

I



Rain clouds bruised the last pale of the sky, lit to copper by the dying sun, and the ring of fires beneath.

Cunomar of the Eцени, only son to the Boudica, thrust a lit brand into the bundle of gorse and thorn and straw that lay close to the base of the legionary watchtower.

He waited, watching the clouds and the fire equally. A lifetime passed; time to be seen, for the alarm to be raised in the watchtower above, for a legionary standing on the ramparts to hurl a javelin into his unarmoured flesh, for a dozen of the enemy to burst from the gates with their blades unsheathed, seeking the life of the warrior who sought to burn them.

None of these things happened. He watched the nuggets of mutton fat wound in the centre of the thorn take light and flare, brightly. Three

part-naked warriors ran in from his right and threw more bundles of fatted furze along the foot of the wall. Cunomar ran after them, lighting each one. He hurled the burning end of his brand into the heart of the last.

Straw and dry thorn blazed, belching greased smoke. He backed away, choking. Heat washed over him then, as if the need to succeed had kept him safe from the ravening power of the fire. Freed from that, he felt the skin of his forearms blister where burning tallow had sprayed onto them. The king-band on his arm grew dull in the heat and burned him.

‘Cunomar! Here!’

He ran back into unseen shadows, blinded by the flames. Friendly hands caught his elbow and dragged him to shelter behind a short barrier of woven wicker palisades. Someone – Ulla, perhaps; she cared for him most closely – reached across to cover his head and shoulders with a cape of soaked rawhide, making sure not to touch the healing wound on the right side of his head where his ear had once been. Someone else passed him a scrap of wet wool and he pressed it over his mouth and nose. He tried to make his breathing shallow and could not; the run and the heat and the fire had taken that from him.

He breathed smoke and coughed again and was not the only one. His lungs ached. The bear grease about his torso and limbs became fluid in the heat. Battle marks in woad and white lime that spelled out his oath to the she-bear, to honour her in

victory or die, smeared into meaningless swirls. His hair stood up like a cock's comb, a hand's length of stiff, white lime. He flexed his shoulders, and felt the heat equally on the old bear scars, cut with love by the elder dreamers of the Caledonii, and the new ones scourged by Rome. None of them matched the savage, perpetual ache at the side of his head where a hawk-scout of the Coritani in Roman pay had hacked off his ear.

Far faster than he had imagined, the flames engulfed the wood of the fort, except at the gates, where the timber was steaming, but had not yet lit. Following standing orders, the men of the XXth legion on watch inside had doused the gates with water before dusk. Even here, in the occupied east of Britannia, where there was supposed to be peace, the legions still protected their watchtowers nightly against fire.

Valerius had said they would do that, and that the men inside would be drunk because, orders notwithstanding, the legionaries did not believe there was any risk of attack. He had said, too, that, drunk or not, they would still charge from the gates in a wedge as soon as the alarm was sounded.

Valerius knew too much and was too free with his opinions. On principle, Cunomar did not want him to be right.

He was thinking exactly that when the gates slammed open and the legionaries charged out. They were formed in a wedge, with their shields to

the outside and wet leather draped about their heads as protection against fire and iron.

Cunomar's spear had already left his hand when the words he needed came to him. 'Go for their legs! Aim below the shields. Go!'

The night splintered apart. Two dozen greased, limed, howling bear-warriors threw down their wicker barriers and hurled their spears. Most aimed as they had been told and if they did not all hit flesh and bone, they caught amongst the ankles of men who stumbled into the night dazzled and deafened and drunk but still viciously able to fight.

'Break the wedge! Don't let them form a line!'

The battle rage had not yet come. Cunomar was intoxicated by heat and smoke and the heady release of action, but still able to think. He saw his second spear glance off the knee of the leading legionary. The man wore the helmet plumes of a junior officer but no leg greaves. Shocked, he looked up, drunk and sober at once. His eyes were black pits in a fire-red face. He was too young to be leading men alone.

His eyes barely changed as another spear struck him. He collapsed onto one knee, using his shield to push himself upright, and opened his mouth and shouted 'Hold the wedge!' and it was then, spurred by the angular grate of the Latin, that the bear took hold of Cunomar, filling his heart and his gut and his head with a vast, unstoppable fury, so that he no longer knew what he did, only that he needed to kill and to keep on killing until every

thing of Rome had been broken apart and driven into the sea for ever.

He was of the she-bear; he ran to battle unshielded and unarmoured, fighting only with spear and knife. Bear grease was his armour, his rigid, white-limed hair his helmet. The king-band that encircled his arm marked him as the son of the Boudica, child of the royal line of the Eцени. His knife was a gift from his mother, made before the men of Rome had flogged her. He had made his first battle kills with it, in her company. As he had done then, he sought the song of the blade that he might bear a small part of the Boudica into battle.

Screaming her name, he smashed the cheek of the Roman officer with the knife's hilt, then stabbed at his eyes. The man's one good knee buckled. He crumpled to the bloody earth, too suddenly dead to cry out.

Exultant, Cunomar threw back his head and howled victory for the Boudica and the bear. If one of the enemy had struck him in that moment, he would have died. He knew it and did not care. He lived because the bear watched over him and was invincible. He shared a second kill with Ulla while there were still men alive to hunt and was sorry there were not more.

Afterwards, it was quiet, but for the spit and tumble of the fire.

Eight Roman legionaries and their officer had manned the watchtower, and all were dead. Of the

two dozen she-bears who had attacked it, only Scerros, a red-haired youth of the northern Eцени, had taken any wound and that a shallow sword thrust to the thigh which would heal by the month's turn.

The enemy dead were stripped of their weapons and armour and their bodies fed to the fire. The flames reached up for the sky, bright as sun in the encroaching night. The heat was unbearable.

Cunomar walked back to the wicker palisades and began to stack them. From that distance, the fire was pleasantly warm, easing the transition to calm.

'It'll be seen.' Ulla spoke from the shadows to his right. Her kill had been first and cleanest, and she had visited the bodies of the slain afterwards, running her blade along each throat that the men might be assuredly dead before they were given to the fire.

Such an act was a mark of her care, or her hate; probably both. She, too, had been flogged by Rome, with Scerros and three others. These five made the tight, unyielding kernel of Cunomar's honour guard, and if Rome had had the choosing of them, still, he was glad of the choices. Nearly a month had passed since and they were recovered enough to move and to fight, but the scars would never go, nor the patina of otherness that set them apart even within the she-bear, which was already set apart from the greater mass of the Boudica's gathering war host.

Ulla was dark-haired and bright-eyed and she

killed as a hawk does, with a fluid, savage beauty. She joined Cunomar in stacking the wicker barriers in a heap.

‘The fire will be seen,’ she said again. ‘If a single sentry of the Twentieth is awake and even half sober in any of the other watchtowers, they’ll light the signal chain and the whole of Camulodunum will know by morning there has been death in the Eцени lands.’

Cunomar hefted the topmost palisade, testing its weight. ‘I would think so,’ he agreed. ‘Valerius said as much.’

Ulla met him face on, her lips set straight. ‘He said it as a warning, not an invitation,’ she said. ‘He thinks we are not yet ready to take on the legions.’

‘I know. I think he’s wrong. Soon, we will learn which of us is right.’ Cunomar hurled the wicker onto the flames. The fire coughed and stuttered and flared higher and brighter. He stepped back, smiling.

‘Perhaps if we throw enough of these on,’ he said, ‘it may be that we can make the flames reach the clouds. However drunk they are, Rome’s watchmen will find it hard not to notice that.’

Ulla was the closest of his honour guard, his sworn shield in battle; she had never yet argued against him. With the four others who had bound themselves closest to the Boudica’s son, she helped him to throw the wicker onto the fire.

Before the last of the wood was alight, a pinpoint of flame blossomed to the south and west.

For a moment it looked fragile, a dandelion puff fluttering in the wind. Cunomar turned to face it fully and spoke aloud the first eight names of the she-bear as he had been taught them in the caves of the Caledonii.

The night vibrated, richly. At the sound, the distant flame strengthened and held, and was joined, presently, by seven others, strung out over half a night's ride in a line that led directly south to the veterans' colony of Camulodunum, Rome's first city in its occupied province of Britannia.