

MANDA SCOTT

BOUDICA
DREAMING THE EAGLE



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BOUDICA DREAMING THE EAGLE

PROLOGUE
AUTUMN AD 32



The attack came in the hour before dawn. The girl woke to the stench of burning thatch and the sound of her mother screaming. Outside, in the clearing beyond the hut, she heard her father's response, and the clash of iron on bronze. Another man shouted – not her father – and she was up, throwing off the hides, reaching back into the dark behind the sleeping place for her skinning knife or, better, her axe. She found neither. Her mother screamed again, differently. The girl scabbled frantically, feeling the fire scorch her skin and the sliding ache of fear that was the threat of a sword-cut to the spine. Her fingers closed on a haft of worn wood, running down to the curve of a grip she knew from hours of oil and polish and the awe of youth; her father's boar spear. She jerked it free, turning and pulling the leather cover from the blade in one move. A wash of pre-dawn light hit her eyes as the door-skin was ripped from its hangings and replaced as rapidly by a shadow. The bulk of a body filled the doorway. Dawn light flickered on a sword blade. Close by, her father screamed her name. '*Breaca!*'

She heard him and stepped out of the dark. The warrior in the doorway grinned, showing few teeth, and lunged forward. His blade caught the sunlight and twisted it, blinding them both. Without thinking, she did as she had practised, in her mind, in the safety of the lower horse paddocks, and once in the forest beyond. She lunged in return, putting the weight of her shoulders, the twist of her back and the straightening kick of both legs into the thrust of the weapon. She aimed for the one pale segment of skin she could see. The spear blade bit and sank into the notch of his throat at the place where the tunic stopped and the helmet had not yet begun. Blood sluiced brightly downwards. The man choked and stopped. The sword that sought her life came slicing on, carried by the speed of his lunge. She wrenched sideways, too slowly, and felt the sting of it carve between her fingers. She let go of the spear. The man toppled over, angled away from her by the weight of the haft. The doorway brightened and darkened again. Her father was there.

‘Breaca? Gods, Breaca—’ He, too, stopped. The man on the floor pushed a hand beneath his side and tried to rise. Her father’s hammer sang down and stopped him, for ever. He brought his arms up and round her, holding her close, smoothing her cheek, running his big, broad smith’s fingers through her hair. ‘You killed him? My warrior, my best girl. You killed him. Gods, that was good. I could not bear to lose you both—’

He was rocking her back and forth, as he had when she was a small child. He smelled of blood and stomach acid. She pushed her arms down his front to make sure that he was whole and found that he was. She tried to squirm free, to look at the rest of him. He leaned in closer and his breathing changed and she felt wet warmth slide down her neck to the wing of her

shoulder and from there down the flat plane of her chest. She let him hold her, then, while he wept, and didn't ask him why her mother had not come in with him to find her. Her mother, who carried his child.

The stomach acid was her mother's. She lay near the doorway and she, too, carried a spear in her hand. She had used it once to good effect but they had been two against her one and the child she carried within had slowed her turn. The slice of the blade had opened her from chest-bone to hips, spilling out all that had been inside. Breaca crouched down beside her. The tentative light of the new day brought colour where before there had been none. She reached down to the small, crinkled thing lying at her mother's side and turned it over. Her father was behind her. 'It would have been a boy,' she said.

'I know.' He let his hand rest on her shoulder. His fingers were still. His weeping had stopped. He knelt down and hugged her, fiercely. His chin pressed on her head and the burr of his voice rocked through her neck to her chest as he spoke. 'What need have I of another son when I have a daughter who can face an armed warrior and live?'

His voice was warm and there was pride in the wretched grief and she had not the strength to tell him that she had acted out of instinct, not courage or a warrior's heart.

Her mother had been leader of the Ezeni, firstborn of the royal line, and she was honoured in death as she had been in life. Her body was bound in fine linen and hides, closing the child back into her abdomen. A platform was built of hazel and elm and the body raised onto it, lifting her closer to the gods and out of reach of wolf and bear. The three dead warriors of the Coritani,

who had broken the laws of the gods in killing a woman in childbirth, and of the elders in killing the leader of a neighbouring tribe without fair battle, were stripped and dragged to the forest to feed whatever found them first. Breaca was given the sword from the one she had killed. She didn't want it. She gave it to her father, who broke it across his forging block and said he would make her a better one, full sized, for when she was grown. In its stead, Airmid, one of the older girls, gave her a crow's feather with the quill dyed red and bound round with blue horsehair, the mark of a kill. Her father showed her how to braid her hair at the sides, as the warriors do for battle, with the feather hanging free at her temple.

In the late morning, Eburovic, warrior and smith of the Eцени, took his daughter to the river to wash her clean of the blood of battle and bind the cut on her hand and then walked her back to the roundhouse to the care of Macha, her mother's sister, the mother of Bán, his first and only living son.

I
SPRING-AUTUMN AD 33





BOUDICA DREAMING THE EAGLE

I



Bán had the dream for the first time when he was eight years old, in the spring after Breaca lost her mother and got a sword-cut on her hand. He woke suddenly and lay sweating under the hides, his eyes searching the dark of the roof space for comfort. A long time ago, when he was younger and afraid of the night, his father had carved the marks of horse, bear and wren on the crooked beam above his bed to keep him safe. He had spent light summer evenings tracing them in his mind, feeling the wall of their protection. Now he lay in the pressing silence, praying for light, and saw nothing. If the moon had risen, it did not shine on his side of the roundhouse. If there were stars, their light did not penetrate the thatch. Inside, the cooling embers of the fire gave off a thread of smoke but no flame. It was the blackest night he could ever remember and he might as well have been blind, or still dreaming.

He did not want to be dreaming. Blinking, he searched for other ways to anchor himself in the world of the living. Light, dry smoke tickled his nose. Each night his mother laid a tent of twigs on the embers, that

the smoke of their burning might carry her family safely through the world beyond sleep. With age, he was beginning to understand the language of the smoke. He breathed in and let the different tones filter through his head, sorting them into an order that would speak to him: the acerbic touch of sun-scorched grass, the warmer, more sinuous thread of acorns roasting, the pricking of wet shale and the high, clear note of tannin, as from a hide, freshly cured. It was this last one that fixed it. An image came of a girl lying asleep under a scattering of white petals and, later, of a tree dripping red with berries the colour of dried blood that he had been told not to eat. *Hawthorn*. It would have been that.

He made his body relax. He was calmer now. His heart beat less hard. He closed his eyes and let the drifting smoke carry him back to the start of the dream. In the other world it was daytime. He was riding a strange horse, not one of his father's; a red mare with a hide the colour of a fox in winter. She was tall and very fit. He ran his hand down the length of her neck and her coat sparked like a new coin beneath his fingers. They were running fast, at dream-speed. He was naked and the mare had no saddlecloth. He could feel the bunch of her muscles gather and pull beneath his thighs. If he worked to let go of this world, he could see the steam billow back from her nostrils and hear the whistle of her breath over the splashing hammer of hooves on turf and bog. In a while, she passed out of the sunlight and entered a mist so thick he could barely see the tips of her ears. The fog swirled in banners past his eyes, making him blind. He sucked in a breath and smelled horse-sweat and stale bog-water and the mint-sour tang of myrtle crushed underfoot. Without any good reason, he lifted one hand and cupped it round his mouth and

yelled a word – a name – into the dizzying white. His voice came out harshly, like a raven's, and the name itself made no shape in his head. It echoed and came back to him and still made no sense. He let it go and leaned forward instead, singing to the red mare, urging her on, promising her fame and long life and strong foals if she carried them both safely through the danger. There was certainly danger, both of them felt it; a distant malevolence kept at bay only by their speed. The mare flicked her ears back to listen and then cocked them suddenly forward. The boy felt a change in her stride and looked up. Ahead of him, a fallen yew blocked the path. The mare gathered herself and tucked her head in, shortening her stride. He wrapped the fingers of both hands tight in the snaking red of her mane, feeling the coarse cut of the hair on his palms. She jumped cleanly and he soared with her into eternity. The ground was firm on the far side. The mare stretched her forelegs to land. The boy relaxed his grip on the mane and sat upright and this time, the first time, he lost himself in the fierce joy of it, exulting in the stories he would tell Breaca and their father and later, when he had it right, his mother.

The world changed as they landed. The fog vanished and it was dusk, not daylight, and he was no longer a boy riding a mare, but a man, an armed warrior, lying flat to the neck of a war-horse compared to which the mare was a small and stringy pony. The beast was in battle-fever, running its heart out, churning up clods and stones in its wake. The hammer of its passing shook the earth and ripped the trees from their roots. Bán swept a hand forward along a black, thick-pelted neck and the scarred skin of his palm came back drenched with sweat and fresh blood. He drew in a sharp breath and the stench of his own sweat flooded

his nostrils, bringing with it a dread that went beyond terror.

He might have fallen then, it hit him so hard, but he felt another's arms clench tight round his waist and knew that he carried someone behind him and that the second life mattered more than his own. With sudden clarity, he understood that the danger was not for him but for the other and that there was safety ahead. He was leaning back to say this when the horse caught its foot in a hole and stumbled. It twisted violently in mid-stride, fighting to regain its footing, and the great head turned on the neck so that, for a brief, blinding moment, Bán's eyes locked with those of the beast and what he saw there froze the breath in his throat. Then a voice shouted a warning in a tone he had never heard before and, even in half-sleep, his body jerked and twitched as a blade arced down out of nowhere and severed his left hand at the wrist.

The pain of that had woken him the first time and it did so again. For a second time that night, he lay wide-eyed in the dark while the hammer of his heart made hoofbeats in his ears loud enough to shake the stars from the heavens. He was less afraid this time. He had seen a thing only the gods should see and the sheer impossibility of it pushed him through fear into the still place beyond. He breathed in and made himself feel the things around him. The hound that shared his bed had gone and he lay alone between the hides with only his younger sister to keep him warm. Silla lay on her stomach, her skin glued tight to his with the damp of their sweat so he could feel the ripple of her ribs and the angles of her hip bones pressing into his side. He concentrated on the place where the point of her knee dug into his calf and let the feel of it bring him back to himself. With that, he found that her breath whistled with

the same rhythm as the mare's and then, later, that the weight of her body was crushing his left wrist, cutting off the feeling from his hand. He eased his arm out, slowly, doing his best not to wake her.

Silla was three years old and had only lately graduated to sleeping with her older brother. Bán had looked forward to that, cherishing the thought of her company with its promise of extra warmth and the novelty of sharing the hides with someone other than a hound. Reality had been more of a two-edged sword. Nine nights out of ten, she was a cheerful bundle of clinging heat who screwed up her nose and squirmed in under his armpit and listened while he whispered the stories of their father, the greatest warrior and smith the Ezeni had ever known, and of their mother, who could become the wren and travel the spaces between the worlds to keep them safe. On those nights, his sister giggled and let him draw the outlines of the beasts on her skin, pressing lightly so the feeling tingled and lasted to morning. Then there was the one night in ten when some unnameable thing had upset her and all he had to do was turn over too fast in his sleep to tip her back into mewling, wailing infancy. Without trying, she could wake half the roundhouse and experience had taught him that it was Bán, not Silla, who would wither under the weary stares in the morning.

Tonight was not one of those nights. She had listened to his story of the crow and the she-bear and had slept soundly, even when he woke with the dream. He moved himself away from her and rolled to the edge of the bed to sit up. His bladder was full and would not last the night without emptying, which was, perhaps, where the urgency in the dream had come from. He slid his hand between his thighs to check that he had not disgraced himself and then, belatedly and with care,

reached under the hides to do the same for his sister. Both were dry. He stood, letting relief lever him out of the warmth into the chill of the night.

It was not as cold as he had thought. The late cloud of the evening had cleared but the wind blew warmly from the south and kept the frost from the ground. Still, he reached back in through the door-flap and dragged his cloak from the bed. It was cut down from one of his father's, scorched in places from the forge but still heavy with the smell of sheep's oil and man-sweat. The important thing about it – apart from the colour, which was blue, like the sky at dusk, and marked him out as one of the Ezeni – was that his mother had told him that when he wore it properly, clasped with the brooch at the right shoulder, he looked just like his father. It was not true, exactly; his father was fair while he had the dark hair and browner skin of his mother, but the boy understood the likeness to be in the way that he bore himself, particularly around the women. He had taken care, in the time since he had heard that, to watch how his father was with his mother and to hold himself the same whenever he was with Breaca. Tonight, in the dark and with nobody watching, there was less need for formality. He left the brooch in its niche at the bedside and wrapped his cloak tight around his shoulders like a hide, draping the free ends over his elbows to keep them from trailing in the mud. Like that, he was nearly as warm as he had been in bed.

He edged quickly round the side wall of the round-house. He had been wrong earlier when he had thought the night completely black. The moon had long since dropped below the curve of the earth but the stars made a canopy of light from one horizon to the other, casting soft, muted shadows. High up, the Hunter stepped over the crown of a beech tree. The boy swung

his fist up, giving the salute of the warrior. This, too, he could do alone in the dark when there was no-one to tell him that he was a child, not yet come to manhood and too young to make the warrior's mark.

The hounds came to join him as soon as he stepped free of the rampart. They had been at the midden and smelled of it now as they crowded round, butting him in the groin and armpit, grinning and whining in greeting. He pushed his way through them, whispering gruff threats that offered all manner of violence if they didn't let him pass. None of them feared him but they drew back anyway, showing white teeth in the starlight, leaving only the brindled dog with the white ear that shared his bed to brush up against him, rubbing shoulder to shoulder after the way of a friend. He hooked his arm across its neck and the beast leaned heavily against him as he stood upwind of the midden, holding himself straight the way his father did, to piss in an arc onto the picked-out head of a pig. The dog nudged him as he finished, pushing him off balance. He grabbed at its coat and used it to pull himself upright. The hound backed away, grinning, hauling him with it and they made it a game, tussling quietly in the dark. The dog was the tallest of the hounds, one of his mother's best stag hunters and soon to be sire to its first litter of pups. The bitch chosen as dam was well past her prime and there had been a long and heated discussion between his mother and one of the grandmothers at the time of her bleeding as to whether she was not too old to bear more young. She was the only one left of her line and she was still the only hound in the pack that had ever brought down a deer single-handed, and the old blood was a good thing, strengthening the untested fire of youth. So said his mother, and the grandmother, perhaps mollified by talk of youth leavened by

age, had relented and given her blessing to the match.

That was two months ago, just before the first of the pregnant mares reached her time. Since then, he had been caught up in the foaling, watching as each one slid out and was freed from the birth-caul. On the night of the quarter-moon, he had chosen the dun filly with the sickle-shaped mark between the eyes to be his own brood mare when he was old enough to take one and she was old enough to breed. The greater part of each day had been spent at her side in the paddock, making sure that she knew the sound of his voice better than any of the others. She was three days old and already she would leave her dam and run across the paddock towards him for her lick of salt. In the stir and flurry of that, he had only vaguely taken note that the bitch, too, was close to her time. When he thought about it, he remembered that her nipples had been leaking milk for the past two nights and that when he had lain alongside her in the doorway to the roundhouse that afternoon with his hand on her belly, he had felt the press of a small, round head against his palm.

The boy felt the nudge of the sire-hound and looked round for the bitch amongst the pack. When he didn't find her there, he turned back towards the roundhouse, thinking that perhaps he had stepped over her in the doorway in his hurry to get out. She was not there. Nor, when he looked in through the door-flap, was his mother.

He let the skin fall back into place. There were a lot of reasons why his mother might be out at night and a whelping bitch was not the greatest of them. If she had gone out beyond the turf rampart, he might never find her. Beside the great roundhouse, there were only six other buildings – seven if you counted the grain-silo – within the encircling ditch, but beyond it were the

paddocks and the river and then the forest, which held greater dangers than a boy of eight could handle. He was forbidden, on pain of cursing, to pass through the gate at night without adult company. If the Coritani attacked and he were about to die, or be dragged into slavery, he might flout the rule, but not otherwise.

So then, where to look? He chewed his lip and turned a slow circle, listening. The sounds of the night rang in his ears: the wet panting of the dogs, the crop and step of mares in the paddock beyond the ditch, the whicker of a nursing foal, and far out and once only the call of an owl to its young and a single high squeak in return. All he could hear of people was his father's breathing, the roll of it dulled only slightly by the wall between them.

He had decided to walk in a circle, following the path of the moon, when he heard a sound that was not of the night: the single yelping cry of a hound in pain and a cushioning murmur of voices, his mother's among them. It was what he was waiting for. He ran as fast as he could, taking care for the mess of the midden, and came up, panting, at the door to the women's place on the far western edge of the enclosure, opposite the entrance. There he stopped. When he was very small, his mother had taken him inside with her to lie in the moss, while the rise and fall of her voice kept him peaceful. Then he had passed through childhood to boyhood and the visits had slowed and ceased altogether. Twelve months more and he would be forbidden so much as to stand in front of the entrance. He stood in front of it now and heard the bitch cry out a second time; a sharp, wheedling cry of pain. The brindle dog paced at his side, whining. It was not a patient hound and had no idea that the male was not welcome inside. It clawed at the door-skin, pulling it

sideways, and the boy found himself standing in an open doorway, with his eyes screwed against the sudden glare of the fire, withering under the combined stare of every woman he knew.

‘Bán?’ His mother’s voice carried over the sucked-in breaths of the others. Her shape moved on the far side of the fire. Beside her, he saw a flash of hair the colour of a fox in autumn, bending over a single, still form on the floor. His dream came back to him, suddenly, cripplingly. He had forgotten it in the search for the bitch. Now it swamped his senses. He stumbled forward against the carved post of the doorway. The marks of the horse and the wren untwined themselves from the rest and whirled over his head.

‘*Bán!*’

He was too near the fire. He could feel the heat of it through his shins. It was very hot. They had been burning birch, well aged, to give off the most light and the least smoke. Somewhere else, sage smoked thickly. His mother caught him and spun him round, turning him away from the fire. She was kneeling, her face close to his. He blinked through tears that were only partly the sage. ‘I had a dream,’ he said, and his voice was a child’s. ‘I was riding a mare with hair like Breaca’s.’

‘That’s good.’ Her voice was gentle. Her hands were less so. ‘The hawthorn speaks to you. I thought that it might. Come back with me now and you can tell me your dream.’

He strained to turn round. The dream had not been of a mare alone. ‘The hound?’ he asked. ‘Is she well?’

‘She’s very tired. It’s been a long night. She will be better by dawn.’

‘And the whelp? The black one with the white head?’

He heard the grandmothers hiss behind him. It was not a good sound. The fingers on his shoulders dug in

tighter. 'Home,' said his mother. 'Now.' And then, coming back to herself, 'We can talk of it there.'

'Why so, Macha?' The voice was an old one, smoked dry by the years. 'There is no need for haste now. The child has seen as much as he is ever going to. If the smoke has brought him, perhaps it is up to the smoke to choose when to let him go.'

The grip on his shoulders relaxed. He took his chance and turned round. His father's mother's sister sat on the edge of the fire closest to the door and she was smiling at him, which was a miracle in itself. In all of his life, that one had never smiled at him. He had thought her a sow badger; slow and plodding and too readily pushed to anger. If he had heard her speak three words at once it was only to tell him to drop the door-flap and never with the depth of humour that he heard from her now. He felt his mother change her mind. With the flat of her hand, she pressed him down to sit alongside the grandmother and took her own place on the far side of the fire. She snapped her fingers. The brindle dog turned and left. Bán felt the draught of the door-skin falling into place behind it. Quite urgently, he wanted to follow. The grandmother tapped him lightly on the shoulder to hold him still. Breaca sat opposite him on the other side of the fire. Her hair was a river of living bronze, fluid in the flames, brighter now than the mare's coat had been in his dream. She smiled at him, the special smile they saved for each other in times of trouble. It was the first time he had seen it since her mother died. A wash of relief took away some of the fear. He smiled back and squared his shoulders, as his father did in the elder council.

The grandmother spoke. 'There was only one whelp,' she said. 'He was too big and coming backwards. The bitch had not the strength to birth him herself. In

the end, we had to take his hind legs and pull him out.’

His heart twisted tight in his chest. ‘But he will live?’

‘No.’ The grandmother shook her head. Her eyes were rimmed red with the smoke. He realized she was the one who had argued against the mating. ‘I’m sorry. Your mother was half right. He would have made a good hound, possibly the best, but he is too weak to live – and not well marked. The gods send these things as a sign. It is not for us to go against them.’

‘But then why was he sent at all?’ The whelp lay in the pool of shadow cast by the fire. The boy dropped to the floor, lifting the limp form to his face. It lolled in his hands, a damp, cold, salty thing with a head too big for its body. It was not a white head, that had been a trick of the slime and the firelight, nor was the body completely black. When he looked at it carefully, he found that one ear was white with a streak like a teardrop that slid down to circle one eye and that the rest was a dark patterned brindle like all of the other hounds but with small flecks of white scattered through the coat, like hail seen on a dark night.

Hail. The word resonated inside. It was a good name for a hound. He kept it in to himself for now, cradling the thing tight to his chest. It squirmed and he felt the heart flutter under his fingers.

‘Look!’ He held the pup in the light. ‘He’s not dead.’

‘Not yet, but he is too close for us to bring back.’ It was a different grandmother who spoke. She sounded tired. Around him, the others murmured assent. Underneath it, he could hear the tug and pull of other things that were not being said.

His mother had lines round her eyes that had not been there in the morning. A long string of bloody mucus crossed over one arm. She spoke to him more gently than the second grandmother had done.

‘It’s a hound puppy, Bán. There will be others.’ She reached a hand across the fire towards him. ‘He should have had brothers and sisters beside him in the womb but the bitch was too old and she could only make one. On his own, he grew too big and the birthing was too long. Even if we bring him back now, he won’t have the strength to suckle. The bitch will run dry within hours and her son will die of hunger, having known the first breaths of life. It will be harder for him then. Better to let him go now.’

Her voice rang true. She spoke as she believed. He sat where he was. ‘But the dream . . . the gods’ horse . . .’ He hadn’t told her. She looked at him, squinting through the firelight. He said, ‘In my dream I was riding a red mare but then it wasn’t a mare, it was a horse and he was black, with a white head.’ His own name meant ‘white’ in the tongue of the Hibernians. He had known that since he was old enough to know the sound. He had never found the reason why.

The grandmothers linked eyes over his head. He felt the path of their stare like a sword-cut. His mother came to kneel at his side. The new lines on her face had gone. ‘Bán? You dreamed a horse with a white head? All white?’

‘Yes. No. Not all of it. It had a black patch between the eyes, like a shield with a sword laid across it.’

‘And what did you see in the black?’ It was the elder grandmother, the oldest of the old women, his mother’s mother’s half-cousin. Her hair was so thin and so white you could see the smooth scalp all the way across the top from one ear to the other. Beneath it, the skin of her face was as wrinkled and brown as bark scraped from an oak. Her eyes were watery brown with yellow at the edges and the black dot in the middle was milking over in a way that said she would soon be blind. But this

evening she was not blind. Her eyes were wide and they picked up the light of the fire, shining in through his own skull to the memory of the dream. It must be so. How else could she know that he had seen something in the black sunburst on the head of the horse?

‘I don’t know.’ He frowned, trying to remember. In the dream, he had known exactly what it was. It had made sense of everything else. Now it was simply a patch in the shape of a warrior’s shield that had shown him something else in reflection. He struggled and failed and saw the effort reflected in his mother’s eyes. ‘I’m sorry,’ he said. ‘I can’t remember.’

His mother had picked up the hound puppy now and was rubbing its chest absently, her gaze still on her son. One of the grandmothers rapped her shoulder and, without looking up, she handed the whelp across the smoke. Breaca took it and began to breathe for it, pressing her mouth to its muzzle and blowing deep into its chest. Someone must have taught her that, and recently; she hadn’t known how to do it for the colt foal that had died by the stream. One of the other women lifted a fold of her cloak and began to rub hard over the whelp’s heart. Something had changed. They were going to bring it back. He wanted to watch, to help, but his mother lifted him round to sit opposite her, with his back to the bitch and the pup. ‘Tell me the dream,’ she said.

He told her as much as he could remember. It took less time than it had taken to dream it. At the end, he could still not tell her what it was he had seen when the horse turned its head. Only the feeling of it was left with him and he had few enough words for that.

‘Did you feel afraid?’

‘No. The first time I did, but not the second time. I knew I had nothing to fear.’

‘Not even when the sword struck you?’

‘No.’ That puzzled him. He should have been afraid of the sword. But then he had been a warrior in battle and his father had told him that, in the frenzy of fighting, some warriors passed beyond their fear. He looked down at his left arm. It was as whole as the other. ‘Maybe I knew it wasn’t real.’

‘Maybe.’ She didn’t believe it. Across the fire, something was whimpering, faintly, like the wind in a reed. The old bitch lifted her head and grumbled a greeting. The pup was rubbed one final time and placed in the fall of her teats. She licked it hard, pushing it up and in. It mewled and pawed and had no idea how to suck.

‘He will have to be fed.’ His mother stretched forward and pressed the hindmost teat between finger and thumb. When the first bead of milk appeared, she held the pup to it, smearing its lips with white. It mumbled and sucked and, the second time, did it more strongly.

The elder grandmother spoke. Her voice was the rustle of dead leaves in winter. ‘The boy had the dream. The whelp is his to rear.’ She turned to Bán. Her eyes scored his face. ‘He will not live without help. Will you give it?’

‘Yes.’ He had no doubts about that. He said, ‘His name is Hail.’

That sealed it. To name a thing gave it life. His mother took hold of his arm. ‘For the first half-moon, they feed more often than not, through the night as well as the day. I will show you how. If you can do it, the whelp will live. If not, he will die. If he dies, it is the will of the gods and you are not to blame yourself. Is that clear?’

‘Yes.’

‘Swear to me that you won’t blame yourself.’

He swore. He swore by Briga, the three-fold Mother, and her daughter, Nemain, the moon, and by the smaller gods of childbirth and rearing. Then, because the whelp was a dog and not a bitch, he swore also by Belin god of the sun and by Camul the war god. It was a long and complicated oath and at the end of it he remembered that he was not swearing to stay awake and keep the whelp alive but rather not to blame himself if it died. He spoke that aloud, to make it clear.

His mother was smiling when he had finished. She held out her hand and lifted him up. ‘Come then, I’ll show you how it is done. And then we’ll find you somewhere to live with her so you don’t keep us all awake through the night with your nursing.’