



Of Water and Dragons

By Kelley Heckart

Brought to you by Winterborn

Dedication

This book is dedicated to my wonderful husband and soul mate, Michael. Thank you for always believing in me.

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Prologue

AD 60, Druid stronghold on Ynys Mon (Mona)

He called for the mists to encircle the island and hide them from the Romans. He called for the winds to make the crossing over the waters treacherous for the Romans. But it was not enough.

The Romans were coming. He could see it all in the entrails of the young male boar that lay splattered against the pristine earth in an amorphous pattern of red.

And he saw something else.

He raised his arms to the stars and moon, speaking in a rich commanding voice that filled the ancient grove of oak, ash, beech and yew.

The crowd was silenced by his voice.

"A child will be born tonight who will someday help lead our people to freedom."

A gust of wind blew through the grove. His loose white robes, carried by the wind, twisted tightly around him revealing the taut muscles of his tall, powerful body.

"But first we must give the sacrifice..."

He gazed out across the crowd of warriors, druids, women and children, his blue eyes softening.

"We must give of ourselves."

Chapter One

The Encounter

AD 84-Battle of Mons Graupius, Northern Caledonia

The scene before him caused his heart to race and set his blood on fire.

Ambiorix, commander (*praefectus equitum*) of the "*ala Gallorum Indiana*" branch of the Roman cavalry, stared in disbelief at the thousands of half-naked Caledonian warriors standing on the hill, taunting the Roman soldiers by beating their crudely made swords and spears against their leather shields.

The earth-shattering sound sent a shiver up his spine. He touched the owl feather he always carried into battle for good luck and then safely tucked the brown and white feather back into his tunic.

The Roman soldiers stood their ground, remaining calm, their disciplined training put to the test. The Caledonian warriors were a terrifying sight with their wild hair combed back from their foreheads, the spiky strands resembling horns and their faces and bodies painted blue. The combination was otherworldly and Ambiorix thought they looked like a cross between a forest demon and the Greek god Pan, the half-goat, half-man god of the mountainside.

The early morning mist dissipated, revealing scattered beams of sunlight that struck the battlefield like golden thunderbolts. Even in late summer, sunlight was unusual in the gloomy Highlands and he interpreted it to be a blessing from the Roman gods.

Chariots lined the lower slopes, the metal-spiked wheels reflecting the mid-morning light. Each single-axle vehicle was drawn by two small, sturdy highland ponies and carried a driver and warrior.

One of the warriors was showing off, running out on the chariot pole, standing on the yoke, and quick as a flash, he was back inside the chariot. Ambiorix's Celtic ancestors had used chariots in battle to hurl javelins at a high speed, but chariots had gone out of style with the southern tribes long ago. He noticed one chariot stood out from the rest. This one was intricately carved with circular symbols and glistened like gold in the sunlight. He suspected the warrior in this chariot was the *Caledonii* leader, Calgacus, who had united all the Celtic Highland tribes against Rome. His long reddish hair and beard blew wildly around his face. While most of the Caledonian warriors had little or no armor, this one wore fine chain mail armor covered with a richly colored cloak of red, yellow and purple. The taunts from the Caledonians continued, but their attempt to unsettle the Romans was futile. Ambiorix waited to see what the legionary commander, General Agricola, would do next. Agricola appeared unfazed by the thousands of Caledonian warriors taunting him. Astride his horse, he rode up and down the ranks, his sharp dark raven-like eyes scanning the soldiers, staring the men in the eye as he passed them.

"Your past victories so bravely won have prepared you for this moment!" Pointing at the enemy, he continued, "The bravest of the Caledonians have been slain by the Roman sword. All that remains are the feeble and the timid. We win this battle, the campaign will be ended, and Rome will have this land in her grasp! To victory!" Agricola raised his sword. The soldiers, pumped up by his speech, raised their swords together, shouting, "Sol Invictus!" The battle began.

A hush descended on the battlefield and then a sharp whistling sound tore through the sudden stillness, followed by a dense volley of arrows that rained down from the sky. Ambiorix raised his shield against the Caledonian aerial assault, his mount stepping nervously beneath him.

Agricola dismounted. The first line of auxiliary foot soldiers, led by Agricola, charged.

The foot soldiers charged in one line, the jangling sound of their Roman *cingulims*, or leather belts, sending up a roar like waves crashing against a rocky coastline. The valley floor rumbled as the soldiers marched, the decorated leather strips swaying back and forth.

A blood-chilling Caledonian war cry echoed through the valley.

The two armies clashed sword to sword on the field. Ambiorix waited patiently for the signal to charge. He knew Agricola's strategy was to have the cavalry units positioned on each end of the Roman line like wings, swing around and surround the Caledonians. Ambiorix had to wait until all the Caledonians were engaged in the battle before he could signal his unit of one thousand men to charge.

From his position on the hill, he saw that the Romans had the advantage, their large shields protecting them as they methodically marched in one line, stabbing the enemy with their short swords. The long swords the Caledonians wielded were a disadvantage in tight hand-to-hand combat with the short Roman *gladius*.

The sound of metal on metal was deafening, like loud claps of thunder rumbling through the valley.

The fighting seemed to go on forever. Ambiorix glanced up, shielding his eyes with his hand. The sun was higher in the sky, the burning rays penetrating his thick shirt of scale.

"These barbarians should surrender. Though they outnumber us, they don't have a chance."

Ambiorix looked to his left at Marcus, his friend and fellow tribune, who was acting as decurion, commanding one of the squadrons of forty horsemen under the "*ala Gallorum Indiana*."

"They are too proud to surrender."

"Proud? I would say they are foolish."

Ambiorix glanced at Marcus, shaking his head in disagreement. His friend gazed at the barbarian hordes, dark eyes filled with arrogance. "You must never underestimate the enemy, Marcus."

Marcus laughed. "Yes, I suppose so..."

The shrill, discordant battle horns of the enemy blared, the sound fitting to the chaos of war. Suddenly, from the top of the hill, the last line of Caledonians charged.

Raising his *spatha*, or long sword above his head, Ambiorix ordered his men to charge. The ground shuddered under the pounding hooves of a thousand horses. He felt the power of the sword in his hand, vibrating, catching the powerful golden rays of the Greek sun god, Apollo.

Faces flashed by him--blue eyes, brown eyes, before he cut the warriors down with one slice of his sword. Seeing his enemy's eyes before killing them always disturbed him, though he would never admit it to anyone.

Chaos erupted to his right. A wayward chariot without a driver careened out of control, nearly unseating him from his horse.

The Caledonians were surrounded and still they kept fighting like madmen.

Ambiorix expertly guided his horse through the blood and gore coating the valley floor. The smell of blood was so thick he could taste it, the bitter metallic flavor coating his tongue. Moans and cries filled the air sending shivers up his spine. He rode past body parts that lay scattered on the battlefield noticing one bloodied severed arm still defiantly clenching a sword in its fist. This was a horrific sight in contrast to the stunning sunset that was turning the sky and hills a deep shade of fiery red. The battle had lasted all day and the weariness was settling into his muscles and joints. His entire body ached. Carrion birds circled overhead, waiting.

Defeated, the remaining Caledonians fled to the hills behind them and into the dense forest. Ambiorix urged his horse forward trying to stop as many as he could from escaping. He realized his mistake, but it was too late. The narrow path was covered with thick bushes and twisting vines making it difficult to give chase on horseback.

He caught up to a group of Caledonians when suddenly they disappeared from sight as if swallowed up by the trees. The shadows closed in around him. From somewhere above, he was struck on the head and sent spinning into a black abyss.

Ambiorix awoke sometime later. Darkness permeated the forest except in small areas where the rays of the moon penetrated the thick tower of trees like tiny silver beams of light. His horse was gone and he couldn't find his helmet. It had probably been knocked off when he was struck in the head. The helmet had apparently saved his life, softening the blow.

Slowly, he stood despite the throbbing in his head. The forest seemed to be alive all around him.

Thorny branches reached out like fingers to claw at him, leaving ribbons of dark blood on his exposed skin. He didn't even flinch at this minor infliction of pain, but continued to fight his way through the thick wall of bushes.

The throbbing in his head was growing steadily worse and he couldn't see out of his right eye. He had to find his way back to the camp, but was disoriented and didn't know which way to go.

Suddenly, the skin on the back of his neck tingled with a sense of foreboding. Out of the corner of his left eye, he thought he saw a flash of blue light. *Was that laughter he heard?* Trying to slow down his heavy breathing, he prayed to his god to give him the strength to find his way back to the Roman camp. If his attackers found him, he knew they would kill him.

Appearing out of nowhere, a pair of menacing yellow eyes floated in front of him. *Whoosh.* Large wings flapped too close to his head, ruffling his hair. He lost his balance, nearly falling. He kept walking in what he hoped was the right direction to the Roman camp when a sudden sharp pain tore through his head, bringing him to his knees.

Looking up, he thought he saw the face of a goddess, illuminated by a single ray of moonlight, moments before the waves of darkness mercifully released him from the pain.

* * *

His sleep was filled with disturbing images of mutilated warriors staring at him with red, glaring eyes. A mist wrapped around his legs like a thick vine preventing him from moving. Struggling to break free of the mist, he noticed a large shadow looming over him. The shadow enveloped him, squeezing the life from his body. Just when he thought he was going to die, the music entered his dream, waking him from the nightmare.

Ambiorix had never heard such music before. It was enchanting, yet with a touch of sadness. Slowly he tried to open his eyes, but only his left eye would open. Candlelight flickered, sending shadows dashing up solid walls in an erratic dance.

He was lying in a bed of soft, clean animal pelts. Out of the corner of his one good eye, he could see someone sitting across the small room amid the dashing shadows.

He must have made a noise because the music suddenly stopped; the melody cut off in mid-note. The person stepped out of the shadows. Her face looked familiar. The goddess of the forest was standing over him. His first thought was that he was dead.

"How are you feeling?" she asked. Her voice was the soothing sound of water gliding over smooth, round stones. She spoke his mother's language.

"Am I dead?" Groaning, he tried to sit up.

"No, you are very much alive. Maybe you shouldn't sit up yet." She gently pushed him back down onto the soft bed. Her unbound hair brushed against his face. He couldn't help noticing that her long raven-colored hair smelled enticingly of wildflowers.

"Where am I?" Ignoring the pain in his head, he glanced warily around the room, noticing that the solid walls were made out of clay.

"You are in my home." She smiled at him reassuringly.

He started to speak again, to ask about his eye, but he was suddenly overcome with fatigue and he lay back, falling into a deep sleep.

Ambiorix awoke sometime later to find himself alone. At first he panicked, not remembering where he was. Then he remembered the lovely goddess/woman and relaxed, a smile tugging at the corners of his lips. He reached up and discovered his right eye was heavily bandaged.

Looking around with his one good eye, he noticed that not one ray of light entered the small cave-like room. Tallow candles, placed on a sturdy wood table, emitted a warm, inviting glow. He inhaled the earthy scent that permeated the room.

Gazing upward, he noticed herbs and utensils neatly suspended from a branch placed along the ceiling, embedded into the clay wall. The only other items in the room were a wooden bench and an intricately carved chest. With his left hand he reached out, running his fingers along the smooth spiral design carved into the top of the chest. This design still decorated the rural areas of this island, a legacy left by his mother's ancestors.

He heard the sound of someone entering the room and saw her climbing down a ladder, her gray cloak billowing out around her like wings.

She smiled at him. "How are you feeling tonight?"

"I...don't know. I need to..." He had an intense pressure in his bladder.

Slowly he attempted to sit up, but the throbbing in his head forced him to lie back down.

"No, you shouldn't get up yet."

"But I need to..." He felt his face burn with embarrassment.

"Oh." She picked up a clay water jug. "I will have to hold this for you. It's very heavy."

She politely turned her head away.

He relieved himself into the clay jar. When he finished, all he could manage was a weak, "Thank you" and once again, sleep overpowered him.

* * *

The next time Ambiorix woke up, he was able to sit up and eat some stew. The nourishment made him feel much stronger.

"You must be feeling better," she commented with a slight tilt of her head, golden flames from the tallow candles dancing in her lively green eyes.

"Yes," he answered, savoring the last spoonful of the flavorful stew. "The stew was very good. Thank you." He smiled up at her. He thought he saw a blush color her cheeks.

She took the empty bowl from him and quickly backed away into the shadows, nearly knocking a candle off the table. He smiled to himself, noticing the effect he was having on her.

"You took a severe blow to the head. You are very lucky to be alive." She bent over him, changing the dressing on his wound. "I think your eye may heal, but you may not be able to see out of it for a while."

He was very aware of her presence. Her touch was like soft rose petals brushing against his skin. The scent of wildflowers nearly drove him mad with desire. He caught himself wondering what she looked like underneath the heavy cloak she wore.

"Do you remember your name?" she asked.

"Yes. Ambiorix. My full name is Gaius Suetonius Ambiorix. "

"That is a strange name, but Ambiorix is in my language."

He noticed how her green eyes were slanted like the eyes of a cat. "I was named for my uncle on my mother's side. She is of Celtic blood."

She smiled. "Well, your mind wasn't damaged by the blow. That's a good sign. Do you remember how you were injured?"

His eye clouded over with anger. "I was attacked by Caledonians. They are probably hunting for me now."

"Cal...e...donians? What does that mean?"

"The Romans call this whole land Caledonia."

"Romans? Oh...yes. I have heard of them. Are you a...Roman?"

"Yes." He looked at her with concern. "I may have put you in danger."

"They won't look for you here." She turned away.

He lightly touched her hand. She seemed a little startled by his gesture. "You are very brave to be helping me..." He paused, waiting for her response.

She smiled, as if in understanding. "My name is Nemu."

He smiled back at her. "A beautiful name. It fits you well."

This time he was certain he saw a blush appear like two red rose petals pressed against her cheekbones. She quickly moved away busying herself at the table.

"Do you live here alone?" He noticed how gracefully she moved around the small room.

"Yes."

"But don't you ever get lonely?" He thought he would go mad if he lived by himself in the forest.

"No," she said thoughtfully, pausing from tidying up the table. "I have lived here all my life. I have the beauty of the forest and all its creatures to keep me company."

He was so intrigued by her he almost forgot he needed to get back to the Roman camp.

"How long have I been here?" He managed to slowly stand up, nearly hitting his head on the low ceiling.

"You have been here for three nights." She was at his side in an instant. "Here, let me help you."

He used her shoulder for some support, noticing that she was very strong for a small woman. She helped him to sit on the bench. "I cannot thank you enough for helping me, Nemu. I will be leaving at daybreak."

"Leave? You are not ready to leave yet."

He thought he saw disappointment on her face in the candlelight when he mentioned leaving. "I must get back to the Roman camp." A sudden sharp pain tore through his head; a white haze filled his vision. He rolled off the bench onto the floor.

"Are you hurt?" Nemu rushed to his side.

As quick as the pain had come, it was gone. "No...my head..."

She helped him up onto the bench. "Maybe you should lie down."

"No. I'm just a little dizzy." A weak smile pulled at the corners of his lips; sweat filled the tiny lines on his forehead.

Running his hands across his unshaven face, he said, "I hope I don't frighten you too much by my appearance."

She smiled shyly at him. "No. You don't frighten me." Her eyes seemed to rest on his bare chest.

Suddenly, he was aware of his half-nakedness. All he wore were the leather trousers that the cavalry wore to make riding astride a horse easier.

She seemed to understand. Handing him his neatly folded tunic, she said, "I will go and fetch some water for you."

He pulled on the white linen tunic that he wore under his armor. The soft fabric was soothing against his skin. His linen shirt of scale and his sword belt were neatly piled in the corner of the small room. She was gone a long time. *Too long*, he thought. Ambiorix carefully climbed up the few steps to the entrance.

It was dark, but the moon lit up the small clearing with a silver glow. He was about to step out when some movement off to the left caught his attention.

Nemu was talking to a Caledonian! He looked like a druid by the white robes he wore. Ambiorix was astonished to see the druid kneel before her as if she were a queen. *Was she in league with his enemies?*

The druids were supposed to have been massacred at the battle of Mona Insula because they were a threat to Rome's rule. His father, Suetonius Paulinus, had led that particular battle. Ambiorix shivered, remembering the stories he had heard of that battle, how the druids had called to their gods to curse the Roman soldiers while women with flowing hair in their black death clothes ran between the battle-lines shrieking like the Furies.

Ambiorix had been at the second battle of Mona, and though most of those left at the druid stronghold were the weak and old he had still feared the curse as he swung his sword.

He peered into the darkness and saw five Caledonian warriors waiting in the shadows. He climbed back down into the cave. He was much too weak to confront the warriors.

Nemu finally returned with the water. Ambiorix said nothing to her. He watched her mix an awful smelling concoction.

"I have something I have to do so I will need to leave you for a while."

He sat back, crossing his arms. "Oh. Would that have something to do with my enemies I saw you talking to?" His voice held a touch of sarcasm.

She sighed. "It's not what you think."

"Isn't it?"

"I help everybody no matter who they are; and they need my help now, thanks to you and your Romans."

He ignored the obvious bitterness in her voice. "How do I know I can trust you?"

"How do I know I can trust *you*? If I wanted you dead I would have left you to die in the forest." She started climbing out of the cave.

"That's another thing I'm curious about. How did you manage to bring me here with no pony or cart of any kind?"

She didn't answer him and in a blink she was gone.

He scowled, but he was in no condition to follow her and she had a good argument. She could have left him to die.

He had a lot of time to think while she was gone. He was determined to find out who this strange woman was and why she always wore a cloak. *What was she hiding?*

* * *

Later, when she returned to the cave, he pretended to be asleep. He watched her lay down on the other side of the room. After making sure she was asleep, he crept over to her.

Nemu slept peacefully, her goddess-like face looking so innocent to him. The cloak was wrapped tightly around her body. Holding a candle, Ambiorix slowly lifted the cloak to see what was underneath.

Her eyes flew open. "Wh-what are you doing?" She fumbled with the cloak, trying to cover herself up, but it was too late.

Large white wings protruded from just below her shoulder blades. He stumbled back in shock, the candle teetering in his hand.

She must have seen the look of shock and disgust on his face because she looked down, ashamed of what he'd said.

He slowly backed away from her. "Y-you are not human!"

"My father was a human!" she shot back at him.

He continued to stare at her in disbelief.

"Stay away from me." He grabbed his sword belt and armor, backing away toward the entrance.

"Wait! At least let me guide you out of the forest."

"No! I can make it on my own."

"I know this forest. You need me if you want to make it out of here alive. You might fall into one of the deep valleys and there are beings in this forest that wouldn't treat you as nicely as I have." She shot him a look that told him she wouldn't take no for an answer. "We have to wait until twilight so Calgacus's warriors can't see us. You should get some more rest."

He didn't argue with her. She was right. He had no idea how to get back to the Roman camp. He lay down, but he didn't sleep; and he kept his sword close to him.

* * *

They were lucky to still have a full moon, but with the forest so dense only tiny silver rays were able to penetrate in a few chosen places. A light carpet of mist covered the ground, swallowing up his feet. Nemu led the way, claiming to have sharp night vision, and she warned him to stay close behind her. He refused to talk to her. His eyes bore into her back, fixating on the large white wings. She had tricked him into thinking she was human and he wasn't sure he could trust her. He had even been attracted to her and for some reason that bothered him more.

His mother's people believed in such creatures as faeries and he remembered hearing stories as a young boy, but he never believed any of the stories.

Strange bird-like sounds surrounded them and he thought he heard faint laughter. The strange sounds made him edgy, but Nemu appeared to be unaffected by the noises. She seemed to acknowledge some of the trees as she passed by them. Ambiorix looked up, but didn't see anything in the trees. He had no idea what she was doing.

They walked in silence until the dark skies began changing to the deep periwinkle of pre-dawn.

Nemu broke the silence. "We have to stop and wait out the sunlight."

"Why? We can probably cover more ground when the sun rises."

She turned to face him. "I'm a water faery, Ambiorix. Sunlight will melt me into a pool of water."

"Well then, I guess we have to find shelter so you don't melt," he said, mocking her.

Her lively green eyes took on a menacing look. He decided to keep quiet.

Nemu found an area with dense bushes, forming a hollow, where she could hide from the sun.

Without saying a word to her, Ambiorix hunted. Armed with only a dagger and some nugget-sized rocks, he was only able to catch one tiny squirrel. When he returned to their camp, Nemu wasn't there.

A slight twinge of worry shot through him and then he remembered his anger at her.

After skinning and gutting the animal, he built a small fire and cooked the squirrel, the succulent scent making his mouth water. Relief washed over him when she returned, but his face remained like stone, free of any emotion. He noticed that she had caught two large hares and three squirrels. He stared at her with dark, angry eyes while she ate. When she crawled into her cave of green, he was still staring at her.

Ambiorix found a shady spot and a soft bed of pine needles to sleep on. The fragrant scent of the pine needles helped relax him. As the birds sang a welcome to the new day, sleep stretched its fingers into the far reaches of his mind.

* * *

The next night, Ambiorix was in a bear of a mood. He had a fierce headache that stretched from the top of his head down the right side of his face and he felt like he hadn't slept a wink. He rubbed his hands through his hair in an effort to soothe the ache.

To make matters worse, Nemu crawled out of her shelter humming a happy tune to herself. He thought he should ask her for something to ease the headache, but couldn't bring himself to do it. Instead, he glared at her.

She stretched, gazing up at the clear night sky. "A lovely night, isn't it?"

He grunted, turning away from her.

"In a mood, are we?"

He ignored her comment. "Let's go."

"Aren't you hungry?"

"No."

"Very well, but you might need your strength to climb down the mountain."

"Climb down the mountain? Why did you bring me all the way up the mountain, you insufferable witch!" His head was pounding.

"I knew I should have left you there to die, you ungrateful beast!" She stomped away.

He took a deep breath and followed her, his gait unsteady.

The moon had risen; a silver glow illuminated the rocky, downhill path. The plateau was barren except for the dark shrubs that grew from the cracks in the ancient craggy rocks. A dense forest stood far below, the tips of the massive trees just visible above one side of the path.

Ambiorix was feeling dizzy so he was careful to stay away from the edge, keeping his left hand on the solid rock face. Having only one eye to see out of was making the situation worse, but he wasn't about to swallow his pride and ask for her help.

Nemu ignored him, hovering above, humming softly to herself.

Her humming fueled his anger. The tense silence between them hung in the air like a heavy stench.

Nemu ended the silence. "We could travel faster if you would only let me carry you," she stated, anger coating her voice.

"I can walk just as fast, and we could travel faster if you were able to move in sunlight." Ambiorix narrowed his eyes at her. "And can you please put those...*things* away?" He gestured toward her wings.

She spread her wings, as if to annoy him, hovering above his head.

He stumbled, cursing.

Nemu giggled. Her laughter sounded like the tinkling of tiny bells.

He stared up at her in disbelief. *No woman had ever laughed at him!* His anger grew. He shouted up at her while he tried to keep his balance. "I will not allow a woman, even a faery woman, to carry me!"

She responded with more laughter.

"I will not stand here and be ridiculed by you! Come down here now!" He stopped walking.

"Say please and I might come down!"

Ambiorix balled his hands into fists, scowling. "Please come down from there!"

Nemu landed before him, arms crossed, moonlight casting a silver halo around her. "I am not one of your warriors that you can order around." She only came up to his chest, but her steely, unwavering gaze cut through him.

Caught off guard, he was taken aback by her courage. "Why did you lie to me about what you were?"

He towered over her, but she stood facing him, unflinching.

"Lie to you? Is that what you think?" Her eyes glittered in the moonlight. "I only wished to heal your wounds without frightening or upsetting you." She spread her wings, lifting her face to the moon, "I cannot help what I am, but I am not ashamed of what I am."

Ambiorix shrank before her, his anger suddenly gone. Nemu stood as if waiting for him to speak, but he was unable to voice the two words that hung plainly before him like a thick mist.

She flapped her wings, taking off, but not before he saw the human tears that glistened in her eyes, spilling onto her cheeks. His heart ached and he felt ashamed.

Just before dawn, they found a spot to wait out the sunlight. A hidden glen revealed a small waterfall pouring into an inviting pool near a cave where Nemu could escape the sun. A light mist clung to the surface of the water.

"I am going to find us some food," Ambiorix announced, hoping she wouldn't embarrass him again by proving that she was the better hunter. His headache had subsided somewhat to a dull throb and he wasn't about to let her do the hunting.

Nemu answered him with a quick toss of her hair. "I think I will stay here," she said, eyeing the cool, clean water.

He stayed close to the glen. Standing quietly among the trees, he saw a large white hare venture out into the open. He carefully aimed his dagger, releasing it at just the right moment. The hare slumped to the ground.

He carried the hare back to the glen, his shoulders squared, head held high. Upon entering the glen, he halted, surprised to see Nemu removing her clothes. He started to leave, but couldn't help himself. He had to look.

The hare dropped to the ground, forgotten.

Hidden behind bushes, Ambiorix admired her shapely body bathed in the blue gray light of dawn. She stepped out of her tunic and glided into the pool, wings flapping, silver droplets of water glistening on her body. Her body was so white she was almost transparent, shining like the surface of the moon. She resembled a sea ghost, a very beautiful sea ghost with lovely curves.

He was spellbound.

Desire welled up inside him. He had been taught that faeries were dangerous and not to be trusted, but Nemu didn't seem to be dangerous. She had saved his life.

Her wings slowly rubbed together in silhouette, soft music floating into the air. One wing was slightly bent so the thin bones on the underside of her wing rubbed against the feathers creating a unique sound.

So that was how she played her music, he thought, impressed by her unusual talent. The music called to him. She added some words to the music, "Come to me/ I wait here in the glen/ morning mist is rising/ come close, come take my hand."

Her haunting voice opened some unknown door inside of him. He started to walk toward her when her song abruptly ended. He shook his head as if clearing a fog from his mind and picked up the hare. Sitting outside the cave, he cooked the hare. The juices crackled and sizzled. Nemu appeared and crawled into the cave just as the sun peeked over the horizon, sending golden fingers reaching through the treetops.

"Nemu, would you like something to eat?"

"It smells good. Will you bring me some?"

He crawled into the cave. "Do you mind if I join you?"

"If you so desire it, you may."

Her long, slender fingers, with their long nails, resembled talons tearing at the tender meat. But those same hands had also tenderly healed his wounds. He was about to speak when an intense pain tore through his head. Groaning, he brought his hands up to his head.

"Ambiorix, what is it?"

"Ohhh...my head."

She touched his head with her healer's hands. "Describe the pain."

"It hurts like Hades! Ohhh!"

"This Hades must be a terrible place. How long has it been hurting you like this?"

"All night."

She muttered something he couldn't understand and fumbled in her leather pack.

"Lie down. I will be right back."

"But...you can't go out there...what about the sunlight?"

"I will be fine as long as I stay in the shadows." She threw on her cloak and carefully crawled out of the cave.

She came back a little while later and gave him a hot potion to drink. He took a drink. His lips pinched together as if he had tasted a sour lemon. "It tastes horrible. It tastes like a...a tree."

She watched him with an amused expression on her face. "Maybe that's because it *is* a tree...willow bark."

He forced the bitter tea down his throat. "I think I am starting to feel better."

"Good. Now maybe you can tell me why it took you so long to tell me about your headache. I can't believe how stubborn you are! Do I disgust you so much that you can't even talk to me?"

He felt a warm flush spread across his face. "I...ah...you don't disgust me."

"Don't lie to me. I saw the way you looked at me when you saw what I was."

"Well...the wings were quite a shock and...when I was a small boy I was told that faeries would visit bad children in the night and suck the life out of them."

Tears filled her eyes. "You would think that of me after I rescued you and took care of you?"

He looked down, ashamed of what he'd said. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have said that. I was brought up in a completely different world. I didn't even know beings such as yourself existed."

"Well, I'll have you know that humans are far from perfect. I was taught to fear them and their destructive ways." She narrowed her eyes at him.

He was speechless.

"Maybe you can answer this. Why *are* humans so destructive?"

He recovered his senses, running his hand through his hair. "What? Why do you think we are destructive?"

"You don't think killing innocent people and tearing down the forests is destructive?"

"Well, no. I think of it more as expanding the Roman Empire. Rome is strong. The strong overpower the weak. That's the nature of all living things, isn't it?"

"That still doesn't make it right. I will never understand that way of thinking." Anger flashed in her eyes.

"My kind have been here for centuries, long before humans began destroying the forests and pushing us out of our homes."

He reached over, touching her hand in a comforting way. "...uh...know I haven't been very nice to you and I apologize for that. You saved my life and for that I am eternally grateful to you." He looked into her pain-filled eyes hoping to see them lively again. "I can't understand why anyone would want to destroy your kind."

Nemu relaxed, leaning against the rock wall.

"Tell me about your world, Ambiorix. I have been living in the forest for a very long time."

"I haven't been home in a long time." He paused, trying to picture it in his mind.

"I come from a place far to the south that lies near a great river. Large stone buildings as tall as the oldest trees fill the town. There are public bathhouses that are heated underneath the floor by furnaces. Mosaic tiles with many different colors and patterns decorate the floor. You can take a bath and if you want, someone will even wash your back."

Nemu furrowed her brow. "But why would you want someone to bathe you?"

He laughed. "It can be very relaxing to have someone rub your shoulders."

"Oh. Tell me more."

"There are marketplaces where people can sell their wares--fruit, wine, pottery, jewelry or clothing. You would probably like the villa my family owns not too far south of here. It is filled with gardens. Many different kinds of flowers grow there." He touched his bandaged eye. "I will probably go there after I am discharged."

"Are there any forests?"

"Not like this forest. Most of the forests have been cleared to build towns."

She frowned. "It sounds like an ugly place."

"It's not ugly!"

"Why do they have to destroy the sacred forests?"

"We've already talked about this." He tried to control his voice, but it came out sounding angry. "The forests have to be cleared to build the towns."

"The Romans shouldn't force their ways on people."

"Are we going to argue about this again?"

She stared fiercely at him.

He couldn't control his words. Nemu, like no other, could ignite his anger. "Look, I'm sorry that you're so upset, but maybe some people don't know what's really good for them."

Her eyes filled with sorrow. "I'm going to get some sleep now."

She had removed her cloak and he couldn't help noticing that her tunic was pulled tight across her breasts. Her breasts weren't large. They were proportioned to her petite body, but he thought they were perfect because he would be able to easily cup them with his hands.

His attraction to her was a mystery to him; she was so different from the refined Roman women he was accustomed to and yet there was some connection between them.

She turned away from him, curling up into a ball, her large wings covering her body like a soft white blanket.

He fought the urge to take her into his arms and comfort her. She was so childlike, so innocent and she had no idea of all the turmoil in the country with the Romans moving farther north. Soon her home in the forest would be destroyed and this thought bothered him more than he cared to admit.

* * *

The next night was bright and clear. Tiny silver stars blinked like ice crystals in the darkening sky. They were almost at the bottom of the mountain. Rocks towered over them on either side of a path that narrowed just ahead.

Nemu went first. They walked slowly, cautiously. It was almost too quiet, Ambiorix thought, feeling the hairs on the back of his neck stand up. He kept his hand near his sword.

"Ambiorix, don't move." Nemu had her eyes fixed on something in front of her that he couldn't see.

"Now, follow me." She pulled him behind a large tree. His back was against the tree trunk and she stood facing him, her body pressed up against him.

"What did you see?"

"Calgacus's warriors."

"Can we go around them?" He was so close to her he could feel the rapid beating of her heart echoing inside his own chest and he could feel her breasts pressed against his mid-section. His face was touching her soft, sweet, flower-scented hair. A pleasant warm feeling came over him and he found himself, to his horror, getting aroused.

"No. That's the only safe way off the mountain. Deep gorges are all over this area."

"How many are there? I can fight them."

"No. You are in no condition to fight, but I can distract them for you." Her warm breath smelled sweet like fresh rain.

"Then this is where we say goodbye." He suddenly had the urge to take her into his arms. He bent down and kissed her. Her lips tasted sweet like honey. She didn't pull away from him. "Uh, I...I'm sorry if I..."

He could feel her heart beating faster.

"I...I should be going now. May the gods smile upon you, Ambiorix."

He hesitated, knowing he probably wouldn't see her again.

"Nemu, thank you for everything you have done for me."

"Count to twenty and then move quickly. Your Roman camp shouldn't be too far from here." She was gone in a blink, wings flapping, the dark night enveloping her in its arms.

He waited twenty seconds, then moved quickly through the trees, sword at the ready. He didn't see anyone until the Roman camp came into view, the familiar leather tents a welcome sight.

"Halt. Identify yourself or die." The guard raised his weapon.

"It's Ambiorix."

The guard rushed over to him.

He thought he saw the shadow of a large white owl fly near the trees at the edge of the camp, but he knew better. He thought he could see her face shining in the trees like a tiny moon. 'I will never forget you, Nemu,' he thought. Weakness overwhelmed him and he stumbled. Guards surrounded him and he lost sight of her, but he knew she was still there watching over him.

He also knew she would be gone by morning and this thought filled his heart with sadness.

Chapter Two

Nemu

Thunder roared, shaking the earth, and a brilliant flash of lightning lit up the forest. Large raindrops splattered onto the forest floor, falling from the treetops that spread like great war-shields across the sky.

Nemu opened her mouth, trying to catch the raindrops on her tongue. She loved the rare thunderstorms because they created thick clouds that covered the deadly sunbeams. But this particular storm carried with it something else--a warning. She sensed, no she knew, the Romans were getting closer. Her home, her forest, was in danger. The Romans were like a spring storm--except that they weren't just passing through. They were here to stay.

Fresh droplets of rain slid down her neck and underneath her tunic. The cold water slithered across her breasts, raising her tender nipples. A shiver coursed through her body, down to her groin. It was the same feeling she had when she was near the Roman warrior, Ambiorix. Her lips tingled when she remembered the kiss they shared the night he left her.

She sighed. Troubling thoughts filled her mind. She felt alone. It had been a very long time since she felt alone. This made her think of her father. He had been gone for many years. Fond memories of him came floating back to her. He had been fishing and he accidentally captured Nemu's mother in his fishing net. They fell in love, but her mother eventually returned to the water along with the rest of her kind, the Ashrays.

Nemu stayed with her father. She chose to remain on the surface, her human half craving the feel of earth beneath her feet and the silver rays of the moon upon her face.

He taught her how to survive in the forest. "My little Nemu," he said, "you must never leave this forest. Other humans are not like me. They don't understand anyone who is different. And you are a very special child." He had smiled down at her, patting the top of her head. Fresh tears sprang to Nemu's eyes as she re-lived those memories.

She had lived among humans before, but that had been a long time ago and she had lived in solitude until Ambiorix came into her life about six moons ago.

When she first gazed upon his face, she had felt a strange fluttering in her heart. He had looked so innocent and peaceful lying injured on the forest floor. She had ignored her instinct to just leave him to die in the forest. She didn't trust most humans, especially strangers, and the unusual armor he wore looked Roman to her. She never cared for Romans. But she had sensed something special about him and she couldn't leave him there to die.

Forgetting him wouldn't be easy. She remembered how she felt when she heard his voice for the first time. His voice was very masculine, deep and resonating. It didn't match his boyish face at all. The sound of his voice made her feel all tingly and warm inside. She thought of his undamaged eye, how it was like the different layers of water, changing from a light shade of blue to dark green when he was angry. She smiled, fondly remembering the hard muscles that covered his body and the cute dimple on his chin.

He had been so arrogant and stubborn, but he had opened up a doorway inside her, awakening emotions that had been dormant for a very long time. She knew he had felt something, too, in the way he had kissed her goodbye. Each night she dreamed of him looking lovingly at her with his eyes that were as expressive as a bard's eyes and his strong warrior hands holding her and touching her in her secret places.

Closing her eyes, she began to doze off, the soft dripping rain and the steady rhythm of cricket song comforting her troubled mind. The storm was moving away, the thunder a distant rumble.

She opened her eyes and witnessed purple beams streaming downward through the thick canopy of trees as the sun set through the remnants of storm clouds. She inhaled the fresh clean air that a storm always leaves in its wake and relaxed, closing her eyes again to the soft lull of cricket song. Suddenly the crickets stopped singing and the ground began to shake.

Nemu spread her large wings, taking to the air, landing high on a tree branch. Her long, sharp nails burrowed into the slippery bark. She looked in the direction of the loud noise and saw them. A line of soldiers marched in a perfect row, hacking their way through the forest. Dusk was settling in, but Nemu's sharp night vision made it possible for her to see the uniforms that looked like Ambiorix's.

Romans!

They were too close to her home. Never would she have imagined that the Romans would expand so far north. She felt a small pang of guilt at this thought.

An uneasy feeling washed over her and she began to shake. She didn't feel safe anymore. Maybe it was time she left the forest to see what the rest of the world was like now. She could pass for a human if she wore a cloak and maybe she could find Ambiorix. Finding him wouldn't be that difficult. She would find the place with many gardens filled with many kinds of flowers. *How hard could that be?*

* * *

Sometimes the wings annoyed her. She had to cut holes in her tunics to accommodate the oversized membranous extensions. But now wasn't one of those times. Now she was grateful to have wings to carry her across this unfamiliar land. She felt too exposed. The forest here was sparse and she didn't hear the soothing, familiar songs of the tree faeries.

Round structures were visible in clearings, dotted along the ground below her. Little white puffs of smoke floated out of holes in the top of them. She knew little about humans, but she thought these might be farmsteads because the smell of animal dung assaulted her sensitive nose. She didn't know what the animals were, but they huddled together, dark figures illuminated by the starlit sky.

It had been a long time since she'd had close contact with humans. Ever since that time long ago when she became involved with the druids of Gaul, she shied away from human contact. She had limited contact now with the druids that traveled with Calgacus. They were the only humans that didn't fear her--except for Ambiorix. She wondered what other humans outside the forest were like now. She flew on, eager to find answers to her questions. The spring night was clear and calm. She sensed no danger. Occasionally an owl would send a low "*hoo hoo*" her way as if in greeting to a fellow winged creature.

Mother Earth seemed to hold her breath in the moments before the Otherworld god released the orange circle of light. Then the stillness would be broken by a cacophony of birdsong. Nemu was still amazed at this mystical time between times. She watched the first golden rays creep over the horizon like flames licking at the edge of a fire pit. The wondrous sight always filled her heart with joy even if its arrival brought danger to her. She knew this ball of light gave life to the earth.

Quickly she ducked into an old barn before the sun completed its journey into the sky. Piles of old, musty straw littered the ground and gossamer webs glittered like starlight, illuminated by the small rays of light squeezing through holes in the deteriorating wood.

Nemu found a dark corner, curled up under her wings and fell into a deep sleep.

She awoke sometime later to the sound of laughter outside the barn. Quickly she grabbed her leather pack, pulling out her cloak. She wrapped herself in the cloak and peeked through one of the holes, careful to pick one that faced away from the sun. The brightness of daylight nearly blinded her at first. As her eyes adjusted, she saw what she thought was a small human playing with something that looked like a human figurine made out of straw. This strange being was wearing a plain brown tunic and its fine blonde hair was plaited into a braid. *Was this a human child?* She had never seen a human child in daylight before. It had the small physical structure of a faery, but this was no faery. She thought this might be a female, the small features delicate like her own.

The small human stopped playing and seemed to stare right at her. Nemu had made no sound. 'How could she know I am here?' she thought.

Smiling, the small human skipped toward the barn.

Nemu started to panic, then relaxed, thinking this would be a good time to see if she could pass for human again.

"Hello? Is there a faery in here?" The voice was soft, feminine.

Nemu was startled by the question, but out of curiosity, she stepped out of the shadows, careful to stay out of the beams of sunlight. "Why do you think that?"

The small human shrugged her shoulders. "I don't know. I just had a feeling. You look human, but you're not, are you?" Her eyes were filled with wonder, no hint of fear. The straw figurine dangled from one small hand.

Nemu didn't know what to say. *Could she trust this human?* Upon closer inspection, she saw that the human's delicate features were smooth, unlined. A smudge of dirt darkened her slightly upturned nose. Nemu knew when humans grew old, lines appeared on their faces and their skin became course like tree bark. This was, indeed, a human child standing before her.

"I knew there were still some faeries around here, but most of them have gone...there are too many people driving them away...but now you are here and I can't believe it!" She chattered on and on, excitement in her voice.

Nemu stared at her in amazement. She knew some humans could see faeries, but this human had *sensed* her. "Can you keep a secret?"

The child bobbed her head up and down, the long braid bouncing from shoulder to shoulder.

"I am a water faery."

"A water faery? Shouldn't you be in the water?"

Nemu smiled. "My mother was a water faery, but my father was human. Like you."

The child's eyes lit up. "Could I be a faery, too?"

Nemu laughed. "Well, I don't know." She decided to play along with her.

"Come here and let me see if your ears are pointed like mine."

Nemu pretended to study her ears. "Hmmm. They look a little pointed. Yes, you could be part faery."

The child jumped up and down, clapping her hands. Her blue eyes sparkled with excitement. "I knew it! I knew it!"

"Now, you can't tell anyone what I am. It's a secret."

"No one would believe me anyway. No one believes me when I say I see faeries." A frown distorted her delicate freckled face.

Nemu spoke softly. "You have a special gift. Not everyone can see faeries like you can."

This brought a smile to the child's face.

"What is your name?"

"Ceri," the girl answered shyly.

"Ceri. Now if you can keep my secret, I will tell you about some faeries that I know and I can tell you how to find them."

Ceri nodded.

Nemu held out her hand. "Come sit over here, Ceri." They faced each other.

"Tree faeries are the most common faeries and the most helpful to humans. They prefer willow trees and they can be found during a full moon. But, be careful. Tree faeries like to play tricks. But if you can get to know these faeries, they can teach you tree magic and how to see into the future."

Ceri's eyes were wide with wonder.

Nemu continued. "You may not understand all of that now, but you will. And you must be aware that not all faeries are good. Some may try to harm you. Always remember you can protect yourself from a faery with a piece of iron." Nemu couldn't imagine any faery trying to harm this innocent child, but there were faeries with bad intentions toward humans.

"Iron?" Ceri asked.

"Yes. Anything made out of metal like a farm tool, cooking pot, or dagger."

"Like a horseshoe?"

Nemu looked confused. "I didn't know horses wore shoes."

Ceri giggled.

Nemu turned red. "Ceri, maybe you can explain some things to me. I have been living alone in the forest too long. You can start by telling me what horseshoes are."

They talked until the shadows began to deepen, creeping across the floor like approaching storm clouds.

"Cerrriiii!" an older female voice called, echoing across the meadow.

Ceri jumped to her feet. "I have to go now."

Nemu walked her to the doorway. "Good-bye Ceri. Remember our secret."

Ceri nodded. "Will you be here tomorrow?" Her eyes looked hopeful.

"No, I will be leaving at sunset." She hated to see disappointment on the child's face. "But if I come back this way, I will be sure to stop and see you."

Ceri brightened. She turned, waving good-bye.

Nemu watched her skip across the meadow, clutching in her arms the straw figurine that Ceri called a doll. She watched until Ceri disappeared behind the crest of a hill.

She waited for darkness, then left the barn to continue her journey. Freeing her wings from the stifling cloak, she stretched before taking flight. It felt refreshing to be outside after being in the musty old barn all day. The fresh smells of spring cleared her head.

Passing a stand of trees, Nemu caught a flash of light out of the corner of her eye. She smiled. The unmistakable song of a tree faery found its way to her ears. She decided to meet this particular tree faery. Maybe she could have her future told.

The moon bathed the land in a silver glow. She was painfully aware that it was during a full moon when she parted ways with Ambiorix.

She tried to follow the light, but the light would disappear, then reappear in another tree. Nemu knew this was one of the tricks they liked to play. She turned her head and flew away as if to leave the grove. This ploy seemed to work because the tree faery showed herself in the tree in front of her. Nemu came to a stop, hovering.

"You are one of us, but you are also human," the shimmering light stated matter-of-factly.

"My mother was Ashray," Nemu said, trying to sense the intentions of this tree faery.

"Your mother had a weakness for humans? Ashrays don't normally care for humans. That is strange indeed." The tree faery regarded Nemu with a slight tilt of its shimmering head.

"I find it strange that you are the only tree faery I have seen since I left my home in the mountains," Nemu responded coolly.

"My, you *are* a spirited one aren't you?" The tree faery laughed, its shimmering body swaying with the sound. Her laughter died away, her mood growing somber. "There aren't many of us left here, but I refuse to leave. This has been my home for many seasons."

Nemu continued to hover, remaining silent.

The tree faery seemed to regard her curiously. "Why have you left your home, half-ling?"

Nemu was beginning to regret her decision to meet this faery. "I grew tired of living in the same forest," she responded, not wanting to share the truth.

The tree faery reached out and a stream of blue light resembling lightning struck Nemu's arm. She felt the jolt of energy rush through her body, almost sending her crashing to the ground. Flapping her wings, she regained altitude.

"You could have warned me first." Nemu cast a look of displeasure toward the tree faery.

The tree faery laughed mischievously.

"What do you see, tree faery?"

"You won't like what I have to tell you," the tree faery taunted her.

"Tell me!"

"You should return to your home."

The shimmering light flitted from tree branch to tree branch moving in a zigzag pattern. Nemu followed the light anticipating its next move. She flew ahead, landing on the branch just before the shimmering light appeared before her. Peals of amused laughter filled the air.

"Very good!"

Nemu glared at her.

"I like you, half-ling. You have a strong spirit, but it is weakened by love. Your human lover is bound by duty and so must take another. You should heed my warning and return to your home." The

shimmering image began to fade away, breaking into tiny streams of blue light. "Farewell..." Her voice seemed to come from a distance.

Nemu was alone in the suddenly cold night. "No. That can't be. I won't give up and go home," she whispered to the empty tree branch.

She moved on, spying a black pool. The black depths called out to her and she landed, standing before the gently rippling water.

Reflected on the water's surface was a human, the large wings hidden in the deep shadows behind her. Nemu reached out with her hand, breaking the image, the illusion gone.

She wouldn't allow herself to feel self-pity, a weak human emotion. The tree faery had been playing games with her. "If Ambiorix can't accept me as I am, then so be it," she whispered, gazing upward, the white moon goddess caressing her with soft beams of light like tender kisses. She could have used enchantment to make him stay with her. The power was within her to do so, but she wanted him to love her by his own will, not by the illusion of magic.

Removing her clothes, she stepped into the water. Instantly, she felt her troubled thoughts fade away. Floating aimlessly, weightless, she closed her eyes, relaxing her tired muscles. The only sound was the soft lapping of the gentle waves against the sandy shore. A part of her still needed water, though she couldn't bring herself to exist only in it.

Like her mother.

She felt close to her mother when she was in the water. The cool, clean smell reminded her of the scent that had clung to her mother's skin. As if embracing her, the water swirled around her. She wanted to linger in her moon bath, but she needed to travel a little further before sunrise.

Emerging from the pool, she flapped her wings, spraying droplets all around. She dressed, then sat on a smooth rock to comb out her long hair. The fish bone comb was her mother's. She ran her fingers over the smooth, bleached edges, remembering an image she had of her mother sitting in the moonlight, running the comb through her own long raven hair. She placed the precious comb inside the small leather pouch she wore on her belt.

The sound of a snapping twig startled her and she saw the shadow move from behind, but it was too late for her to escape. A large coarse sack dropped over her body, trapping her. While cursing her inattention, she struggled with her unseen captor and tried to find her magic voice, but a blow from behind sent her spinning down a long dark tunnel.

Chapter three

Ambiorix

Ambiorix was sure he was in the right place. The small clearing and pond were there, but he couldn't find the familiar mound of earth where Nemu lived. He paced around like an anxious wolf, finally giving up and sitting on a rock that faced the pond. It was springtime, but here in the mountains the air was crisp and a shiver coursed throughout his body. He pulled his woolen cloak up and tight around his shoulders.

His hand traced the scar that started at the top of his forehead and ran through his right eye, ending at his cheekbone. The vision in his right eye was still blurry, which prevented him from continuing his service in the military.

Ambiorix had earned his command unlike the other tribunes who only took the military posts to help them gain political awareness and respect so they could earn a *quaestorship*, an entry level seat in the Senate. He had taken his position seriously, learning all he could about the province and battle strategies. As a student he had studied the writings of Julius Caesar and the Gallic wars, dreaming of the day he would command a Legion. In addition to his administrative duties as a tribune, he had used his free time to practice battle skills on horseback. Some of the other tribunes were amused by his actions, but Agricola commended him for his initiative and was very impressed with his newly acquired skills. Agricola requested that Ambiorix command a cavalry unit. He had proved himself worthy at the second battle of Mona Insula and again at Mons Graupius, even earning an award, a Corona Civica,

for saving another soldier's life in battle. But now his military career was over. Letting out a sigh, he thought of his comrades. Life as a civilian was still strange to him.

He had been given an honorable discharge, which included a large sum of money and a governor's post if he wanted it. As a Roman citizen, and the son of an important Roman official, he was given special consideration different than the auxiliaries that were under his command. Auxiliaries were soldiers from different provinces and not entitled to money. Instead, they were given Roman citizenship, immunity from taxation and the opportunity to hold a municipal office after serving twenty-five years in the military.

The money he received was used to fix up the family villa just north of Eboracum, in the Brigante territory of northeastern Britannia, near the border of the Selgovae and the Votadini tribes. He would run a remount depot there. It was a remote part of Britannia covered in trees and mist. 'Nemu would have loved it,' he thought regrettably.

Thin streams of mist swirled over the surface of the water, the full moon's reflection undulating on the smooth surface. Small rustling sounds erupted from the bushes near him. He gripped his sword. He knew it was dangerous to be here alone at night, but he had to see her again, had to know for certain if his feelings were true. But he had arrived too late.

She was gone. Emptiness, like a dark void, filled his heart.

The Romans had probably driven her away when they had moved further north and built the new legionary fortress.

Sitting for a while, staring at the pond, he watched three small waterfalls, silver blue in the moonlight, gliding through crevasses off the barren plateau and into the pond.

He imagined Nemu with wings spread, bathing naked in the moonlight. How he longed to run his hands over her shapely breasts and her small rounded buttocks. He thought that maybe he had imagined her. The blow to his head might have played with his mind. No, he was convinced she had been real. He could still smell the wildflowers on her skin and hair, but like a dream, she was just within his grasp and when he reached for her, she was gone. Gone to where he would probably never find her again.

He had no idea where she could have gone. He knew nothing about her, about her past, only that she was kind, gentle, and very passionate about her beliefs. He had to smile when he thought of how her green eyes sparkled with anger when she spoke out about the destruction of the forests. Too late he had realized that he was in love with her and it would take some time to forget her. But he didn't think he could forget her. Ever.

Slowly he stood, took a last long look around, and vaulted onto his horse. The new Roman fortress was about a day and a half away. He would travel for a while and then rest until morning.

He was careful to stay on the path and clear of the deep gorges that Nemu had warned him about. An odd feeling came over him. The moonlight, the trailing silver mist within the shadows, the strange sounds of faint laughter all seemed a part of him now.

The massive Roman legionary fortress was hidden in the trees on the East bank of the Tay River. Pinnata Castra, which meant "*Fortress on the Wing*," was positioned at one of the main routes in and out of the Highlands, and additional forts were built further north and south at the mouth of each nearby glen.

High stone-walls with an outside ditch and gatehouses on either side, served as defenses against an attack. The fort covered at least fifty acres, housing six thousand men. Along with the general's quarters and tribune's quarters, there was a hospital, headquarters building, granaries, soldier's barracks, a workshop and an officer's club. A bathhouse was constructed on the outside of the fortress near the river. Ambiorix wondered to himself how many trees had been destroyed to build the great fortress, Pinnata Castra. Before he met Nemu, he never would have given any thought to the destruction of trees.

He had fought for and still would die for Rome if he had to, but for the first time he felt himself doubting what Rome stood for. *What was he thinking?* Rome was the greatest power in the world--undefeated. *Had the faery woman bewitched him?* He shook his head, clearing his thoughts.

Across the river, a group of soldiers erected matching stone altars on either side of the bridge leading to the fortress. A trident with a fish wrapped around it was carved into the stone--a tribute to the God of the sea, Neptune, to ensure the continued flow of much-needed water.

Dust clouds, kicked up by his horse and the other supply wagons traveling the main road into the fortress, floated up into his eyes, causing them to water. He wiped his eyes, seeing the fortress gates looming before him like the gates to Hades. General Agricola had summoned him and Ambiorix made a promise that he was expected to honor.

The stone bathhouse stood just outside the gates on the west side of the main road leading into the fortress. The bathhouse seemed to beckon him with its promise of cleanliness and relaxation. After sitting astride a horse for most of the day, his muscles were screaming for release and the smell of leather and sweat filled the air around him. Ambiorix decided that a bath seemed like a good idea before calling on Agricola.

He entered through a grandiose portico and into the *apodyterium*, or changing room, where he undressed and placed his clothes in one of the niches provided to store belongings. Soldiers crowded into the apodyterium. The bathhouse was one of the few comforts for a weary, dusty soldier stationed on the northern frontier. He passed some soldiers that were playing a game of dice. Other soldiers sat around drinking and talking. Ambiorix nodded to another group of soldiers he knew as they exited the bathhouse.

The public latrines were located in a room to the right. He passed this room and entered the *frigidarium*, or cold room. On the right side was a cold plunge bath. He took a quick dip into the unheated water to wash off the road dust.

This bathhouse had four rooms plus a furnace room and an area for cisterns that held the water. It was a small bathhouse by comparison to the ones in the large cities, but the white columns holding up the high ceiling were enormous, and what seemed like miles of colorful mosaic tiles, supported by frescoed sky blue walls, surrounded the clear pool. In a niche on the far wall sat a statue of the goddess, Fortuna, the goddess of good fortune. He hoped the goddess would grant him good fortune, blessing his pending meeting with Agricola.

In a larger bathhouse, there would be additional rooms to the four basic ones. There might be a *palestra*, or large central courtyard used as an exercise yard, or a *laconicum*, a dry heat room.

Ambiorix entered the *tepidarium*, or warm room, to rub oil on his skin. The pleasant dry heat was very relaxing. On the right wall was a double-glazed window with shutters that could be left open or closed to help regulate the temperature. Ambiorix sat on the smooth wooden bench and rubbed oil over his skin to prepare for the *caldarium*, or hot room. Then he put on thick wooden sandals so he wouldn't burn his feet when he entered the caldarium because the walls and floors would be very hot.

The caldarium was very humid. Sweat pooled on his skin and dripped down his chest. He drank from the stone fountain of cold water, or *labrum*, and let the cool water run down his chin. At the center of the fountain was a mosaic depicting the head of the mythical Medusa. The coiled snakes on top of her grotesque head seemed to lash out at him, fangs bared. He stared upward at arched pillars and white colonnades. On either side of the room were two recessed areas that held plunge pools filled with hot water heated by an underground furnace. The furnace heated the boilers that supplied hot water and hot air for circulation under the flooring and through cavities inside the walls.

Voices and splashes echoed around the tiled floors and mosaic-clad walls. Ambiorix wasn't in a mood to socialize. He wanted to relax and think about his pending meeting with Agricola.

"May I?"

Ambiorix turned to see a dark slave girl. He made no effort to cover his nakedness. Slave girls were common in the bathhouses. She lowered her eyes, as she was trained to do, so as not to openly stare at him. She looked like she could be from one of the Celtic tribes in Caledonia. He felt a twinge deep within his chest when he realized she bore a striking resemblance to Nemu with her long raven hair

and slanted cat's eyes. The timid girl held a *strigil*, or scraper, in her small hand, patiently waiting for his reply.

"Yes. You may." He sat while she scraped the oil, sweat and dirt from his body. His skin tingled with every stroke of the scraper. Once his skin was clean he plunged into the hot bath. The hot water was soothing to his sore muscles. He closed his eyes, allowing his body to float. More voices echoed through the vast room as a new group of men entered.

"Ambiorix!"

He looked up and saw Marcus. He acknowledged his old friend with a smile.

Marcus grew impatient with the slave girl. "Hurry up!"

The girl quickened her pace with the scraper, accidentally catching it on Marcus' elbow. The scraper fell, landing on the tile floor, with a loud clank. She bent over to pick it up. One of the men standing near Marcus took this opportunity to have some fun with her by rubbing his naked body against her bent head. When she lifted her head, Ambiorix could see tears shining in her eyes. Marcus and the man burst into mischievous laughter.

Ambiorix's face turned red with anger, but he held back from grabbing the disrespectful man and shoving his head under the water.

"Don't mind those two beasts. They are more at home in a barn."

The girl smiled shyly and finished her work.

Marcus slid under the water near Ambiorix, eyeing his friend with suspicion.

"Beasts, are we? Since when do you guard the honor of slave girls?"

Ambiorix frowned. "She is only a child, Marcus. If he touches her again, I'll show him what it's like to be humiliated."

"A little harsh, don't you think? Are you sure you are feeling well?"

"I'm fine."

"I think you are being too soft on these people. They are below us--or have you forgotten your training?"

"I have forgotten nothing!" Ambiorix's voice echoed inside the large room. Marcus backed away, a surprised look on his face. Ambiorix ignored the curious glances from the other men nearby. He couldn't tell his friend the truth, but he didn't want to lose his friend either. "I'm sorry, Marcus, it's just that I haven't been myself since Mons Graupius."

"I understand. You suffered a great injury. You are lucky to be alive." Marcus smiled reassuringly, his dark eyes somber. "You should visit the temple. Maybe that will help you to clear your mind."

Ambiorix relaxed, resting his head against the ledge of the pool. The hot water helped to loosen his tense muscles. He looked at Marcus. His friend looked concerned. "Maybe you're right. I will visit the temple on my way home."

* * *

The guards recognized him and waved him on through the gates. He stayed on the main roadway, or *via principalis*, which would take him to the *praetorium*, the General's quarters.

On the main road he passed barracks on either side and on the right was a u-shaped building that looked like the officer's club. The fortress was bustling with activity. Workers hurried about trying to complete the barracks at the rear of the fortress and lines of wagons marched in and out, dropping off their loads of timber.

Straight ahead was an imposing whitewashed building with bright red roof tiles. The headquarters building was a very important administrative and religious center. He entered the gate into a colonnaded courtyard where religious ceremonies and sacrifices took place. On either side of the courtyard were the armories and beyond these rooms was a long hall with a raised platform at one end, from which the commanding officer would address the troops. A sudden feeling of melancholy washed over him as he gazed at the platform, remembering the inspiring pre-battle speeches that he would no longer hear and the battles he would no longer be a part of.

Along the rear of the courtyard were five rooms. The center room held the shrine to the gods, the valuable battle standards of the Legio XX Valeria Victrix and a statue of the emperor, Domitian.