up as we pass underneath. Seven human heads hang above the wolf's back, some so decayed they have shrivelled like rotten apples. They are the remains of thieves and murderers, staked here as a warning, even though everyone knows we lack the power to punish the worst criminals – hanging a Roman on our gates would be taken as an act of war. Still, my mother says the heads are a reminder to Rome that our patience should not be tested too far. And my father's presence, as Rome's client king, is an effective deterrent from their violence.

Inside the town, clamour and warmth engulf us. Smoke rises from the roundhouses, making the grey sky above shimmer a darker shade of blue, and my spirits rise with them. We weave our way past traders at the gatehouse, men and women jostling to sell baskets woven from marsh-reeds, or clay pots, or fabric. Further into town, grain stores stand on stilts, hovering like herons. Their height offers protection from vermin and damp, though not from Roman tax collectors.

Bellenia and I ride single-file through the milling people,

dogs and pigs, following the loud clanging of metal which marks out the blacksmiths' quarter. This part of town was once the armoury, where people and horses were equipped for war, before it was banned. We pass the forge, where beautiful metal masks sit either side of the door. They are for horses, horned and inlaid with silver. I try to imagine Tan wearing one, how fearsome he would look riding into battle, and picture myself charging over the field like a warrior of legend, as glorious as Esus's bride, Epona. I pat Tan's neck. "Maybe one day," I murmur, as if he might hear my thoughts.

Our home lies at the heart of the town. My mother's family have ruled here for generations, cousins and kin all living in a vast painted roundhouse, its hall big enough to hold hundreds. Today, the clearing outside our home is crowded with visitors who have not only come to celebrate the feast, but also to bring their grievances to my father. I dismount, watching one of the servants lead Tan to the stables, suddenly nervous. I have lived most of my life in the south, with my father's people. The Wolf Tribe are tougher, harder to read, more prone to fighting. More like my mother.

Even though his rule has brought us peace, many here have never forgiven my father for making our kingdom a client state of Rome. My mother resents his choice most of all. She beckons now to Bellenia, who walks beside her into the hall, their hair the same shade of gold, while I follow behind with Riomanda. Dust motes dance in the dimmer light, and our father Prasutagus sits by the red glow of the hearth, pressed close by men and women, the leaders and warriors of surrounding settlements. High above them, carved wolves' heads are shaded by the fire's rising smoke, and the walls glint with the metal of a hundred shields.

Our father rises as he watches us approach, holding out

his hands to our mother. "Catia," he says, embracing her. She draws close to him, resting her forehead to his. He might be king, but everyone watching this performance of unity knows their rule is like a rope, drawing its strength from weaving together the warriors of the north with the Druids of the south.

My parents stand apart, his grey hair at a height with her gold. I try not to notice how much older my father looks. He gestures for me to come closer, laying a hand on my shoulder. "Solina will lead the ceremony tonight," he declares, looking round at our guests. I force myself to ignore my nerves and meet the assembled warriors' eyes with a show of pride, as my parents expect.

"May the gods guide you." The words are spoken by a tall, blond warrior, with a chest as broad as one of the shields on the wall. I recognise him as Isarninus, the leader of a settlement near Andraste's sacred hill. He is the man Bellenia has her eye on.

"I pray they bless the feast," I reply. Even though we are standing near the hearth, the hall feels chill. I fold my arms, not wanting to shiver.

"Your daughters wear warriors' clothes," says another man, dressed in a wolf pelt, his expression as unfriendly as the beast he wears. Bellenia pulls her own cloak closer around her thighs, perhaps hoping to hide the mud stains where she fell. "Yet you have not called for arms against Rome?"

"We still hope for peace," my father answers, not rising to the man's tone.

"They leave *us* no peace," snaps an older woman, deep grooves cut through her weathered face, like wheel ruts in the road. I know her as Diseta, one of my distant cousins. Like my mother, Diseta wanted us to join the rebel Caratacus ten

years ago in his doomed uprising against Rome. I remember Caratacus coming to our home at the City of the Horse, a glorious warrior in a cloak of gold, making promises of freedom. My father refused to help him, to my mother's grief.

"They are demanding money from me, from all my kin," Diseta says. "Roman filth turn up at my home without shame, then the bastards make off with whatever they can grab. Demanding we return loans they never even gave us. Stealing our cattle! Even our men are being kidnapped, forced to fight in *their* armies. Yet we do not fight back to defend ourselves? Why?"

I glance anxiously at my mother, whose hand now rests on Bellenia's shoulder just as our father's rests on mine. Her lips are pursed in a hard line. I know she agrees with Diseta, that she would have us go to war. But she will not say so here. It is more important to give a pretence of unity between herself and my father.

"Diseta, I know they are arrogant," my father says. "I know they demand too much. But we are not enslaved, like the Trinovantes. War would risk the loss of every remaining freedom we have."

"We don't yet have the means to fight them," my mother adds. "Too many have forgotten how. It is a question of timing."

There are nods of agreement at this – my mother is always closer to the mood of her own people. "So that is why they are training." Isarninus gestures at my sister.

"Our daughters have always trained in the old ways," my father says, unwilling to give any quarter. "Nothing has changed."

"Everything is changing," Diseta snaps. "Prasutagus, you have given your life to peace, and we have trusted

your guidance. But that season is ending. You cannot keep Rome at bay forever, their violence grows daily. They are stripping the land like rats in a barn. Their greed will never be satisfied."

"Do not invite the Darkness," my father says, a note of command in his deep voice, a reminder of his divine status as a Druid. "Tonight, of all nights."

"We share your anger." My mother turns to Diseta, whose mouth is already open, ready for a furious retort. "Feast with us tonight. And we will ask the gods to guide us."

At the back of the hall, screened from sight in a chamber under the eaves, Bellenia and I dress for the feast. Through the wicker slats, we can see a few guests still gathered around the hearth, arguing with our father.

"Will Roman soldiers come this far north in winter, do you think?" Bellenia whispers to me. "Surely not with the king here?"

She has voiced my own fear. "Not tonight, they won't," I say, trying to sound less afraid than I feel. "And Diseta would see them all off, anyway."

Bellenia smiles. "She gets more like a forest troll every year."

I can hear one of the maids scolding the children playing knucklebones in the hall, then she is inside the chamber, bringing a bowl of water for us to wash our hands and faces. "Naughty little mice," she says. "Running around, getting in everyone's way." The girl cannot be much older than a child herself, and I remember being her age, wanting to join the adults. "Will you be getting married this year?" she asks, yanking my hair back into plaits. "Imagine all the dancing and feasting!"

"Solina won't be happy unless Esus himself swoops down to claim her," Bellenia teases. "I'm not sure a mortal man will ever be good enough."

"I don't have to find a man of any sort," I say, giving her a withering look. "I will serve the kingdom as a Druid, like father, and marry or not as I please."

"You see." Bellenia smirks. "I told you. She's holding out for Esus, himself. Though failing a god, there's always Vatiaucus." I shove Bellenia, who laughs but then shoves me back, hard, and there's a moment when I know my sister, like me, is thinking of throwing a punch. I picture our mother's fury if we were to be caught brawling and lower my fist.

"Vatiaucus might not even be here," I say unconvincingly.

Last spring, I chose Vatiaucus as a lover, dazzled by the sight of him on horseback, but after a few intoxicating weeks, I realised his body was by far the most interesting thing about him. I managed to disarm the poor man once when we trained together and took this as an excuse to end things – as the king's daughter, I have the right to an unconquered warrior. Now, whenever I see him, Vatiaucus gazes at me with large, sorrowful eyes like a cow stuck in brambles, much to my sister's amusement.

"It's Bellenia you should watch," I say to the serving girl. "She's got her eye on Isarninus."

"The tall one, with the lovely eyes?" the girl exclaims. "What a match that would be! He's blond as a haystack, isn't he? And almost as big." I try not to snort at her ridiculous description.

"He's handsome enough," Bellenia says, with a smug little smile. I roll my eyes. I have no doubt she could claim Isarninus if she wanted. Bellenia has always been more beautiful than me, with our father's fine features, while I take after our mother – tall and striking, but unlikely to

steal a man's heart on sight. Even Vatiaucus used to stare at Bellenia when he was mine. I think of the reassurance Riomanda once gave me. *You have a beauty that grows, an acorn that will become an oak in the soil of the right heart.*

"Perhaps you and Isarninus will dance together tonight!" the maid says to Bellenia. "A shame there are no flowers for your hair. Will you kiss him or take him to bed? I'm sure he couldn't refuse!"

The girl has now lost interest in helping me dress, fluttering around my sister. I wrap myself in the heavy robes I will have to wear for the ceremony later, woven in a shifting pattern of red and white. Horses run around the borders, stitched in gold. I lift my arms, wanting to see the colours of the fabric shimmer. My chest feels tight – although I always stand beside my father at the Feast of Darkness, I have never led the ceremony. He will take over from me after the invocation, but I am unsure I deserve the honour. Father has reassured me there are many ways to be a Druid; some serve through learning, others through visions or prophecy. Yet I still feel crushed by my inability to see beyond the veil, to walk in the Otherworld as he does.

The maid is now gawping, awestruck, at the sparkle of my robes. "Do you think the gods will speak through you?"

I catch Bellenia's eye. My sister sees my fear and steps forward to take my hand. She is always there when it truly matters. "Solina is a gifted Druid," she declares. "She is blessed by the gods. That is why our father chose her to cross to the Otherworld tonight."

I squeeze my sister's hand, hoping she understands the gratitude I cannot express in front of the maid. Bellenia turns and kisses me quickly on the cheek. "The gods will speak to you this evening, Solina," she says. "I feel it in my heart."