

STORM WARRIOR

PROLOGUE

Black Mountains, Wales
AD 92

The howling of dogs in the distance told him his Roman keepers had found his trail again. Rhys spat out a curse, along with some blood, and forced himself to keep going.

The site of Isca Silurum, the fort that housed the Second Augusta Legion, was a broad, flat plain in a bend of the River Usk. It was less than a day's easy march southward to the ocean, but Rhys had headed north and west to the interior. North and west toward his tribal lands. North and west to the hills, to the rough and rocky terrain that might discourage the many search parties and their savage dogs.

So far, the rugged ground had only slowed them down. After three days, it had become obvious—the Romans were determined not to let their favorite gladiator go.

He was determined to remain free.

The landscape was beginning to look familiar as he left the southern lands behind him, lands that belonged to another tribe overrun by the Romans. After three decades of war, the remaining sons of their once-proud leaders had been rounded up and sent to Rome, not as prisoners but as students. Education and assimilation were devastatingly effective at controlling a conquered people. Rhys knew that the young men would return to their homes every bit as Roman as their overlords. For all he knew, the same thing was happening in his own tribe and clan, perhaps in his own village.

If there was anything, anyone, left of it.

Like all the Celtic tribes in this part of the country, his clan had struggled for decades to repel the Roman invaders. The tribes had defended their borders ferociously, held the armored aggressors back for a full generation, but the Romans were relentless. The armored troops had withdrawn for a few years in order to quell a huge Celtic uprising east in Brethon. But when the Romans had finished slaughtering the warrior queen, Boudicca, and her thousands, they had returned to Rhys's land with a vengeance. He hadn't been old enough to hold a bow when the Romans targeted the spiritual heart of his people by falling upon the great sacred island of Ynys Môn and slaying all the druids there. He had barely reached his full height when his father and older brothers were killed in a fierce battle to defend their village hill fort.

Sadly, their deaths had not purchased their people's freedom. All the Celtic tribes fought with courage and skill, but they were no match for the organized and disciplined troops of the empire. It wasn't long before the Romans declared victory and levied taxes.

Not all the Celts were conquered, however.

In the past, they'd learned the art of war not only from hunting but from conducting secret raids on other tribes. It was a game of sorts that benefited all. One tribe would steal six fine cattle. The other tribe would retaliate by taking four strong horses. Each tribe gained new blood for their herds at the same time that they practiced the art of stealth. It helped keep them all in fighting trim. In telling the stories of his raids, Rhys's father

had impressed upon him the importance of surprise:

always do the unexpected

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An older and battle-hardened Rhys used those tactics as he began to lead raids on Roman patrols, using stealth and strategy to pick them off in the dense forests and misted hills. When he was growing up, archery had been used in hunting rather than battle, but it was well suited to the style of fighting he and his followers practiced now. Silent and effective, bows could deal death at a distance and strike terror into the hearts of the survivors. And while the Romans were looking in the direction the arrows had come from, a second party could easily emerge from the opposite shadows and cut them down to the last man with sword and dagger. It wasn't long before spooked soldiers had given Rhys a nickname, whispered over campfires with many backward glances into the darkness: the Bringer of Death.

The patrols had dwindled for a time, even stopped for a while. Then one day a scruffy-looking unit had wandered into Rhys's territory. Unshaven, they looked lazy and lax. Older men these, some with unsoldierlike bellies. Laughing and talking foolishly like troops on leave, not a unit on patrol. They even fell out of the disciplined march from time to time, drinking from wineskins that were not army issue. It wasn't all that surprising—Rome seldom sent its best and brightest to the far-flung frontier once a land had been subjugated. Yet, the patrol hadn't fallen into any of the tribe's traps, appearing instead to blunder around them as if by pure chance.

Rhys had thought about that many times since. It should have warned him that all was not as it seemed. It should have warned him...

The patrol had meandered off the path and was lolling on a riverbank when Rhys and his followers launched their ambush. No sooner had they broken cover than they found themselves

facing Roman swords, looking into the sharp eyes of not only seasoned but elite soldiers. The undisciplined foolishness had been a clever facade.

But Rhys and his men were seasoned too. The battle was fierce; the riverbank was soon slippery with blood as Romans and Celts alike met blades. No one prevailed. They were evenly matched it seemed, until suddenly the sound of many horses, galloping hard, could be heard over the fight.

The Romans had timed their trap well. The elite unit had held the Celts' attention long enough for a mounted patrol to catch up to them. Rhys yelled out for his followers to retreat just before a weighted net was thrown over him. A blow to the head silenced him, and he spiraled into darkness.

He'd awakened a prisoner, chained by the neck to four of his men, the only survivors of the battle. On the long march south to Isca Silurum, two had died from their wounds. Once at the Roman fort, two more had been used as targets during a training exercise. Rhys had expected to be next, but the Romans had other plans for the Bringer of Death.

The newly built amphitheater just outside the fort walls needed fodder for its bloody spectacles. Intending to make an example of him, his captors had thrown him into the sandy arena with a wild boar. Pain-maddened from a number of oozing flesh wounds, the massive creature bellowed its fury and shook its scythe-like tusks at Rhys. Someone in the stands tossed him a broken sword, barely the length of a dagger, which caused much laughter. The laughter faded when Rhys nimbly dodged and feinted, staying one step ahead of the charging animal. The crowd had expected the Celt to die and quickly. Yet, it wasn't long before the boar squealed horribly and thrashed on the ground with its throat cut.

Still gripping the handle of the sword, Rhys had stood quietly and watched the boar's blood soaking into the sand, certain that his own blood would soon follow. Instead, he had been relegated to a cell and brought out again the next day. And the next. The Bringer of Death proved true to his name. For two years, against all comers, against man and beast alike, Rhys had been forced to fight for his life. The 5,500 soldiers stationed at Isca Silurum wagered their pay on him, alternately cheering him and cursing him according to their wins and losses.

These men were the same ones who chased him now. He should have known the Romans wouldn't easily give up their main source of entertainment here on the frontier. Plus, the legion leaders were no doubt glad to have a task to assign to their bored soldiers, all of whom were likely betting on which man would find the gladiator first. Ironically, Rhys's escape was simply providing one more amusement for his captors.

Not that his escape had been easy. He'd broken the jailer's neck and garroted two guards, but the second had managed to stab Rhys before dying. The wound was just under his ribs, and pain had sawed at him with every step since. He'd suffered worse, but the loss of blood was starting to tell. He was tiring fast, and sometimes he was dizzy. He pressed the heel of his hand to the bundle of dry moss that he'd bound to the wound and willed himself to go on.

The dogs howled again, closer this time. These were no game hounds but big war dogs, accustomed to hunting men. Accustomed to *killing* men. Rhys had used every clever trick he could think of to stay a scant step ahead, to buy time so he could reach the hill country.

Always do the unexpected.

His father's words came back to him as he sought to throw the dogs and their handlers off the trail once and for all.

Rhys doubled back and headed for a steep hillside, angling his way downwind of the Roman hunters until he reached a shallow noisy creek. He could cover the rest of the distance by traveling up the center of the wide stream. The noise of the tumbling water

would cover any splashing. He touched his fingertips to his collarbone, to the blue hound tattoo that marked him, and breathed a prayer to the gods.