

The Mouthy Prince is an adventure story set during the last decades of independent Celtic Britain. As a man, Caradoc will lead the resistance against the Romans, but for now he must escape, survive, and save the girl he loves.

## **The Mouthy Prince**

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# The Mouthy Prince

Book One of the Caradoc Series

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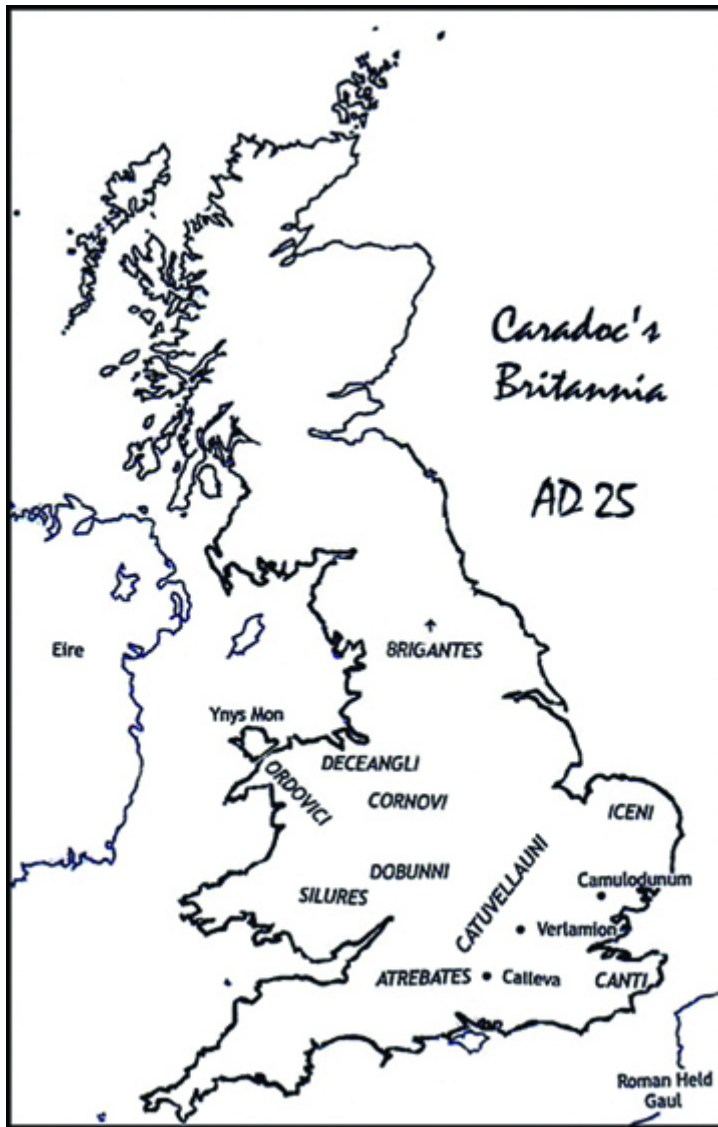
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## *One The Sacrifice*

**H**er screams were unbearable, by the end. I was just an acolyte, well to the back, but the slope we stood upon meant I could see and hear Gwyfina's hysterical cries as her lover's skull was smashed in from behind with an axe. He had already been garroted with a sacred rope and a stick. I could feel the boy next to me trembling and I think I was too – I certainly felt sick. 'Shouldn't she be drugged?' a boy asked softly. Master Drysfal shushed him quiet, but as another desperate roar of grief escaped from Gwyfina my teacher sighed and whispered that the dosage must have been too low. Dark blood poured from the victim's nose and I felt sure Cernos was dead, but Britannios, the chief druid, and other Elders were still holding him upright over the pool as they chanted rhythmically. They were trying to continue as if everything had gone as planned but even I had seen a few of them flick glares in Gwyfina's direction, and several of the female druids were holding her back so tightly it must have hurt. That, I felt sure, was deliberate. Only Britannios had a face unperturbed as stone.

'We honour you, as you give this gift to our land!' he bellowed above her screaming. 'The Gods welcome you, honoured one.'

I could see from the reflection in the pond the head of the 'honoured one' slumped against his chest. He was dead. How this pleased the Gods was beyond my reckoning. Around me everyone repeated Britannios's words, even the youngest acolytes mumbling along with the others, but the disgust I felt kept me silent. As they all came to the last word Britannios and

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the Elders who had been holding the victim steady let go suddenly and he fell into the dark pool with a splash. The Elders all held their arms aloft to the Gods, still as trees. Gwyfina's screams had turned to anguished sobs, and I think even she must have known Cernos was beyond saving. Beneath them the moonlight glistened on the victim's bare back as he partially floated on the surface, buoyed up even in death by the air-sacs of his lungs.

'From here the ceremony mirrors the pattern for a votive offering into a pool or river that you already know.' Drysfal whispered to us all. The Initiates were indeed scattering torn blossoms over the water surface as if it was just a normal night. 'Until the first rays of the sun are glimpsed above the hill – shouldn't be long now, you boys let me know – and then the Mistletoe Bride's throat will be cut with the sacred - '

'What?!'

I had interrupted an Elder, and not in whispers either – dozens of heads whipped round in scorn. Drysfal was used to me being trouble and simply frowned out his annoyance.

'What is it Caradoc?'

'Why is she being sacrificed too?' I had lowered my voice, and tried to twist my alarm into a valid question an acolyte might make of his teacher. 'I mean . . . surely the Gods are already honoured with the gift of a druid Elder?'

Drysfal's face softened a little. 'You are correct – if the victim was just a captive or criminal then it would end there. But in this rite, the even greater sacrifice of one of our own Elders was required. So an extra gift is given, not only to the Gods but to the sacrificed himself, to join his spirit in the shadow world, and be reborn together. Cernos chose Gwyfina.'

I looked over to her, my blood draining to my feet. Gwyfina was shaking with shock still, and held back by the Elders, but she

was not actually fighting to get away. I saw no fear on her face. 'Does she know?' I asked.

'No. Even the most practiced of Elders could feel terror at this moment. The drugs were meant to soften her grief, and help her.'

*Help her ?* How repulsed I was by my master's coldness then. I knew *I* would not stay until my hair was white and I saw all life through a druid's skewed veil. I wondered if anyone there felt for Gwyfina as a living person at all besides myself. Could I stop it? There were at least a hundred druids from all over the isles and beyond, none of them armed with anything more than ceremonial sickles and knives – but then neither was I. I was five rows deep at the back too – even getting close to Gwyfina would be impossible. I looked to the eastern hill, where the sky had already turned from black to deepest blue and was now lightening rose. The female Elders had manhandled Gwyfina over to the pool's edge where Cernos had fallen. Despite my jealousy I felt a pang of pity for her as she reached out for him, before Britannios grabbed her hand back. Her hands were bound behind her with the rope Cernos had been strangled with. I looked again at the east hill – a strip of gold was rising. Britannios raised the knife. 'Great God Belenos welcome your daughter!' he cried. As Britannios pulled back Gwyfina's head her crown of blossom fell into the water. She barely knew me, and could not have known I adored her, but at the last moment her eyes looked into mine. I saw a cry for help, imagined or no. The first rays of the sun escaped the hillside and I, still just a boy, and the worst acolyte of Ynys Mon, began to pray for a way of saving her life.

## ***Two The druids of Ynys Mon, and me***

Cernos was beloved of Gwyfina, not me. I knew that well enough, but since the first time I had seen her, at the festival of Lugh the summer before, I had been smitten in the way only first love can be. She was a Goddess to my eyes, tall and lithe, fine-featured, with hair like honey dripping from a jar. I was too far away during the sacrifices to talk to her – I believe I was in trouble for something or other and Drysfal was keeping me close to hand – but even naïve and lovestruck as I was then I could see she stood closer to Cernos than any of the others, and when they talked together there was a binding affection between them. Almost as soon as I felt love for the first time, I felt the first jealous pangs I ever remember having, and I had not even spoken to her yet.

Gwyfina was just a few years older than me and only recently an Initiate. Cernos I knew slightly better, as he taught some of our classes. At about thirty summers old he was one of the younger Elders, but still twice my age, and he had already been towards the end of his Initiate training when I arrived. Cernos was always rather distant and humourless, it seemed to me, even before I became jealous of him, but I did enjoy his herb-lore teaching more than most of the lessons I had to learn by heart. The main impact he had had on my life, up to that point, was the time that he could not teach us due to being at a grand gathering of the Druid Order, and instead we were taught by one of his young Initiates. I felt I was God-blessed when it was Gwyfina. When I left home I had still been at the stage when most girls seem stupid and annoying, and whilst acolytes at Ynys

Mon we were kept mainly apart, learning and living in small groups with one Elder most of the time. My friends among the other acolytes my age had left their homes when they were even younger than me and were probably even less worldly. If any of my friends were as spellbound by Gwyfina as I was that first lesson, I never knew. She was very earnest, and not the slightest embarrassed about speaking before a group of younger boys she had never taught before, and even if I hadn't been in awe of her I don't think I would have given her any trouble at all. Indeed I think it is possible that she had been warned about me. All the harder questions seemed, unfairly I felt, to be aimed at me.

'So, Caradoc, can you give us any examples of summer herbs to use on wounds?'

I had to scramble quickly. 'Um – yarrow.' She nodded. Everyone knew that. 'And herb-robert . . . .' She nodded again and motioned for more. 'Silverweed?'

'Good, yes. Silverweed is also useful for cuts that have become inflamed. And would you use the herb-robert to heal the wound or clean it?'

Again the cold but beautiful green eyes were looking straight at me. Thankfully I knew the answer. 'Clean it. I would infuse it in hot water then strain it.'

'Good.'

She seemed surprised. We were all sent off to the wood margins to look for herbs to prepare for practice, and suddenly I was the best student you can imagine – all in an effort to make her smile at me. It didn't work. Nevertheless I looked forward to every lesson with Gwyfina so that each day in between dragged like a bag caught round your ankles until that one afternoon in her glowing presence. When Cernos came back and took the lessons again I drifted back to my old moody self, but I was too embarrassed to admit to anyone why. My only chance to see Gwyfina after that was at the gatherings, and then from a

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distance. That autumn and winter I always tried to get a place with a view of her at every meeting of the whole order. At the Samhain festival I had managed to talk to her a little, away from the others, but it was just about my training and nothing she wouldn't have said to any other acolyte. Not once did she ever give me any encouragement.

The day the druids from Gaul came had been particularly wounding to me, as Gwyfina began distributing refreshments to them and tending their sore feet. Honestly I had no desire to do this myself but she had asked other acolytes to help, completely passing over me. I remember her looking about us all, to choose, and I responded with what was – I hoped – my most charming smile. She quickly looked elsewhere. Hurt, and peeved, I gave old Drysfal the slip and went off into the woods by myself. I did this quite a bit at all times of the year, not so much out of a deliberate act of defiance but just to get a bit of time alone. I would hunt and fish if I could, to supplement the gruelly weedy dregs we acolytes were given. I had started life on good Catuvellauni wheat and missed it! I was on my way back after a snack of roast trout and feeling a bit better when my friend Gorfan found me.

'Caradoc! Where have you been?!' He was panting from having run instead of solemnly walking for once. 'Drysfal is furious.'

'Then the sun must have risen in the east.'

He looked back blankly.

'Old Oak-Apple is *always* furious with me.'

'I've been looking for ages, you'll get *me* a hiding too.' Gorfan was always more obedient than me, but nevertheless he was my friend, and he knew I always took the blame onto myself if we were caught so I didn't set much store by his protest. He was Ordovici, and my mother had been Ordovici, so we had worked out that in some roundabout-winding honeysuckle-twine way we

were kin. I suppose really he followed me about more like a faithful dog than a true friendship of equals but many childhood friendships are like that, I have seen.

'I was just in the woods, getting away from camp for a while. Were you seen?'

'No – well, I don't think so.'

'What do you mean?'

'Britannios and one of the Gaulish druids came near but I hid until they'd passed.' The light was fading – it was still only early spring – and Gorfán was struggling to keep up with me in the tangled undergrowth. 'I heard a bit of what they were saying. They mentioned your Father.'

I hadn't seen any of my family in years and always feared for bad news. 'What about him?'

Gorfán looked up at me apologetically. 'Something about the Romans – they were too far.'

I was panic-stricken by that, and irritated by Gorfán's failure, though I tried not to show it. Despite being penned up with these druids for three years I would never forget I was a king's son. My great ancestor Casvallonos had fought the Romans when they first came to our shores, and they hadn't stayed long. No doubt to them even to set foot on Britannia was a great feat given their useless buckets of boats were smashed to firewood by our weather before the moon was full again. The Elders here say our druid forebears deliberately brought down the storms and raised the seas – I had asked how they did it but no-one would answer me. Caesar's army *had* wounded us, even I admit that, but then they just as suddenly went back. They were like flies though – every summer brings more – and Gaul was already over-run with them. More and more druids were seeking sanctuary at our shores, each of them sure that our lands would be next. Several generations had passed since the Romans had come and gone though and I had always known my father to keep

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an uneasy peace with them. 'Never antagonize a wasp,' he used to say, 'Either kill it or let it be', and most of the time he tolerated them. He had even sent my eldest brother off to their capital Rome to learn their ways. Nevertheless he had watched their plottings and back-stabbings from afar and taken advantage every time they seemed weak. Support from Rome hadn't helped our neighbours the Trinovantes when Father set upon adding their lands to ours. I myself was born in what had been the Trinovantes capital at Camulodunum, and was now ours. Camulos the God of War it seemed favoured us, and the Romans weren't so friendly with their one time 'ally' the Trinovantes to do anything about it. When I heard Gorfán's words it struck me that my father might have stirred up the wasps' nest after all.

'Where were they going?' I asked, an idea already forming in my mind.

'Towards the old bothy as far as I could tell.'

The old bothy had been a house once I think, but by then it was where the lay-folk of Mon kept their seed-corn. We had sheltered there once ourselves when a cloudburst struck our lesson.

'We could get there ahead of them I think, if we run, and listen to what they say.'

Gorfán's face was unsurprisingly swept with fear. 'You mean *spy* on them?'

'If Britannios was ever likely to tell me the news of my father any other way there would be no need.'

Gorfán digested that logic well enough and set off at a run behind me. It wasn't easy in the dark and with fallen branches to trip us. We could see better once out of the woods but we must have showed up against the moonlit sky far too well. My gamble was on the fact that Britannios and his companion were old and slow and wouldn't suspect anyone would be out here, and at least Gorfán and I were in our everyday black robes. Britannios as

chief druid of the isle only ever wore the ceremonial white. As we got within sight of the bothy he stood out against the dark like a lamp. The old midden was just yards from the bothy and I pulled Gorfán down behind it.

'We are nearer.' I whispered. 'But they mustn't see us. From here drop down and crawl on your elbows - ' He looked bewildered. 'Just follow me.' We scrambled the last few yards in this way and made it to the building before Britannios and the Gaul were close to the door. It was cold and I had gambled upon them going in to shelter, while Gorfán and I could listen through the cracks in the wattle wall behind. Thankfully I was right. We were safely hidden by the time the two men had gone in and lit a torch. I could hear shuffling and I guessed they were moving sheepskins about to sit upon.

'I'm sorry to bring you out this far,' Britannios was saying, 'But I need to know the worst before the whole order is informed. No-one can hear us here.' Gorfán shot me a furious look at that. I decided he was probably just cold and sat upon a nettle, and chose to ignore it. 'The Elders already suspect we will go the way of Gaul.'

I heard the other man sigh. 'If these isles are taken then the Gods have abandoned us – there is no-where else to flee to. My homeland is lost.' No wonder they had come out here in the cold – the usual line meted out to us acolytes, and the lay-folk, was that the Gods were waiting for the right time to purge the legions from Gaul forever. 'We have to conduct our sacred duties in hiding – it is a mockery.'

'Parsix, every time we receive a druid escaped from Gaul they tell of sacrilege and cruelty at the hands of the Romans. It is no shame to protect oneself.'

I could hear Parsix's voice shaking as he told Britannios of what happened. They had gathered intelligence that the legions were encamped for the winter, so the Gaulish druids had taken

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the risk of holding the Imbolc festival, albeit deep in their forests where most of the Romans feared to come, but they were followed. Parsix believed it was their sacred grove they wanted to hunt out even more than the druids themselves. The Romans brought swords and axes, and every last oak was hacked and burned before the Gauls' eyes whilst knives were held to their throats. 'Only when every last branch was on the pyres did they start to murder us. They started with the women – ' Parsix's voice cracked. I had never heard an Elder cry before. He took a few moments to speak again. 'And finally they slit the throats of my acolytes, so I had to watch as the land ran with the blood of my own students. No mercy was shown, not even for the very young.'

We could hear Parsix sobbing then, and I felt my own throat tighten. I imagined an attack on our own forces at Mon – old people, acolytes, many of them just young children – we would be slaughtered like sheep. By my side Gorfán was crying too, and I regretted dragging him into this. I had heard nothing of my father and upset my friend, but I knew I couldn't send him back to camp now lest we be found.

'Thank the Gods you were spared.' Britannios was saying.

I could hear a sneer in his voice as Parsix described how he was to be executed publicly, back in their town, as a rebel leader. 'It seems the Roman laws require 'just' wars, and abhor the cold-blooded killing of women and children, so these outrages are done in secret.' he mocked, his voice still twisted. Parsix believed if he *had* reached the town then he would have died, but the soldiers bringing him were ambushed by a party of loyal warriors on the road. In the carnage the legionaries took their eye off Parsix and he was spirited away. He disguised himself as a lay-man and took passage on a merchant ship here to Britannia.

'Many have done the same, my friend. We will welcome all until the glorious day you shall see your homeland free again.' Britannios soothed.

Parsix just sighed. What Britannios had said was a stock phrase and he probably knew it too. 'Only if the infection doesn't fester here – what I saw among the Atrebates was not good.'

Britannios murmured assent. 'We have been watching them for some time.'

The ship Parsix had taken was laden with wine meant for the Atrebates chief, so he made his way to him though even a Gaul knew Veriko was friendly with the Romans. Parsix thought his status as a druid Elder would accord him a warm welcome even if the guest-laws did not. He was wrong – Veriko had completely gone over to them.

'I heard that he has Romans living at his court now and calls himself *REX* – their word for king – despite his 'kingdom' being so small.' Britannios scorned.

'Yes – it felt as if there were as many Romans as his own people at his court. His warriors have their help fighting the Catuvellauni – Veriko has Roman artisans making weapons for him, and Roman mercenaries as a bodyguard. They sit discussing warcraft as if Rome never lost a battle.'

'Yet the Catuvellauni gain ground?'

I held my breath.

Parsix laughed. 'They do – Epaticos is eating up Veriko's kingdom like a dog does meat.' I had to keep my joy to myself or risk being discovered, but it was a struggle. I wanted to slap Gorfan on the back and run about. My uncle is victorious! 'While I was there, Epaticos launched another attack. Veriko held on despite more losses but it can't be long now.'

'Did you meet their chief druid?' Britannios asked. 'We fear for her.'

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'I believe I owe my life to her.' When the Roman mercenaries guessed Parsix was not only a Gaul but a druid they were waiting for a sly chance to kill him. 'At a meal one of them drew his finger along his throat and pointed at me and Veriko *laughed.*' he said and Britannios snorted in disgust. 'Atrebatii sheltered me. She has suffered many humiliations at Veriko's hands. He has listened to his bodyguard's disgusting talk on women and druids and does not fear punishment from the Gods if he hurts her.' Parsix sighed.

'Her influence over him should have been stronger, it is not right for a druid Elder to be weakened like this.' Britannios said. I had never met the woman and yet I nettled – could one person, even a druid Elder, turn a tide? Britannios asked too much, I think, from the distance of Ynys Mon. 'Do you know her plans?'

'When I left to come here she helped me. She said she would flee to Epaticos if she can get away unassaulted.'

'Gods protect her.' Britannios prayed. 'And Epaticos.' he added. I silently prayed along with him.

'We all hope for the fall of Veriko,' Parsix agreed. 'But what if Epaticos does win? Don't you worry that Veriko will ask *more* help of Rome?'

Britannios sighed. 'He probably will, if he lives, but we all know they do not always answer. Cunobelin knew what he risked when he sent his brother into battle.' I was glad Britannios thought my father wise, though I would expect nothing less. 'Whether they win or lose, we shall have to show the Atrebatii people that Veriko has done evil to the Gods in disrespecting the Order.'

Parsix murmured assent. 'The druid dead of my homeland have yet to be honoured properly also. What do you suggest?'

There was silence a moment, and I imagined Britannios tugging his beard as he did in astronomy teachings when we asked a question he could not – or would not – answer. 'For now,

my friend, let us go back to camp for supper. We shall discuss this further with the rest of the Order.' Quite how Britannios ever became the chief druid of our mighty isle – or anywhere, frankly – when he so indecisive was lost to me even as a boy. They opened the door and we heard it creak. Gorfán looked at me and started to fidget but I hastily motioned him to remain still – we needed to let them get well away before we moved ourselves.

Neither Gorfán nor I got any supper that night, as punishment for going missing, and endured a livid talk from Drysfal to add to our miseries. Our master was distracted though, and the feared-for beating we managed to miss. It would have been far worse if he had known we had listened in on Britannios's talk with the Gaul.

The next morning was bright and cold, all the more so because we were hungry, and it was a relief to find that all teaching was canceled while the Elders held council. I would have gone off to hunt but Drysfal set me doing chores all morning before he joined the others. The sun was on the wane when we were all herded to the grove to hear Britannios speak. Given all Gorfán and I had heard the night before I half expected to hear some plan to fight the Romans, perhaps some intention to rescue Atrebati from Veriko and bring her to Mon . . . I was to be disappointed. When Britannios did speak after the usual processing sunwise about the wooden god was done, it was all symbols and mystery. I determined to pester Drysfal for news.

One of the Initiates led Drysfal back to our part of camp, and he seemed even older than usual.

'Welcome back master, I have done all you asked.'

Drysfal sat down heavily. 'Hah! I'll believe it when the Gods walk among us.' He started to rub his left knee that often gave him pain. Even a bee-sting didn't help much any more, and

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besides it was too early in the year. 'Get me a good helping of the porridge will you?'

As I had been left the cooking there was stew and dumplings for once. 'It's stew, master.'

'What is it a feast day? Is there some deity whose festival I have impiously missed in all my forty years a druid?'

This was not going well, I didn't seem likely to get much out of him at this rate. 'I thought you would want us all to celebrate the deliverance of our Gaulish fellows from the Roman menace, master.'

After a heartbeat's stunned silence he laughed bitterly. 'Well I suppose we may as well all enjoy our food while we can. At least it's a good stew. A whole morning of listening to bad news deserves a good dinner.'

'Is there any plan to attack the Romans who destroy the Gaulish groves? Or punish Veriko of the Atrebatas?'

Drysfal sucked in his breath. 'How do you know all of this?!'

I mentally kicked myself. My tongue and brain were not always brothers in arms. 'I heard some Initiates talking while I gathered fresh stuffing for your bed roll, master.'

'Why do I not believe a word of your snakeish tongue Caradoc?' I put on my innocent face, for all the good it did considering his blindness. He sighed. 'No. The plan – which I am *not* free to blab of to *you* – is more a case of strengthening our own cause with the Gods help.' I wanted to ask more questions but he rested a hand heavily on my shoulder and shushed me quiet. 'You will all find out soon enough.' This is always a most unsatisfactory answer to any young mind. 'And I think your good kinsman Epaticos will 'punish' Veriko, as you have it, soon enough too.'

I slept like a rock that night, and when one of the Initiates shook my shoulder to wake me before dawn it was bleary eyed I

followed him and everyone else to the gathering place. Plenty of people looked as sleepy as me, but we all lit our torches unprotesting and chanted the Gods names as we processed three times sunwise about the wooden god. There had been animal sacrifices the day before, and now Initiates brought the bronze bowls of blood to throw upon the earth and around the idol to sanctify the ground. Only when they were done and the ritual chants had been sung nine times did Britannios come to the circle's centre, with Parsix the Gaul next to him.

'It has been three generations since your ancestors first repelled the Romans from these sacred isles,' Parsix began. 'But Gaul is lost to them, and we have word that once again the legions of Rome are looking to your shores. Tiberius, the new Caesar, covets the power and wealth of we druids and demands the extinction, the annihilation, of our Order.' He had prepared this speech and did not break down as before, but I could see the pain in his face. 'A thousand years of devotion were obliterated in one night. The sacred grove of my ancestors is wood ash, the blood of my acolytes stains the ground, the spirits of my murdered brethren are scattered to the winds in horror.'

Heads were bowed in grief at this sacrilege and I heard people mutter curses upon the Romans, for all the good it did.

Britannios stepped to the fore. 'We in Britannia are only as safe in our sacred isles as the Gods keep us,' he began, 'We have sacrificed a raven, a boar and a calf to consult the entrails as to our path ahead. All three have the same message for us.' I did not like the way he paused, it was more like a bard entertaining a household than a war-leader offering a plan. 'The Gods demand a Sacrifice! A devoted one! One of our own to guide the way!'

All the Elders were lined up behind him, including Drysfal, so although a ripple of concern ran through us acolytes we had no-one to ask what exactly he meant by 'our own'. A Briton? The criminals executed as sacrifices were Britons and he had never

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called them 'ours'. 'What does he mean?' Gorfán whispered. I wasn't sure. Veriko, maybe? That would make sense if the Order wanted to punish him for his infringements, and make an example of him, but they would have to catch him first. I would rather my uncle just killed him outright in battle and got the glory for it. I was thinking too practically as usual.

'One of our own Elders will meet the Gods at Beltane, and call upon their justice for our slaughtered brethren, our despoiled sanctuaries, our conquered lands. Each of the three divinations has pointed to this.'

Britannios was passed a large flat loaf. There is always a burnt patch, like a thumb-print, as if the Gods take their offering whether you give it or no, and this was no different. As he broke the bread apart he made sure the burnt patch was not split in two.

'The mark of the God is only on one piece. Whoever picks it is the Honoured One.'

We watched with caught breath as each of the Elders passed the skin bag and took their lot. We knew all of them, as teachers and leaders of our way of life. Now one of them would willingly take the place of a captive or criminal this Beltane night. My eyes flew to my old master, ninth in line, his hands ready because he could not see how far the bag was, and I felt my heart jump with fear for his sake. I had treated Drysfal with little respect, I often ran away from him and talked back and mimicked him for the entertainment of the others. Once he caught me doing an impression of his snoring and I got slapped round the ears for it, but Drysfal had tolerated me when none of the other Elders could, and I sort of liked him. When it came to his turn to draw his lot I dreaded seeing him with the burnt piece. 'Belenos, Maonos, Cernunnos, Epona,' I prayed, 'Please don't let it be old Drysfal.'

Whether by my prayers or no, Drysfal was spared. Instead the lot fell to Cernos. I watched him carefully as he looked down

at the burnt bread in his hand, expecting just a flicker of natural terror at what was now going to happen to him, but there was none. He was calmer than even a dumb beast can be, and it chilled me. He raised the lot above his head with a shout – smiling, even – and all the others dropped to their knees.

Britannios moved towards him and placed a gold torque around his neck. 'Five nights from now, when our order are gathered for the Beltane feast, it is Cernos who is honoured amongst us to meet the Gods. He will call upon their help for our sakes.' Cernos bowed his head as everyone cheered and staffs were thumped on the ground.

Britannios said something to Cernos in a low voice and Cernos crossed over to the Initiates and took Gwyfina by the hand. I felt a sharp pain in my heart, for then I thought I understood the whole of what was happening – she was to be his bride, for his last days in the mortal lands. Everyone smiled and cheered as if it was a hand-fasting amongst the normal folk, even those who I know now were aware that she was five nights from death too. Gwyfina seemed to think herself a bride like any other, she looked radiant as the sun itself. They walked hand in hand towards the woods whilst the other Initiates made a tunnel with branches of oak and hazel for them, cheering all the while like happy children. I fought back my bitter jealous tears.

I did not see Gwyfina again for the five days Cernos had amongst mortals. A bower was built for them from young branches, apart from the camp, and as food was brought to them they had little reason to come out of it. I was not so young as to be unaware of what they were doing, and I could not tell you exactly what I felt except the more tried not to think of her, the more I thought of her. It was a vile, lonely five days, despite the fact we acolytes were kept busy, preparing for the Beltane feast. From all parts of the Isle and Eire chief druids gathered and I kept an eye

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out for Catuvellaunos, my people's druid, anxious more than ever for a friendly face and news of home, but he rarely came to these things and this year was no exception. By the morning of Beltane Eve I had given up looking for him.

When twilight was upon us we lit the Beltane fires. There were always two at the sacred grove of Mon, one on the left or west of old wood from the winter stockpiles, and the one on the right, east side of specially dried new wood of the Spring. The lay-folk of Mon brought their sheep and cattle and herded the flocks through the fires for blessing, encouraging the skittish animals with willow whips. Once all the flocks were through, the animals that had been sacrificed for the divinations were roasted and the meat distributed to all, and the rough frenzied music of the farming folk was struck up like a war-host of goblins.

At last Gwyfina and Cernos emerged from their seclusion, dressed in robes of fine white wool and golden torques, she crowned with mistletoe blossom, he with oak leaves, for all the world like Gods as far as the lay-folk were concerned. I noted bitterly that their hands were still grasped together even now – this was no mere ritual marriage. They crossed to the wooden idol, kneeled, and then sat before it while the peasants brought them bannocks and ale and the choicest cuts of the meat. The lay-folk knew Cernos was to be sacrificed so he was already dead to their eyes, and they approached him with fear and reverence. When the Devoted One was a criminal, and bound to the wooden god, they would pelt him with clods of earth and feast bones, and I wondered if the peasants missed their three yearly chance to beat out their many woes upon a miscreant and instead were having to bow low as always.

The feast continued through the night and despite my misery I ate as much as I could, hanging around the margins to avoid having to watch Gwyfina and Cernos gaze lovingly into each other's eyes. Around me the young peasants danced wildly

by the light of the fires, the men stripped to their breeks, the girls in little more than thin shifts, with blossom in their hair. I saw one scooped up by a young man about my age, and they went off into the woods laughing, and not for the first time did I hate the moment my father had sent me off to be a druid. Why had he punished me? I had been no trouble then. I gazed into the fire where the old clothes and winter stores of the laity now burned, and remembered how the very poorest had simply given a chunk of their hair to the flames. I pulled my knife from my belt and cut a lock from my own, just above my left ear, and threw it into the fire. I knew as the smell rose I should ask a prayer, but I had too many things to wish for, and just idly watched it burn.

'What did you do that for?'

Gorfán was by my side, his eyes confused.

I shrugged. 'I don't know, what harm can it do?'

'*You* don't need to.'

He was my friend, but he didn't understand me much. In fairness I never told him the concerns of my heart and inner soul.

'Come on, Cernos is about to be sacrificed.'

Gorfán was actually a little ahead of himself for once, we hadn't missed anything. Cernos and Gwyfina were drinking, she from an electrum cup and he from a heavy gold one, as we approached, but this was the last part of the feast for them. Druids with torches were ready to lead the way to the pool, with Britannios and the Beltane couple at the head of the procession. Gorfán and I met up with Drysfal and the others and tagged on the end. 'This is very important,' Drysfal was saying, supposedly to everyone but with his hand on my shoulder, 'Remain silent, watch, and learn.'

We reached the round, steep-sided pond and took our places on the slopes. Despite my distaste, I was curious and I made sure I was able to see everything. Cernos, from what I could see of his face, remained calm, sleepy if anything, but

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Gwyfina looked more troubled, I thought, even then. It was as if the understanding of what was about to happen had, finally, crossed her mind's threshold, and she made as if to embrace Cernos one last time but he – not ungently – just touched her face and moved away. Elders came between them, bearing the implements of sacrifice, and chanting prayers to Belenos. The gold torque was removed from Cernos's neck. He stripped and dropped to his knees. Despite the heavy robes worn day-to-day no druid feels shame in their nakedness and Cernos was unflinching. He did not have the hardened body of a warrior but he was no weakling either, and his flesh was flawless and healthy. I wondered if to anyone else it seemed a waste, when we could be fighting for our lives any summer hence, to have a strong man in his prime killed, even for the Gods, and then remembered how I had prayed for the life of old Drysfal, alone amongst the Elders, despite knowing one of them was surely to die. Gwyfina was starting to cry even before the garotte was placed around her lover's neck. I could not decide if he was merely drugged or brave, but he certainly did not struggle. The chants fell silent when the stick was twisted, and even at the back I heard the sick snap of his neck. Gwyfina had known all along his eventual fate but it was then, with that unmistakable sound, that her desperate screaming started.

When it came to her turn to meet death I prayed. 'Belenos, Maponos, Cernunnos, Epona' I began, as before. Why was I praying to Belenos? This sacrifice was to him – he was no ally. 'Maponos, Cernunnos, Epona . . . Save her.' I begged uselessly. Britannios had the knife at her throat. The sun was rising. *Think where you are* – a voice – my own – in my head. At the pool – the god of the pool? *The woods*. I realized my mistake.

'Cernunnos, Cernunnos, God of the wilds. Help me save her, save her please.'

In my mind's eye, great golden eyes looked back.

### *Three Flight*

**A**s the knife cut into Gwyfina's throat and the first of her blood rose up, a great shrieking owl fell from the sky with talons outstretched for prey. Ignoring all else it set upon Britannios's hand. Like a vengeful spirit the bird cried as its beak and claws ripped into him, its wings a savage blur about his head. He had to raise his arms desperately to protect his eyes. Never, in all my years before and since, have I seen another owl behave so, and I felt the spine-shiver of a divine presence.

'Stop! Stop!' I cried. The blade fell from Britannios's hand and immediately the owl let go and flew back up into the trees. Everyone was screaming. I pushed my way through the crowd. Britannios was cradling his bleeding hand and his eyes flew to me in rage.

'We have only moments before the sun is too high. Someone give me their knife -'

'The sacrifice must *stop!*'

'Silence!' he roared. 'You are an *acolyte*, you shall be *silent!*' His lip curled with disgust. 'A boy has no authority here.'

'I alone prayed to Cernunnos to spare her.' I pointed to Gwyfina, shaking but alive. 'And she *is* spared. Did you not see his animal protect her?!

'You are a *boy.*' he repeated, virtually spitting.

I was not a boy. I was anger itself.

My voice was low despite my fury. 'I am a prince among my own people, and if that earns the respect of the gods more than you then that is good enough for me.'

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Everyone gasped, and only then did it occur to me that my own throat could well be cut. My terror had turned to cold rage, and I knew by arguing with me Britannios had showed weakness.

'The sacrifice will continue.' he muttered.

I pointed to the east, without even looking. 'The sun has risen.'

The Elders either side of Britannios were looking uncomfortable. 'We shall have to think upon this.' one said. 'Let us sacrifice another beast and divine the path', someone else suggested. Parsix the Gaul stepped forward and gently drew Gwyfina back from the water's edge. My eyes met his for a moment.

'If Cernunnos sent the bird,' he said carefully. 'Cernunnos should be heeded.'

Mumblings of disquiet were heard but no-one spoke up to dispute him.

Britannios seemed calmer, but cold. 'Some will stay to guard the Honoured One. The rest return to camp,' he ordered, 'The sacrifice will either happen or it will not, the Gods will decide.'

He glared at me, and I felt heavy hands on my shoulders. Four Initiates escorted me back to camp.

I was tied to the wooden idol in the gathering place, I think for lack of any where else rather than for the symbolism. We druids embrace the earth as our bed, wake with the sun's first rays, drink in the scent of the woods, and move our camp with the seasons, but Britannios knew well enough that no tent of hides would keep me in. My knife was removed and my hands tied behind me. 'Meditate on Cernunnos at your pleasure.' Britannios scorned and walked swiftly away. A whole day and night I was there without food or water, only untied twice during the day to relieve myself and even then not left alone a moment. As the day

waned I was becoming light-headed with thirst. People stared, but I saw no pity on any face. Even Gorfán passed hurriedly on with the others though I tried to catch his eye. If I had been Gorfán I would have rolled me a bannock, or run over with a cup of water 'innocently' and just accepted the beating, but he brought me nothing.

Gwyfina I did not see at all, and this disturbed me. As night fell and the camp dispersed to bed I grew cold, and could not sleep. I was worried about her, but some instinct told me she lived. I imagined her lying alone in the bed she had shared with Cernos the night before and weeping. Maybe he watched over her, from the spirit world. Maybe he was angry with me, for depriving him of his bride. He would be reborn without her now. But somehow I convinced myself Cernos was glad she lived, or else I did not care.

Shortly after the camp breakfasted the next morning I saw Britannios coming across the meeting ground and feared the worst, but he passed on into the woods without so much as looking at me and I released my tense-held breath. It was Parsix the Gaul who came to speak to me shortly after, carrying a small wooden bowl. That could have been equally either full of water for me or just to collect my blood so I didn't get my hopes up too much. When he pulled the knife from his belt I tensed back towards the god, but Parsix went behind me and cut the ropes.

'I've brought you some water.' He had a cold cheese fritter for me too and I fell upon both food and water like a wolf. Parsix sat down upon the ground beside me and studied my face.

'What is to be done with me?'

Parsix smiled. 'I have convinced Britannios that a night and day in the cold is punishment enough. Most of the others agreed with me – you are fortunate.'

I should be grateful, but I did not entirely trust him. 'Why are you helping me?'

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I expected him to say that he had seen enough death and was sick of it, but what he did say threw me. 'You know of Vercingetorix?' I nodded. Even during my childhood at home Catuvellaunos had told us of the last great Gaulish chieftain to have fought Rome, and his final defeat and vicious end. But Vercingetorix was long dead . . . Parsix could not have known him? 'When you stood up and defied Britannios, some God sent Vercingetorix to my mind.' He was flustering and I felt my face redden. Parsix started a sentence then stopped and gathered his thoughts. At last he spoke.

'It strikes me that when we face the legions, we will need men like Vercingetorix as well as men like Britannios.'

I did not know what to say, for once. I suppose I should have been flattered. Instead I changed the subject. 'And Gwyfina? What of her?'

I saw amusement in Parsix's eyes which irked me. 'You are a little sweet on her aren't you? She is safe, don't worry. Her fate will not be decided until the Lughnasa festival.'

This did not really fit my sense of 'safe'.

'Does her neck bleed?'

Parsix shook his head. 'It is not too bad. The artery was untouched. She now offers herself to Teutates to purify herself anew.' I wasn't sure what he meant but it did not seem to imply danger.

'Thank you.' I said, at last.

Parsix nodded his acceptance. 'Your master and the other acolytes are already at classes, you are released for the day. Go back to your tent and sleep it off.'

I did return to Drysfal's tent as he said. Parsix watched me go so I did not wander off, his mercy having its limits, clearly. As he had said there was no-one there. In the distance I could hear the faint sound of Drysfal's harp and the boys chanting in unison. I closed the tent flap behind me. My knife had been

thrown upon my sleeping place so I hastily strapped it back on. There was not much time. I pulled both blankets from my bed place and rolled them up, with my winter cloak around them, and went to the tent flap to listen. Silence – no-one was approaching. I remembered my hunting-sling hidden under the bedroll and took that too. I strode to the other side of the tent and cut the stitching down low to peer out. The wood-line was not far and no-one was in sight. I did not hesitate a moment – I crawled through the hole and ran for the trees.

Next I had to find Gwyfina. Parsix had said that she was purifying herself as an offering to Teutates or something like that, and Teutates is a god of water, so I guessed she was either swimming or bathing, but now I had to work out where. I quickly dismissed the sacred lake – surely even a grieving woman would not swim about above her lover's corpse? I turned towards the larger lake, then thought again – those waters were cold enough to freeze the blood even in high summer. He must mean the river. I twisted about and ran north through the trees, glad I had not wasted too much time.

I saw female Initiates gathering sticks and was careful to skirt round them. A farmer coppicing hazel for hurdles was no threat so I just nodded good morning to him and moved swiftly onward. As I approached the usual bathing place I slowed and was mindful to keep within cover. Gwyfina could be guarded, in case she herself planned escape. I took care where I placed my feet lest a snapping twig alert someone to my presence, and once again was glad of the drab black robes I in general hated. The breeze stirred the hawthorn blossom but all else was stillness. I listened. Splashing. More than just the splashing of the river on the rocks. Crackling? The crackling of a fire to the west. I could just about smell the smoke. I moved carefully in that direction. A

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girl's hushed voice was chanting a purification prayer over and over.

Gwyfina was not alone.

Just down-river from where Gwyfina was bathing one of the female Initiates tended a fire on a rock. The smell was horrible, like hair burning, and I noticed the girl had sensibly positioned herself upwind of it. She had her head bowed for the chanting but she was facing me and – should she look up – there was every chance she would raise the alarm. We were still not far from camp – if she screamed that was my escape and Gwyfina's over. Quietly I picked up a piece of fallen branch, the thickness of my forearm, and slowly wove my way between the mossy trunks to come up behind her. As I reached the river Gwyfina herself came into sight, emerging suddenly from under the water. She was naked as a newborn, glistening, beautiful, a Goddess of the waters. All stealth was forgotten on my part as I stared, and my breath caught in my throat. The girl at the fire snapped round towards me and gasped. My senses returned – I swung the branch hard and she slumped unconscious onto the ground.

Gwyfina's shock turned to fury. 'What have you done?!'

'Shhh!!'

'You've killed her!'

I crouched beside the girl and felt under her jaw for a pulse. She groaned, coming round. I must admit I was a little relieved. 'She'll be all right.'

Gwyfina stared at me and the girl in dumb shock, still dripping wet in the middle of the river. I dropped the branch and waded into the water to grab her by the wrists. 'Come on – you have to run!' I made to move away but she resisted, pulling away from me with unexpected strength. 'Gwyfina – your life is in danger – it is not me you need to fear.' Her eyes searched my face for my sincerity but I think it was the shout we heard from camp that clinched it. Parsix must have checked if I was in the tent.

Within a heartbeat Gwyfina was sprinting beside me. Our flight was spurred when the girls' screams were heard. The Initiates gathering firewood must have discovered their companion, or else the girl herself had woken and raised the alarm. I had let go of Gwyfina as it was quicker to run that way but I grabbed hold of her wrist again just in case she turned back. We raced through the trees, whipped by branches and jumping over rocks, until our hearts and throats were bursting with pain.

'Stop! I must stop.' Gwyfina begged, gasping. I did not argue and fell to the floor as well gasping in great breaths. We were at the edge of the woods now. There was no sound of pursuit but I knew they would be looking for us. The sun was getting high and our next stretch of escape was to be across open fields. I wished I could have planned this better. Gwyfina seemed suddenly conscious of her nakedness and was eying the bundle of blankets.

'Are those my clothes?'

'No, blankets.'

'If you knew where I would be, why didn't you bring any clothes?'

The criticism stung. 'There was no time! Maybe I should have brought a mirror too and some fire-dogs and a bondwoman to do your hair?!' The look on her face was pure venom. I took another deep breath, regretting my outburst. She would need clothes, it wasn't such a stupid thing to ask. I took a blanket from the bundle and set upon it with my knife. Gwyfina looked confused now. 'I'll cut armholes and a hole for your head – it'll have to do.'

'My robe was burned, as it is no longer pure.' she said, and suddenly I realized what the girl with the fire had been doing and why the smell was of wool burning. 'Why are you trying to save me? Where could we ever go to escape Britannios?'

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I chose to ignore her first question, unsure how to answer. 'We will go to my own homeland, and seek sanctuary with my father. The druids are not the only ones with power.'

'You are Catuvellauni aren't you?' I nodded. Her beautiful face was spoiled with scorn. 'That is almost the other side of the isle! We have no horses, I am barefoot -'

'We will worry about that tomorrow. Today we need to get off of Mon.' I interrupted. Gwyfina sunk into sullen silence and we got going again, she now dressed in the shapeless garment I had made her. The only good thing about it was that it was not a druid's robe and she could possibly be mistaken for a peasant. Continual running was impossible – we were young but neither of us was fit enough, so we ran for short stretches then walked briskly in turns. It was hard, but every stride took us further from the grove and towards the sea, and I felt buoyed up with hope, at least. By the time the shadows grew long we were within sight and smell of the sea, with gulls wheeling about our heads. There was no sign of pursuers behind us and I was beginning to feel we had got away with it. When we grew near the ferry crossing my strides slowed and I beckoned Gwyfina close to confer.

'We should be able to cross easily,' I estimated, 'As druids will have been leaving all day due to the end of the festival. The problem is if anyone recognizes us -'

'Because neither of us did anything yesterday to catch anyone's attention.' Gwyfina shot in sarcastically.

I sighed. 'Yes. So it might be best if we hang back until the end of the day when all the druids have gone.' Gwyfina shrugged, not even looking at me. 'I say we have a bit of a rest and then find somewhere in view of the crossing to wait.'

Gwyfina sat down and peevishly brushed the muck from her feet. 'If that's the plan then so be it.'

I wasn't sure quite how to take this but she did follow me. We kept low in the dunes and found a good spot by a gorse. The

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mountains of Ordovici territory seemed close, across the water, and I felt my heart soar with hope. Then I saw exactly what I did not want to see – two of Britannios's Initiates, one holding the halters of three horses. They had got to the straits ahead of us. Another Initiate was questioning the ferryman. My heart sank and I looked to Gwyfina hoping desperately that she was not going to give herself up to them, but some instinct for self-preservation must have fought to prominence in her at last, just as it had when she faced the knife, and she shrank back into the gorse.

'Look – they have brought dogs.' she said, and I saw where she pointed. Just behind the horses a lay-man was leading two hounds on leashes. He had a piece of cloth in his hand – a piece of my bed roll, or hers, I guess.

Thank the Gods we had not got nearer the crossing.

The Mouthy Prince is an adventure story set during the last decades of independent Celtic Britain. As a man, Caradoc will lead the resistance against the Romans, but for now he must escape, survive, and save the girl he loves.

## **The Mouthy Prince**

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