

The Fox
By Arlene Radasky

Chapter 16

...

In the morning, I sat stirring cooked barley and goat's milk for Crisi and Logan. Lovern came to me from his solitary walk and morning prayers.

"I heard you talking last night as you came in," I said. "Even the chieftains are hearing words of the Romans."

"Yes, we are all to discuss it today." Crisi was sitting and playing, drawing pictures in the dirt with a stick. He reached down and picked her up, wrapped her in his cloak and sat down next to me.

"Good morning, Father. I am going to look for a honey tree with some of the other children today. We talked about it yesterday, and we are going as soon as we eat."

Lovern looked at me with concern.

"The older children have this planned and asked the younger ones to go," I said. "Logan and Eanruig are going."

"Ah, little bird, *m'eudail*. Is there a honey tree nearby?"

"If not, I will call the bees and we will make one. We want honey for our mid-day meal."

"You are in woods that you are not familiar with. Do not stray from the others when you go." Lovern tousled her hair and hugged her. She jumped from his lap and sat down to finish her drawing.

Lovern did not turn from her but stayed watching her movements.

"I will not let anything come to harm her." He turned to me. "Or you."

The snake in my belly hissed.

The children left in an adventurous noise, and then word that the druids and chieftains would meet together today was passed from lips to ears.

We stood around the fire to sing praises to Morrigna. All hands were raised in praise of her when a thunder of hooves and chariot wheels disturbed the start of our day.

I turned just as the assembly of riders came to a stop at the outer edge of the crowd.

Three warriors slid off their ponies and moved with practiced fluidity into position. Each bore a spear, a shield, a bow, and arrows. They wore capes of brown wool and loin wraps to protect themselves on the ponies. Their arms and legs were blue. This was a custom of the men who lived far north. The woad, taken there by traders, was used for body color more than for dyeing cloth. Two stood to either side of the ponies that pulled the chariot and one on the ground to the side of the man who stood in the chariot. Their eyes measured the crowd, watching, their bodies tense and ready to protect the man they were guarding.

The man in the chariot reviewed our gathering with sharp, dark eyes. His naked, fully dyed blue body revealed a short but very well muscled warrior. His long nose hung over a mouth that was set in a grim line. He wore his golden hair swept back and stiffened with lime, his yellow beard trimmed. His only protection from the weather was a cloak of deep green. On its collar was a row of feathers from a sea eagle, a bird that watches all, bearing talons of surprising strength to hunt and kill for its family.

In the chariot next to him stood a woman. She wore a sun-whitened wool dress. Her cloak was the color of undyed wool. She wore strands of yellowed boars' teeth around her neck. Her rust hair, braided in many rows, hung to her waist. A sea eagle feather was woven into it and hung over her left ear.

The man lifted his arms and looked as if he were ready to fly over us. He did not shout but spoke in a tone that caused us to lean forward. We concentrated to hear.

"I am Calgacus. I am *ceann-cinnidh* of many clans in the north. We pray to Scotia, the fierce mother goddess of our land. We have come together to prepare for the coming war. We know the Romans are coming to us. We have won and lost many battles with them before and have slowed their progress into our realm. Hope was never abandoned, as we are many and hidden in the most secret and sacred places. Because of these places, we have been shielded as the most distant dwellers upon this ground. Our remoteness and obscurity have hidden our name from their lips. We are the last of the free. The Romans, in the name of peace, will rob, slaughter, plunder, and enslave those left alive. It is so in the lands they now live. They have wiped our kind from existence there and we alone are left to carry our bloodlines to the future. There is nothing beyond us but waves and rocks, yet they still come.

"Nature teaches us that every man's children and family are his dearest objects. We have seen these torn apart by death and slavery. Some are left to farm, to feed the slaves that were once members of their families. Can you raise grain to feed your daughters who are raped by the Romans daily?"

A loud "No!" rose from the throats around me. Lovern wrapped his arm protectively around my shoulders. Heat radiated from his body. His eyes did not stray from the speaker, and a low groan escaped from him at the mention of rape. The face of the man who took me flashed like lightning across my mind. He was a Roman slave. He was once a proud warrior, but they turned him into an animal. This could not happen to us. I grew resolved not to allow it.

"There is one Roman who comes our way with warriors," Calgacus continued. "Agricola. He is the chieftain we must kill. It is his army we must defeat. His men are ignorant. They do not know our sky, our sea, our forests. They have no wives or children to kindle their courage, or parents to goad them to battle. They are lost in our land; the gods have delivered them to us.

"Behind him lie unmanned forts guarded by the old, our mines of ancient times, and many slaves who will welcome a release to freedom.

"They cross the wall and are coming. What say you, chieftains? Others that I have spoken to have agreed. If you say yes, then you will train your warriors and wait for my call."

All the chieftains in attendance gathered into a knot of men. After a conversation the length of three breaths, Haye and Kenric stepped forward.

"We agree," said Haye. "We will train and await your call."

Instantly the vision I had in Haye's stable was brought to mind and the snake in my belly bit me. I was poisoned. I knew of Haye's death. Fear was fastened deep inside me now.

The woman next to Calgacus stepped down from the chariot. Her path was straight and the crowd split to allow her progress. She came to Lovern, laid her hand on his forehead, and said, "This man is one who will work well for us. He can speak the

tongue of those who live on the wall. He will bring us what we seek. The goddess Scotia picks him for herself.”

The woman’s beautiful face melted away and became the face of a hag. Her already long nose became sharper. Her sky blue eyes turned to iron. Her well formed mouth hung open to reveal black, jagged teeth. I imagined her breath to smell like the inside of an unclean stable. Her hair writhed about her head. I shook my head at the sight but the hag’s face remained. She slowly looked down to the ground and when she looked back up her face had become beautiful again.

Lovern stepped to her as if drawn by a cord. His arm fell from my shoulders and, in my spirit, I knew our relationship would never be the same again. She had stolen part of his heart.

“Firtha,” said Calgacus, “is my druidess. She tells me she has dreamed of you. She said you could go where the Romans live and bring back information. Her visions tell me that we must have this information. We must know how many they are and when they come.”

Lovern answered, “You ask me to leave my family and my clan to take a journey that will last at least three moon cycles.”

“I do not ask, I order,” Calgacus said. “Go in the spring. After Imbolc. They will not come in the winter. Go and come back to me with this knowledge. With that information, we will be prepared to go into battle. We must not lose to become slaves of Rome.”

Lovern’s shoulders rose as he took a deep breath and turned to me. “My mother died at their hands. My sisters and teacher are slaves if still alive. I cannot let the Romans come here. I must go.”

My body was losing its strength to stand. I wavered and would soon fall. Rhona stepped up behind me and laid her hand on the small of my back. Lovern’s deep blue eyes begged me. I had no choice. We had to save Crisi. My soul cried as I nodded and whispered, “Yes, I agree. You must go.”

The sea eagle and his hag won. My Fox was theirs.