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Skin

Written by Ilka Tampke

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SKIN

ILKA TAMPKE



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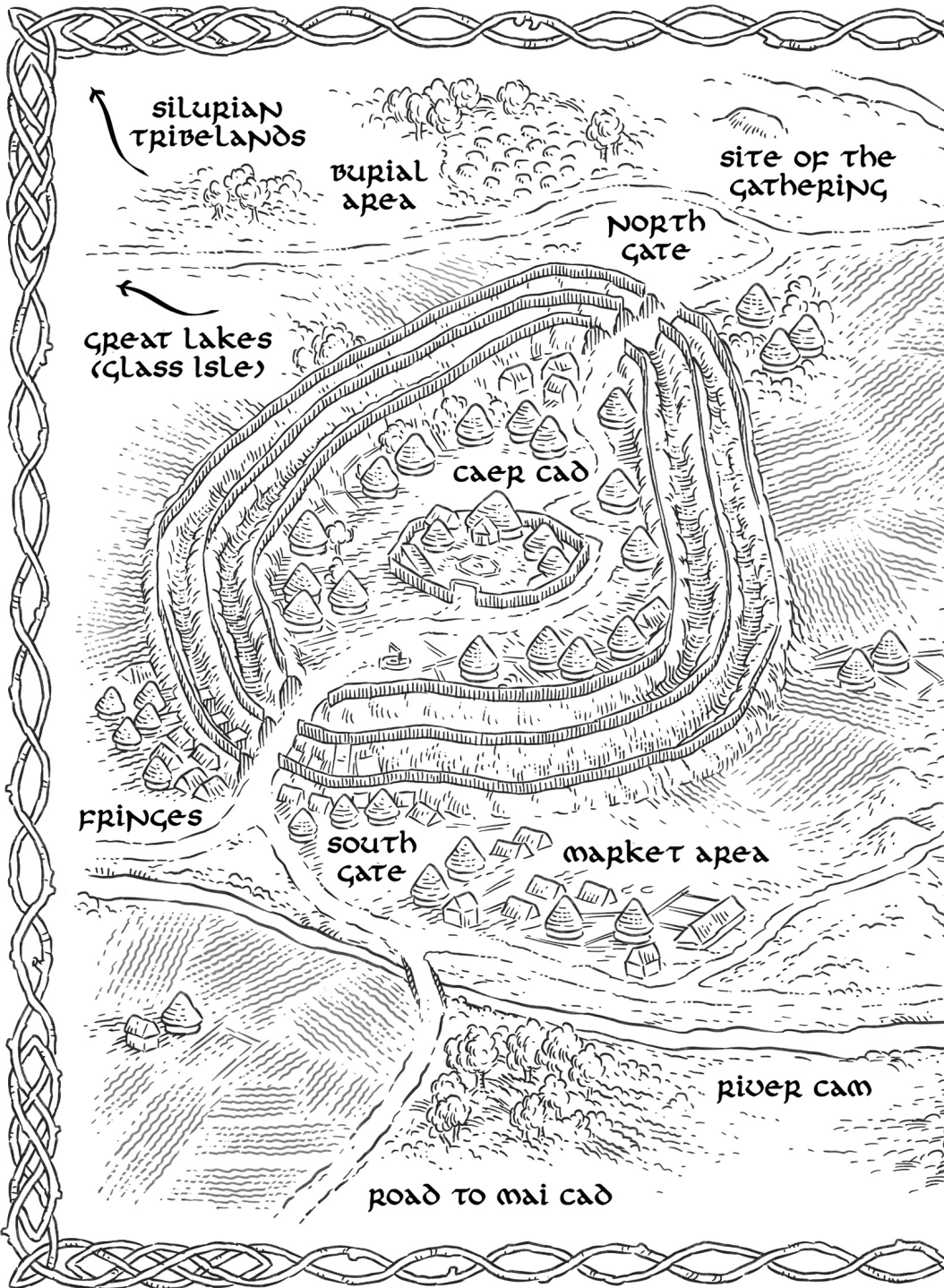
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For Adam, Amaya and Toby



silurian
tribelands

burial
area

site of the
gathering

north
gate

great lakes
(glass isle)

caer cad

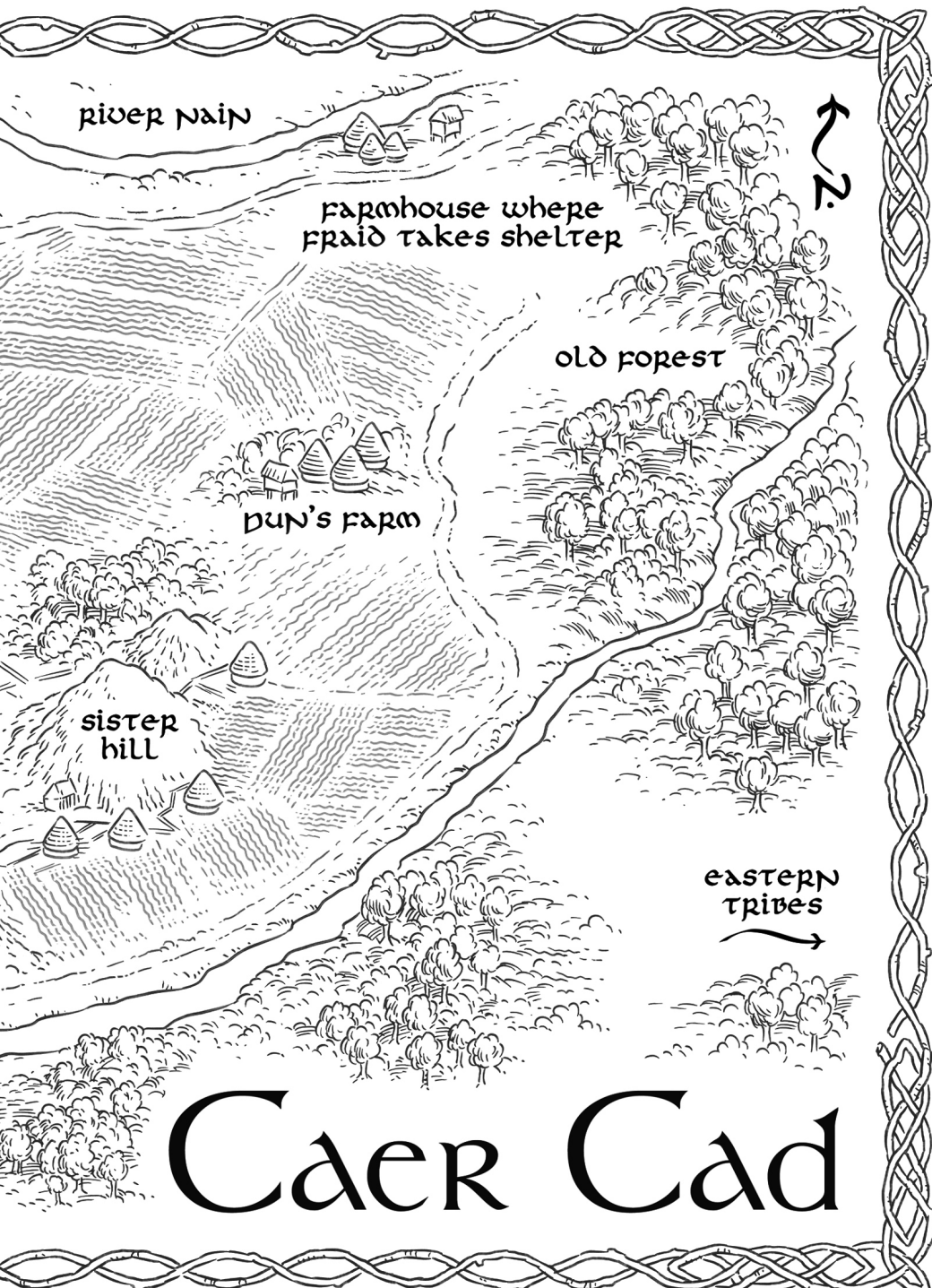
fringes

south
gate

market area

river cam

road to mai cad



river nain

farmhouse where
fraid takes shelter

old forest

Dun's farm

sister
hill

eastern
tribes

Caer Cad



The Great Deluge

The world was born of a great flood. These waters were Truth and washed over everything. Some saw the river as it came and were well minded enough to transform themselves into salmon.

By this means they survived. They were the wise ones.

SOUTHWEST BRITAIN, AD 28

I WAS NOT yet one day old when Cookmother found me on the doorstep of the Tribequeen's kitchen. She was on her way to our herb garden after tasting her stewed pork and finding it wanting in rosemary. I very nearly felt her leather sandal upon me before she noticed my tiny, swaddled shape.

I knew the story well.

'Mothers of earth!' She carried me inside, laid me on the table and peeled open my wraps, powdery with frost.

I was a girl. Misshapen, no doubt, for why else would I have been left for the Tribequeen's servants to care for? Cookmother ran her callused fingers across my wrinkled back, my flailing limbs and swollen belly. My cord had been torn, its stump still raw and crusted, and my eyes were sunken with thirst. But she found nothing else wrong. I was

perfect. A poor mother then, or a mother in shame? But Cookmother could not recall any women from the fringes who'd been due with child.

I squalled at the smell of her. I had not yet known a mother's touch nor the taste of her milk.

Cookmother sat down on a stool and let her leine fall open so I could suckle greedily from her well-veined breasts, still full to bursting for the second warrior's new child.

And when she had to tear my mouth away to tend to the spitting cookpot, she laid me down on a goatskin in front of the fire, where Badger, the old black-and-white bitch, was resting from the mouths of her own hungry pups outside. And when I howled—two hours on a stone step at midwinter had given me a coldness that needed touch and I had not yet drunk my fill—Cookmother placed me beside Badger's flaccid abdomen and my little mouth easily found a nipple. Badger lifted her head and smelled me curiously, too exhausted from seven successive litters to snout me away.

Over the months that followed I fed often in this way. Cookmother said I was half reared on dog's milk. She wondered if this had some part in what became of me.

Perhaps because I was well formed, or because the season's harvest had put all in good temper, I was kept in the kitchen as Cookmother's own. She had treated many lost babes, then given them to the warrior families or, if they were too weak, to the builders, for a child-soul in the foundations would bring great protection to a new house.

But I lay in a tinderbox lined with lambskin while Cookmother ground the grain, dried the meat and ran the Tribequeen's kitchen. She was busied all the sun's hours and my cries were often silenced with a sharp word and a finger dipped in pig fat or salted butter. But at the end of each day I was nuzzled to sleep in her own bedskins and

the murmurs of her dreams were my night song.

Her temper was hotter than a peppercorn and my cheek often felt the sting of her palm, but when I was two summers old and burned my wrists at the rim of the cookpot, it was she who applied a fresh poultice while I writhed and screamed, and she who held me through the night when the smarting was unbearable. And when the Tribequeen called for girls of able wit to be sent for service to one of the eastern tribekings, it was she who shut me into a wooden chest with a command to be silent, and told the messenger I had taken to wandering the fringes and who knows what infections I was picking up there.

Cookmother was plump and warm, like a fresh-filled sausage, although to look at she was as ugly as a toad, with a toothless laugh and skin as pocked as porridge. Her legs (when I burrowed beneath her skirts, hiding from a loud-voiced farmer or loosed bull) were so gnarled that I wondered, in my earliest innocence, if she was half kin to a tree. This was before I knew the workings of the body and learned these dark, knotted roots to be pathways of blood.

The tribelands in which I grew were those of Durotriga in Southern Britain. Of the many regions within it, ours was called Summer, a wetland country, named for its abundant yield of barley, oats and wheat, where grass grew as lush as a deer pelt, and teemed with rivers.

My township, perched on the plateaued crest of Cad Hill, was Caer Cad, one of the largest hilltowns of Durotriga. The walled banks and deep ditches that encircled it were beginning to crumble, for peace had sat upon this tribe for many seasons. The only strangers breaching our gateways now were traders from the Eastlands, who chuckled at our round earthen houses built all alike, their doorways aligned to the midwinter sunrise. They called them anthills and thought us simple. But our journeymen and -women did not seek to

display their knowledge through mighty buildings. Their greatness lived elsewhere.

I was an inquisitive child with a watchful eye. What pleased me most was seeing life at its arrowhead: Badger and the endless stream of pups that spewed from her swinging belly, the ice crystals in the river at wintertime, the spill of young fish that filled it in spring.

What frightened me was being alone.

There were five in our house. Of my three kitchen sisters, Bebin was my favourite, steady and never shooing me away when I followed her to market or to the Tribequeen's sleephouse. I was less fond of Cah, sharp and changeable as the west wind. Ianna was our spinner, without wits for much else.

In the kitchen we slept abreast, close to the crackle of the hearth. Sometimes one of the girls would sleep in the stable if the night was hot or the human smells were too wretched. But I would never sleep alone. I needed the comfort of fire and a body against me.

Despite my affliction, Cookmother's rugged care never wavered. She told me always that fear could be fought with a curious mind. *Hold questions like a torch before you.*

After evening porridge was eaten, my favourite stories were those of the skin totems.

'Speak of the deer!' I would bid her, curling in her broad lap.

'Graceful. Gentle. They are kin to the woodlands and survive best by quietness.'

'And the salmon?' I urged.

'Ah, the queen of all skins,' she proclaimed, for she was salmon-skinned. 'Keepers of wisdom. We hold the past, and the seeking of homelands.'

'And what of mine?' I wound my small arms around her neck.

She would tell me each time that I belonged to no totem. That I belonged to nothing but her.

Though she nursed almost every one of the warriors' children, there was no blood youngling who had ever called her Mam. I was the one, she whispered to me each nightfall, who was truly her own.

She called me Ailia, meaning light.



I was seven summers old when my life was spared for the second time.

It was midwinter. The Gathering. The people of Durotriga had come together, as they did every seven years, to remake the union of our tribe. For six nights we had woven together our tribelands in song, called forth our animal kin, and eaten and drunk together. Now it was the seventh day, when we would offer the gift that spoke most deeply of our gratitude to this country and to the Mothers who formed it, the gift that would hold our ties strong until we next met.

I hoped to the Mothers it would not be me.

The near-dawn was bitter as we gathered in our hundreds around a large, raised mound, surrounded by fires. Cad Hill was to the south of us. We were on Mothers' land now, the most sacred ground of Summer, deep-sodden by our northern river, the Nain, which kept the Mothers close. Many had journeyed days to come here; we had only to pass through our northern gateway to reach this place. The land had been felled and cleared, but it was not permitted for beast to graze it, or tribesman to walk upon it outside of ritual time.

This was the turning of the winter. The journeymen worked quickly to be ready for the breaking of light over the far grey hills. They called for girl children born in the year of the last Gathering to come forward. Braced by our closest kin, or whoever loved us most, we approached the space before the crowd.

Tethered horses steamed at the nostrils and gave off a strong blood heat from the slabs of muscle on their flanks and necks. I flinched

as they stamped and twitched in the cold. They'd been whipped and taunted. They were ready to run.

I stood at the end of the row, gripping Cookmother's hand. When I glanced sideways I saw a line of only ten or twelve wide-eyed faces, fewer than one would expect among so many tribespeople. No doubt some tribeswomen had kept their daughters hidden, had not heeded the Mothers' call, each knowing that their daughters would now never be truly of the tribe because they were not willing to give them to the tribe.

Llwyd, the Journeyman Elder, highest trained of our wisepeople, paced our number and one by one sent girls back into the crowd. They scurried and tripped, collapsing into their families' joyful sobs. One by one we were rejected if our health, our strength, our radiance of spirit were not sufficient for the Mothers.

At last there were two of us. We could hardly have been more different to look at. I was tall and well grown with a vine of light-brown curls escaping my braids, whereas she was small and slight, her dark hair smooth as water.

Llwyd came to me first.

'She is half-born,' said Cookmother. 'A foundling. She has no skin.' Her voice was steady but I could feel her legs trembling through her skirts.

'Unskinned?' said Llwyd. He looked up and down the length of me. 'She is otherwise perfect—perhaps the Mothers want her anyway. After all, they know her skin.'

'Please—' Cookmother's voice cracked. 'I'm training her for plant-craft. Let her serve us in another way.'

Llwyd crouched before me and squeezed my arms and legs. Although I had been told countless times of the honour this gift would bring to my soul, I started to rock with terror.

Llwyd took my hand. 'Will you be our gift?'

My legs weakened but I did not fall. ‘Yes,’ I whispered.

Llwyd stood.

All watched, awaiting his word.

He walked to the other girl. She must have been far-born as I had never seen her at markets or festivals. ‘Is there any reason, why I should not choose *this* girl?’ he asked.

The girl’s companion was no older than fourteen summers. Too young to be the child’s mother. ‘This is my sister,’ she said, ‘and last of my kin.’

‘She, also, is perfect,’ said Llwyd. He looked out to the gathering. ‘We will give the child with skin.’

‘No!’ The sister grabbed the girl, who had begun to wail.

Now my legs buckled and Cookmother lifted me into her arms.

‘You will be honoured for your gift,’ said Llwyd, reaching for the girl.

It took two journeymen and the Tribequeen’s first warrior to wrench the child from her sister. The air was jagged with the older girl’s screams.

Cookmother hurried me back to the safety of the crowd and kept me clasped to her chest. Nightshade was thrown onto the fires and my nostrils flooded with its dizzying smoke.

The journeymen and -women started to sing down the songs of our tribe in powerful harmony. I could sense the expectation in the gathering, the pulsing of hearts and the coursing of blood. This ritual was part of our story, part of our truth, but the terribleness of it was never forgotten.

The chosen girl’s sister still screamed. The warrior held her, his arms spasming with the force of her struggle.

The girl was led between the fires to the top of the mound. The ovates poured henbane down her throat. Soon she would feel no pain. The singing became louder. Cookmother squeezed me closer.

I wanted to hide my face in her tunic, but I knew all must bear witness to this giving. Especially me.

The ovates took off the girl's under-robe. Unclothed, she was as fragile and veil-skinned as a baby mouse. Water, dark with plant steepings, was poured over her blue-cold skin, the trickle of shit wiped from her thighs, and she was called to be ready.

I was lost in the wondering of how this would be the greatness of her body's growth. That the fresh folds and twig bones of her would never know the height nor flesh nor wisdom of a woman. As I stared, she met my gaze. Though she had nothing of my high forehead or my pointed nose, her wild green eyes were a mirror of mine.

The ovates began to circle her as the first lip of light emerged on the horizon.

Llwyd stood on a platform before us and called the dedication: 'Mothers, receive this lifegift as tribute and request. Let the spread of this new blood soak into your earth, flow into your rivers. Let it nourish your body and ease your hunger. Let what we give you now, torn apart, be returned to us as whole.'

As he spoke, the lesser journeymen were tying the ropes around the child's ankles, wrists and neck. These in turn were fastened to the ropes that trailed behind the horses. There were nine horses for the task. Two for each arm, two for each leg, the largest and strongest for her head.

The journeymen positioned her; she was already halfway to the Otherworld with the herbs. They kissed her and stepped away.

She stood with limbs outstretched and tears on her face. The singing reached a wailing peak. It was time. She was, for a moment, creation, the rising sun itself, before the riders mounted, the journeyman shouted, and the horses surged with unstoppable force, to the north, south, east and west of her.



The Singing

At first there was chaos. A void without form.

Then the Mothers began to sing.

AD 43

I STIRRED WITH the crow's first cry, instantly awake. It was the day before festival; tonight the fires would be lit for Beltane and I had been sleepless half the night in anticipation.

Despite the cold morning, I was damp with sweat in my bed, pressed on one side by Cookmother and the other by Neha, my beautiful grey-and-white bitch. She was the final born from the last of Badger's litters and the most like her in temperament: wary of any who stroked her. But to me she was as devoted a protectress as could ever be wished for and I would not so much as empty the nightpot without her by my side.

I lifted Cookmother's arm and rolled out from under it, reaching for my grey woollen tunic that hung over a stool by the bed. The other kitchen girls still slept, Bebin and Ianna curled together. Only

sour-tempered Cah slept alone. The fire in the hearth was barely smouldering. It was Cah's turn to keep it last night but she had clearly forgotten again. I stoked it quickly. It would bring great shame on Cookmother for our house fire to die.

As I tied my tunic with my leather belt, Neha brought me my sandals. 'Good girl,' I whispered, lacing them firm. I tugged a comb through the tangle of hair that spilled down my shoulders, then I grabbed a basket and we slipped out through the heavy cowskin covering the door.

Outside, the air prickled with spring. Past the Tribequeen's low stone gateway, the path was dotted with festival offerings of cheese, eggs and milk left in small rock hollows or poured straight onto the cobbled ground. Some had left bread or jugs of ale. Each gave back the best they could.

Soon the winding pathways of the warriors' houses gave way to the open streets of the town centre, where our craftspeople worked. Caer Cad was already awake. Smoke poured from the house peaks and the open forges were lit. Many makers were already bundling their metals and pots into baskets for market, restless, like me, with the promise of festival. Most greeted me as I passed, but some looked away.

I turned into a narrow path where the rich smell of roasting wheat told me Mael's bread was ready. Inside his bakehouse, I leaned against the warm oven while he chose his largest loaves.

'Take care when you attend the Tribequeen today,' he warned. Mael had grown heavy on his own graincraft and had a great fondness for the foretelling of ruin. He was mocked for both of these, but I always offered him a ready ear and in return he was free with the news of the township.

'Why so?' I asked.

'There was a rider from the east last night. The Bear is fallen.'

'Slain?' I questioned. There had been no news of war.

‘Nay. Died in his bedskins. An old man’s death, bless his soul to have reached it.’

The Great Bear, Belinus, king of the Catuvellauni, whose rule spread over most of the eastern tribes of Albion. He was greatly admired, even by those beyond his reign, like us.

‘Who will wear his crown?’ I asked.

‘This is the question.’ Mael bent down and swung open the door of the oven. ‘Togodumnus has claimed the capital but his brother, Caradog, will want his share of the tribes, and he is a flaming arrow. Whatever smooth waters Belinus has sailed between Britain and Rome, Caradog is sure to whip up.’

I could not help smiling at his prophecy. ‘I think we are safe from the Romans here, Mael.’

‘Are we?’ He dripped with sweat as he pulled out the bread stone. ‘The Bear knew how to throw a bone to the Roman dog. He gave them all the skins and the tin they could want and kissed their fingers for the privilege. They had no reason to attack again. With that young cock Caradog crowing about Britain’s great freedom, who knows what Rome will do to subdue him?’

I placed the loaves in my basket. Even within my short remembering, the tendrils of Roman ways had touched Caer Cad. Aside from the pretty cups and the dark wines that filled them, there were new arts like coloured glass, oils from fruit, and different coins that served in trade. More and more barrow-loads of our lead and grain were carted out and rolled onto ships bound for the Empire. But the tribes had always been, and remained, the law-keepers of this land.

Rome’s army had come one hundred summers before and the eastern kings had defended their freedom with trade and terms. There was always talk that they would come again, that they would not be so easily withheld, but I was not afraid. Cookmother had taught me

that the roots of the tribes reached deep and it would take more than Roman swords to dig them out.

I thanked Mael for the bread and he smiled at me through blackened teeth. 'First time through the fires tonight?' he asked.

I nodded.

'Then Mothers bless you.' He chuckled and the knot tightened in my belly.

Outside, Neha sprang to her feet. Sun streamed over Sister Hill to the east. Already there were women busied at its crest, softening the ground for the poles and laying the offerings.

Of the year's four great festivals, Beltane was the most beloved by the tribes. A night of fire, of joy, where the heat of man against woman broke open the winter, called back the sun and readied the ground for a strong, sweet harvest. For girls who had first bled since last Beltane, such as me, tonight would be their first union. I was twice seven summers.

Barking filled the air. Neha had galloped ahead. I ran after her, hoping she hadn't bitten the wheelwright again.

When I rounded the corner I found her snarling at a young tribesman marking his fightcraft in the street. I pushed through the crowd around him and called Neha off. 'I'm sorry,' I panted, grabbing her scruff. 'She's not fond of strangers.'

He laughed. 'She mistakes me then. I am no stranger to Cad.'

I stared at him. He was well cast, of medium height but heavily muscled, his beard lime-bleached in the style of the warrior. Despite the crisp morning, he practised without a shirt, his silver torque glinting on his shaved chest. He was familiar but I could not place him.

'Are you returned from fosterage?' I asked, hooking my unbraided hair behind my shoulders.

'Ay.' He sheathed his sword. 'I am Ruther of Cad.'

Orgilos's son. Often spoken of. Fostered to the east for

fight-training, then to Rome to learn their soldier's craft, he would have been almost twenty summers now.

I nodded. 'Blessings upon your return.' Neha growled under my firm grip. 'Hush!' I hissed. 'Forgive her. She's cursed with a wolf's temper.'

'And her mistress?' He stared at me. 'Is she so cursed?'

I answered with a brief smile, then pulled Neha and turned away.

'Do you not offer your name?'

'Ailia,' I called over my shoulder.

'Skin to Caer Cad?'

I stopped, wordless. It had been many summers since I had met this question.

In the silence, a woman's voice called. 'She's unskinned, daughter only to the doorstep!'

My face burned. There were those who were angered by my place in the Tribequeen's kitchen. Years of taunts had taught me to walk away without looking back, lest their spit wet my face.

'Unskinned?' said Ruther. 'Yet you hold your head like a queen.'

'Because she attends the queen's kitchen,' called another. 'And the Cookwoman pets her like a house dog.'

I kept walking. Ruther was right to be surprised. Not often would one without skin move through the town so freely. A pebble struck my shoulder, hard and sharp. I stopped as the sting gave way to a warm ache and a trickle of blood down my back.

'Cease!' shouted Ruther into the crowd. 'Do you strike a maiden's back? And for nothing but an accident of birth? Do you still live in this darkness since I have been gone?' He turned to me. 'Go home, daughter of the doorstep,' he said. 'Be proud of your boldness.'

Before I turned the corner, I glanced back. Ruther had unsheathed his sword and was swiping and twisting it again to a tide of admiring murmurs. Who is he, I wondered, who cares so little for the laws of skin?

‘Handsome, isn’t he?’ said a townswoman as she passed.

‘If your tastes are such,’ I answered.

‘He thought you sweet enough.’

As I hurried home, I saw the thick smoke of the fringe fires coiling above the town walls.

Just beyond the southern gate, wedged along the lower banks of the ramparts, was a tight-packed warren of stick huts and hide tents, foul with littered bone scraps and poor drainage. These were the fringes. Home to the skinless. Shunned by the tribe.

Summer was strong in deer spirit. Except for those who had travelled or married in—bringing with them skins of the owl, wolf or the river—most born here were skin to the deer.

Born to the skinless, or lost to their families before naming, the unskinned were not claimed by a totem. Their souls were fragmented, unbound to the Singing. If they remained little seen, they were not despised, not usually harmed. The townspeople gave them enough grain, cloaks and work, if they would do it. But they could not live within the town walls because no one could be sure of who they were.

I quickened my pace and Neha trotted beside me.

Skin was gifted from mother to child by a song.

I had no mother. I had no skin.

But I had been spared. Just.



‘Who cast the stone?’ spat Cookmother, dabbing an ointment of comfrey on my back.

In the quiet of the kitchen, I sat between my worksisters on a long log bench draped with pelts. We held bowls of bread soaked in goat’s

milk and huddled close to the hearthstones as the morning sun had not yet warmed the thick walls of our roundhouse.

‘I did not see.’ I winced as Cookmother covered my wound.

‘I’ll strangle them with their own innards if I learn of it.’ She lifted my dress back onto my shoulders, and I leaned against her warm bulk. It was by Cookmother’s insistence alone that I remained in the Tribequeen’s kitchen.

As we ate, I told the girls of the Great Bear’s death, and of my meeting with Ruther.

‘It is said he can match twenty Romans with his sword,’ said Ianna, her wide eyes blinking.

‘More likely to share their wine and whores, I’ve heard,’ said Cah.

‘Speak not against Orgilos’s son in my kitchen, thanks be,’ said Cookmother, stirring the fire pot.

Bebin rose and took up a flame to light the torches. ‘Was there another returned with him?’ she asked.

‘Who could you mean?’ jibed Cah.

We all knew she spoke of Uaine, also fostered to the east. She had awaited his return for three summers.

‘He was alone,’ I murmured.

Bebin turned away and my heart fell.

‘Uaine will be schooled to a high warrior now,’ said Cah. ‘He will set his sights beyond a kitchen girl when he returns.’

I could have struck her with a fire iron, but I knew Bebin had more sense than to listen to Cah.

Bebin walked the curved room, igniting the torches, each one revealing more of the swirling red circles that marked our walls. She lit only the kitchen’s eastern half—the realm of the living—where the floor and shelves were crammed with baskets, grindstones, grainpots and buckets. The western half, where our beds were laid, was the place of the dead and must remain always in darkness.

‘Empty your bowls, Cah, Ianna,’ snapped Cookmother. ‘It is time for your lessons.’

Cah groaned.

‘What was that?’ said Cookmother. ‘Rather wash out the shit trough, would you?’ She reached over and snatched Cah’s bowl.

‘I had not finished,’ said Cah.

‘You have now. Get your cloak.’

Bebin smiled as she caught my eye. Four years my elder, she had finished her schooling, but every morning except wane days and feast days, Cah and Ianna, both my age, were still expected to go to the shrine, where learners gathered before dispersing to the rivers or to the craft huts for schooling.

I followed them to the door and watched them walk off, laughing. Learning was wasted on both of them. Ianna had no brains for it and Cah had no gratitude. They had no idea of their privilege. I would have cut off my first finger to be in their place for just one summer. But I was not permitted to go with them or hear any talk of what they learned. It was forbidden for the unskinned to be taught.

Neha nosed my hand. I squatted beside her and buried my fingers in the swathe of white fur around her neck. She was not a large dog—her shoulder only at my knee when I stood—but her carriage was proud. She turned her snout to meet my caress. Her face was unusually marked—half-grey, half-white in perfect division—but it was her eyes that drew the most curiosity: the one belonging to the white side was ice-blue, the other brown. It gave her an eerie, lopsided stare that, combined with her wary temper, many felt marked her as a friend to the dark spirits. But I knew her soul was true and I had taken many years of comfort from her odd-eyed gaze.

‘Come, Ailia,’ called Cookmother from the hearth. ‘Fraid will be ready for her bath and you know she does not like to wait.’