

Chapter 1

“Mind your spears, coming through!”

Dug Sealskinner shouldered his way back through the ranks. Front rank was for young people who hadn't learned to fear battle and old men who thought they could compete with the young.

Dug put himself halfway in that last category. He'd been alive for about forty years, so he was old. And he wanted to compete with the young, but grim experience had unequivocally, and sometimes humiliatingly, demonstrated that the young won every time. Even when they didn't win they won because they were young and he wasn't.

And here he was again, in another Bel-cursed battle line. Had things gone to plan, he'd have been living the respectable older man's life, lord of his broch, running his own seaside farm on Britain's north coast, shearing sheep, spearing seals and playing peekaboo with grandchildren. He'd been close to achieving that when fate had run up and kicked him in the bollocks. Since then, somehow, the years had fallen past, each one dying with him no nearer the goals that had seemed so achievable at its birth.

If only we could shape our own lives, he often thought, rather than other bastards coming along and shaping them for us.

Satisfyingly, the ragtag ranks parted at his request. He might not feel it, but he still looked fearsome, and he was a Warrior. His jutting jaw was bearded with thick bristle. His big head was cased in a rusty but robust, undecorated iron

helmet. His oiled ringmail shone expensively in the morning sun, its heaviness flattening his ever-rounder stomach. The weighty warhammer which swung on a leather lanyard from his right hand could have felled any mythical beastie.

He'd been paid Warrior's wages to stay in the front rank to marshal the troops, so arguably he should have stayed in the front rank and marshalled the troops. But he didn't feel the need to fulfil every tiny detail of the agreement. Or even the only two details of it. First, because nobody would know; second, because there wasn't going to be a battle. He'd collect his full fee for a day standing in a field, one of thousands of soldiers. One of thousands of *people*, anyway. There were some other Warriors – Dug knew a few of them and had nodded hello – but the rest were men and women in leathers at best, hardly soldiers, armed with spears but more used to farm equipment. Quite a few of them were, in fact, armed with farm equipment.

What, by Camulos, is that doing here? he thought, looking at a small, bald but bearded man holding a long pole topped with a giant cleaver – a whale blubber cutter, if he wasn't mistaken. He hadn't seen one of those for a while and wanted to ask its owner what it was doing so far inland. But an interest in fishing equipment wouldn't help his battle-hardened Warrior image.

He pushed out into the open field. Behind Barton's makeshift army, children in rough wool smock-frocks ran across the bright field, laughing, fighting and crying. The elderly sat in groups complaining about the army's formation and other things that had been better in their day. To the left, sitting in a heap of rags and shunned by all, was the inevitable drunken old druid, shouting semi-coherently about the imminence of Roman invasion, like all the other dozens of drunken druids that Dug had seen recently.

Over by the bridge were those others who escaped military service – Barton's more important families. A couple of them

were looking at Dug, perhaps wondering why their expensive mercenary was taking a break.

He put his hands on his hips in an overseer pose and tried to look like he was assessing the line for weaknesses. *Very important, the rear rank of a defensive line*, he'd tell them if they asked afterwards.

Dug hadn't expected to be in the Barton army that sunny morning. He'd been stopping in Barton hillfort the day before when word came that the cavalry and chariot sections of King Zadar of Maidun Castle's army would be passing on their way home from sacking the town and hillfort of Boddingham.

Boddingham was a smaller settlement than Barton, forty miles or so north-east along the Ridge Road. It had stopped paying tribute to Maidun. Perhaps Boddingham had felt safe, a hundred miles from the seat and capital of King Zadar's empire, but along good metalled roads and the hard chalk Ridge Road, that was only three days' journey for Zadar's chariots and cavalry – less if they pushed it. It would have taken much longer to move a full army, as Dug well understood, having both driven and hindered armies' movements in his time, but everyone Dug had spoken to said that Zadar's relatively small flying squad of horse soldiers was more than capable of obliterating a medium-sized settlement like Boddingham. If that was true, thought Dug, they must be the elite guard of Makka the war god himself.

The Maidun force had passed Barton two days before, too set on punishing Boddingham to linger for longer than it took to demand and collect food, water and beer. Now though, on the way back, swords bloodied, slaves in tow, the viciously skilful little company might have the time and inclination to take a pop at weak, underprepared Barton.

“You!” A man had shouted at Dug the night before. So courteous, these southerners.

"Aye?" he'd replied.

"Know anything about fighting?"

You'd think his dented iron helmet, ringmail shirt and warhammer might have answered that question, but southerners, in Dug's experience, were about as bright as they were polite.

"Aye, I'm a Warrior."

And that was how he'd ended up at the previous night's war council. He'd actually been on his way to sign up with Zadar's army – finally fed up with the strenuous life of a wandering mercenary – but he saw no need to mention that to the Barton defenders.

Fifty or so of Barton's more important men and women, the same ones who weren't in the battle line, had been packed into the Barton Longhouse for the war council. Calling it a longhouse was pretentiousness, another southern trait that Dug had noticed. First, it was circular. Second, it was only about twenty paces across. At most it was a mediumhouse. It was just a big hut really, made of mud, dung and grass packed into a lattice of twigs between upright poles. Four wide trunks in the middle supported the conical reed roof. Dug could have shown them how to build a hut the same size without the central supports, thereby freeing up space. Perhaps the hall predated that particular architectural innovation, but there was a wood at the foot of the hill and plenty of people, so rebuilding would have been a doddle.

This tribe, however, was clearly neither architecturally diligent nor building-proud. One of the support posts leaned alarmingly and there was a large, unplanned hole in the roof near the door. At the end of a long hot day, despite the hole, the air inside was thick and sweaty. It could have done with double ceiling vents. Dug could have shown them how to put those in too.

King Mylor of Barton sat on a big wooden chair on a platform in the centre, rubbing the back of his hand against

his two remaining rotten teeth, staring about happily with milky eyes at his visitors and hooting out “Oooo-ooooh!” noises that reminded Dug of an elderly seal. He looked like a seal, now Dug came to think of it. Smooth rings of blubber made his neck wider than his hairless, liver-spotted skull, which was wetly lucent in the torchlight. Whiskers sprayed out under his broad, flat nose. Dug had heard that Barton’s king had lost his mind. It looked like the gossipy bards were right for once.

Next to Mylor sat the druid Elliax Goldan, ruler in all but name. You didn’t cross Barton’s chief druid, Dug had heard. He was a little younger than Dug perhaps, slim, with tiny black eyes in a pink face that gathered into a long nose. Rat-like. If you could judge a man by his face – and Dug had found that you could – here was an angry little gobshite. Dug had seen more and more druids as he’d migrated south. There were three basic types: the wise healer sort who dispensed advice and cures, the mad, drunk type who raved about dooms – almost all Rome-related these days – and the commanding sort whose communes with the gods tended to back up their plans and bolster their status. Elliax was firmly in this latter camp.

On Mylor’s left was the druid’s wife, Vasin Goldan. Her skin was shiny and mottled. Big eyes sat wide apart, far up her forehead, very nearly troubling her hairline. Frog-face, Dug had heard her called earlier. *Spot on*, he mused. Seal-head, Rat-nose and Frog-face. Right old menagerie.

Behind Elliax and Mylor were four Warriors in ringmail. It was never a great sign, Dug thought, when rulers needed protection from their own people.

Elliax silenced the hubbub with a couple of claps, interrupting Dug’s explanation to a young woman of how he’d improve the hut’s roof. “The meeting is convened!” he said in a surprisingly deep voice. Dug had expected him to squeak.

“Could we not do this outside?” asked Dug, pulling his mail shirt away from his neck to get some cooler air down there. Spicily pungent body odour clouded out. The woman he’d been talking to shuffled away. Blooming embarrassment made Dug even hotter.

“Barton war meetings take place in the Barton Longhouse!” Elliax boomed, also reddening.

“Even when it’s hot and there’s plenty of room outside? Isn’t that a bit stupid?” Several people around Dug nodded.

“Hot-t-t-t-t!” shouted King Mylor.

Mylor, it was said, had lost his mind along with Barton’s wealth and position ten years before, when he’d bet his five best against King Zadar’s champion. The champion, a massive young man called Carden Nancarrow, had slaughtered Barton’s four best men and one woman in a few horrifying moments. Barton had paid painful taxes to Maidun ever since.

By persuading Mylor to accept the five-to-one combat rather than defend the highly defensible fort, Elliax claimed he’d saved Barton from annihilation. Over the following decade he’d continued to serve his town as Zadar’s representative and tax collector. Zadar’s taxes would have starved Barton in a couple of years, said Elliax, but he was happy to mislead Maidun about Barton’s assets and collect a little less. All he asked in exchange were a few easy gifts like land, food, ironwork or the easiest gift of all – an hour or so with a daughter. While others became steadily malnourished, Elliax thrived, his wife fattened, and unmarried girls bore children with suspiciously rodent faces. Anyone who complained found themselves chosen by Elliax’s druidic divinations to march south as part of Zadar’s quarterly slave quota.

“We have nothing to fear,” Elliax continued, ignoring Dug and King Mylor. “I have seen it. We pay our dues and it’s in Zadar’s interest that we keep paying them. He will not attack.”

“But Zadar can’t be trusted to act rationally!” shouted a young woman at the back. “Look what he did to Cowton last year.”

Dug had heard about Cowton. Everybody had. Zadar had wiped out the entire town. Men, women, the elderly, children, livestock . . . two thousand people and Danu knew how many animals had been slaughtered or sold to Rome as slaves. Nobody knew why.

Elliax looked sideways at King Mylor. The king was picking at the crotch of his woollen trousers.

“Who is your chief druid?” Elliax asked. Nobody had an answer. Elliax smiled like a toad who’d caught a large fly. He held out his arms. “This morning, on the wood shrine, I sacrificed a seabird from the Island of Angels to see its tales of the future. As the bird quivered in death, I was distracted by a sound. I looked up and saw a squirrel hissing at a cat. The cat passed by, leaving the squirrel unharmed.” Elliax looked around smugly, eyes finishing up on Dug’s.

Most people looked at each other and nodded. More often than not the gods’ messages were too cryptic for Dug to grasp immediately, but he got this one.

“Can’t argue with that!” said a stout man.

“Yeah, if it was true. Ever heard a squirrel hiss?” muttered a woman behind Dug.

“No one would dare lie about something like that!” whispered a man who, by the frustration in his voice, Dug took to be the woman’s husband.

Elliax continued. “I looked into the bird’s viscera and found Danu. She told me we had nothing to fear from Zadar. Next I found Makka. He outlined our strategy. The weather has been dry, so Zadar will leave the Ridge Road and take the quicker lowland road, as he did on the way to Boddingham. Makka told me that we should gather everyone on the valley floor and form a spear and shield line between the two curves of the river on the other side

of the bridge. Cavalry and chariots cannot charge a spear line."

"Unless the spear line breaks," said Dug. He wouldn't have usually challenged any god's proclamations, especially Makka's, but these people didn't know battle and needed to be told. A few older voices murmured agreement, which encouraged him to continue: "In which case you might as well have a row of children holding wet reeds. Why not bring everyone up into the fort? Do a bit of work on the walls overnight – sharpen the angles, tighten the palisade, few spikes in the ditch – and they'll never get in."

"And leave all our farms, homes and crops to the whims of Zadar's army!" Elliax spat, his voice becoming steadily higher. "You're as stupid as you look, northman! You shouldn't be in here anyway. You're not from Barton. There's no reason for a spear line to break. I think two gods know a little more than some shabby has-been Warrior. And actually I have the advice of three gods, because further into the guts of the bird, I found Dwyn."

"Pretty crowded in that bird," said the woman behind Dug. Her husband shushed her again.

Elliax ignored the interruption. "That cunning god perfected the plan. He told me to send a rider to Zadar to tell him that we'll be lining the route to celebrate his passing with a ceremonial battle line. We'll defend our land with something that looks like a show of respect. That's the sort of strategic thinking you won't have seen much of where you're from."

"Are you sure that's what Dwyn told you?" Dug had never questioned a druid before, but Elliax's plan was madness. "Forewarned, as most kids where I'm from know, is fore-armed."

Elliax sneered. "We have slings, many more than Zadar can possibly have. His troops will be on horseback and in chariots, we'll be behind shields. If Zadar tries to attack, our

shields will protect us and we'll send back a hailstorm of death. Zadar is not stupid. He will not attack! He knows how futile it would be. Besides, the gods have spoken to me. Perhaps if you'd listened to them more, you wouldn't be walking the land begging for work. At your age too. It's shameful."

Dug's ears were suddenly hot. Elliax turned away from him and outlined his plan in detail. Irritatingly, thought Dug, the jumped-up prick's idea made some sense. Charging a line of spears on horseback or in a chariot was indeed suicide. Horses knew this too, so it was also near impossible. He was right about projectile weapons as well. Barton's more numerous slingers and shields should neutralise any projectile threat.

Geography also favoured Barton. To get from Zadar's likely route to most of Barton's land, you had to cross a river. The only bridge for miles was in the centre of a long bend. The best way for cavalry to beat a line of spearmen was to gallop around and take them on the flank or from behind. With the army bracketed by two loops of the river's meandering course, that would be impossible. But there was still one big, obvious flaw.

"Why don't we stay this side of the bridge?" Dug asked. "We can hold the bridge with a handful of soldiers, protect most of the land and you can still have your wee procession. If Zadar attacks and your long line of bakers and potters doesn't hold, which it probably wouldn't, then we're trapped between him and the river and in all sorts of bother."

Elliax grimaced as if someone had just urinated on a relative's funeral bed. "Still you challenge the gods? They know, as you don't, that there's valuable property just the other side of the river."

"This property wouldn't happen to be yours, would it?"

"Why don't you shut up and stop embarrassing yourself? We share property. It's *everyone's* land, you northern fool."

Elliax stared at him furiously, but then, as if recalling a pleasant memory, smiled. "Or maybe you'd like a stronger reading? Why don't you come up here and we'll see what your spilled entrails say about Zadar's intentions? We'll see the next ten winters in your fat gut! Bob, Hampcar, why don't you find out just how much this know-it-all knows about fighting?"

Two of the four guards stood forward and slid swords a couple of fingers' breadth from scabbards. They were both big men. One had a long face with a pronounced muzzle and drawn-back lips showing uncommonly white teeth. The other was beardless, with a scar soaring redly from each corner of his mouth into his shaggy hairline. That injury was caused by making a small cut at each corner of a person's mouth, then hurting them; an iron auger screwed between wrist bones was one method Dug had seen. The victim would scream, ripping his or her flesh from mouth to ears. If the wounds healed and they didn't die of infection, they were left with a smile-shaped scar. Way up north this was called a Scrabbie's kiss, after a tribe keen on handing them out. Men generally grew beards to cover the scars, but this guy had shaved to show them off. It was, admittedly, quite effective, if you were going for the scary bastard look. His mate looked even tougher.

Dug decided not to take them on.

"Are you coming? Or are you a coward?" Elliax sneered.

Dug stared back in what he hoped was a cool, Bel-may-care manner. He didn't need to take on four Warriors to prove a point. Or even two. Besides, if Dwyn, god of tricks, Makka, god of war and Danu, mother of all the gods, had all been involved in the planning, who was Dug to argue? He might as well negotiate a decent fee for standing in the line, then leave the following evening a richer man with his guts still in his belly.

"Are you coming, I said?"

“I’ll stay here.”

“Stupid, fat and cowardly too. Some Warrior!” Elliax looked around triumphantly and seemed to grow a little. “Ignore this oaf’s ignorant comments. I have been shown the way. The plan is made and King Mylor agrees.” Mylor looked up and smiled at hearing his name, then returned to plucking at his genitals. Elliax continued: “Have no fear. Zadar hasn’t got where he is today by attacking against impossible odds. We are completely safe.”

So the following dawn everyone who wasn’t too young, infirm or important to hold a weapon, around four thousand men and women in all, wandered at first light across the bridge to the big field and gathered between the two river bends. The mixed bunch of farmers, crafters and woodspeople from Barton village and its outlying hamlets and farms shuffled about confusedly but good-naturedly as Dug and others formed them into an as effective a line as possible, putting those with relatively decent shields and spears at the front. Dug herded a few people with longer spears to the rear, going by the theory that if those in front were engaged in a hand-to-hand mêlée, the back rank could still thrust their long weapons at the enemy. He knew it was futile – if this front line engaged with even half-trained troops then they were all fucked – but it kept him busy and showed that he knew his game.

The children and the elderly crossed the river and gathered behind them, standing on carts, boxes and barrels to watch Zadar’s army pass. The chief families arrived last, dressed in well-worn finery. Mylor, Elliax and his wife Vasin arrived last, with their chairs from the longhouse mounted on the biggest cart.

As the day warmed, a carnival atmosphere developed behind the spear line. The crazy druid stopped shouting, children played less frantically and the elderly forgot their

gripes as they drank and talked of battles past. Puppies scurried between feet. Older dogs padded around looking for pats and scraps. The line grew ever more ragged as its members left to grab a drink, find somewhere to squat or just wander about.

Dug was pushing back through the line to say hello to some old boys with a gigantic barrel of cider that he'd spotted earlier when Zadar's army rode into sight from behind a stand of trees some four hundred paces away. A few shouts got everyone's attention and silence spread through the crowd like blood soaking into sand.

"Lift me up, please?" It was a small, skinny boy with huge brown eyes and a tuft of hair the red-brown of freshly ploughed earth. He stared up at Dug. "Please?" The boy's eyes widened ever further.

Dug sighed and hoiked the boy onto his shoulders. He hardly weighed a thing.

"Is that Zadar?!" chirped the child.

"Probably. Yes." A lone rider headed the procession. He wore a huge, golden, horned helmet, a shining black ringmail jacket and black leather trousers. His black horse – by far the largest Dug had ever seen – was similarly attired in a golden-horned pony cap and a draped sheet of black ringmail protecting its rump.

"What's he wearing on his head?"

"Can't you see?"

Dug felt the boy slump a little. Dug could see well over long and short distances, but he knew that a lot of people had trouble with either or both. As a young man, he'd made no allowances, convinced that everybody could see just as well as him but pretended not to be able to for perverse reasons. Age had made him more tolerant.

"His helmet has horns on it."

The boy perked up. "Why?"

"Maybe to make him look scary, or maybe he's trying to

persuade people that he's Koronos, the horned god of animals. Probably he's not very tall and he thinks people will think he's taller if he wears a big hat. But of course people will think he's just a wee man in a big hat."

The boy giggled. Zadar in fact looked like quite a big man, but Dug was never one to let truth get in the way of belittling people he suspected to be puffed up.

"That coat he's wearing – and that rug covering the arse of his horse – is ringmail. That's hundreds or thousands – probably thousands in this case – of rings of iron all linked together. It'll protect you from slingstones, a sword slash, that sort of thing. But it's not much use against this." Dug raised his warhammer. The boy jiggled with glee. The hammer was an effective but simple weapon, no more sophisticated than the rock-tied-to-a-stick design that had been popular for aeons. An iron lump the size and shape of a large clog was moulded around a shaft of fire-hardened oak a pace long and held in place by a tight criss-cross of leather strips. Both ends of the handle were sharpened into points.

"Only kings and Warriors are allowed to wear ringmail."

"But you're wearing ringmail!"

"Aye. That's right. I'm a Warrior . . . Mine is more the hundreds of rings type, though not as supple or as light as his'll be."

"And is his horse a Worrier? Or a king?"

"Uh . . . neither. Thing about rules is that if you become powerful enough, you get to break them. And make them."

"Your voice is funny."

"I'm from the north."

"What are you worried about?"

"What?"

"You're a Worrier?"

"A Warrior. It's a title, like king. But this one you earn. You have to kill ten people in a battle. If five people who are already Warriors agree that you've done that, then they

say you're a Warrior, and you get one of these." Dug tapped the crudely made iron boar that hung on a leather thong around his neck. "And you're allowed to wear ringmail, which is a neat way of making sure fewer people become Warriors and making life safer once you do. Being a Warrior also means you can claim a certain price as a mercenary. And people treat you better, like you might be given food at an inn on the understanding you'll protect the place."

"Can I have a boar necklace?"

"No. You've got to earn it."

"But our smith could make one for me?"

"Aye, he could, but the punishment for pretending to be a Warrior is death by torture."

The kid mused for a few moments on Dug's shoulders.

"Probably not worth it."

"No."

"And the man dressed in black behind Zadar?"

"That must be his head druid, Felix." Dug spat for good luck. They said that Felix, Zadar's Roman druid, could command the gods' magic like nobody in Britain had for generations. Dug had heard tales of Felix thwarting enemies' plans by reading their minds from afar, and other stories of him ripping souls from people's bodies or tearing them apart just by looking at them. You couldn't believe all, or even most, of what the bards said and sang, but Dug had heard so much about Felix's powers that some of it must have been true. He shivered despite the warmth of the day.

"And who's that next lot? Oh gosh!" squeaked the boy.

"Aye." Following King Zadar and Felix were fifty mounted men and women. Their helmets were hornless, their mail less polished and their horses' spiked pony caps were dull iron. "Those are Warriors."

Two hundred paces away they rode by, eyes front, not deigning even to glance at Barton's suddenly pathetic-looking spear line. They'd obviously been ordered not to look to the

side for effect, thought Dug. That told him two things. One, that Zadar was a showman, and two, that discipline was strong in the Maidun army. Worryingly strong.

The chariots came next.

“The chariots are built with wooden struts under tension so they can bounce over bumps, narrow burns, corpses . . . Two people in each, a driver and a fighter. See that first lot, with the armoured soldiers?”

“Yes!”

“Those are the heavy chariots – less bouncy, more solid. They’ll drive up to a battle line. The fighter will lob a javelin at the enemy. That probably won’t kill anyone, but it might stick in a shield, making it useless or at least difficult to use. Or it might go through two overlapping shields, pinning them together when the iron spearhead bends. Then two soldiers have the choice of fighting joined together or chucking—”

“What would you do?” the boy interrupted.

“The only time it happened to me I chucked the shield away. There’s something to be said for using a sword without a shield. It can free your senses, changing the whole direction of your—”

“What do the fighters do after they’ve thrown their javelins?” said the boy.

Dug nearly dumped the boy off his shoulders, but he remembered that his daughters had always interrupted his advice and stories, so, in their memory, he decided to give some leeway to the impertinent wee turd.

“Javelins away, the soldier usually leaps off the chariot and wades in with sword, hammer, spear – whatever. Most people down here use swords, great iron double-edged swords, for swinging. The Romans use shorter pointy swords, for stab—”

“Have you got a sword?”

“Me? No. I had one. I’ve had a few, but I’m a hammer

man now. So, the soldier starts killing people and trying not to get killed, while his charioteer mills about in the background keeping an eye on things. When the guy on foot gets tired or hurt, he retreats or waves to the chariot, which picks him up and they shoot off to safety. They'll have a snack and a piss, maybe take a shit, grab a drink, and then head back to the battle. Brilliant way to fight if you have the means."

"Why do they have those big swords sticking out of the chariots?"

Dug had been trying to ignore the curved blades that protruded a pace from the boss of each of the heavy chariots' wheels. He shuddered at a memory. "If your enemy runs, you chase them. Those blades are sharp. One moment someone's running, the next they've got no legs from the knee down."

"What are these other ones? They're smaller."

"Light chariots. Unarmoured or lightly armoured driver, plus a slinger or sometimes an archer. No blades, thank Danu, but they're still nasty. They're all about speed. They fight from a distance—"

"My mum said that the bravest fighters go naked into battle to show how brave they are not needing armour."

"That does happen. But it's not bravery. Battles are dangerous enough. You don't have to be naked to appreciate that. It's mostly because they've drunk way too much, or it's men showing off; usually a mix of the two. And it is always men. Women are cleverer than that. Nobody likes the naked ones they always get killed the quickest. Often by their own side."

"Have you ever gone into battle naked?"

"I have not. But there was one time a whole gang of naked men charged a group of us. It was a cold day, and their wee blue cocks were pointed straight at us, like mice looking out of hairy holes, somebody said. They were still a way away

and a girl on our side hit one of them in the bollocks with a slingstones. The noise he made!" Dug chuckled. "We were laughing almost too much to fight. It was up on the banks of the Linny Foith, a great channel miles north of here but way south of where I'm from. I'd just sworn a year's service to a—"

"What about going into battle painted blue?"

"I've done that, but I don't like it. When I was with the Murkans I was in a battle and each side had blued up, trying to intimidate the other. We all felt like arseholes, and it was hard to tell who was on which side. I'm pretty sure I killed a friend that day. Sometimes your blood gets up. I was lashing out at anybody blue, forgetting . . ."

"Will you kill me if Zadar attacks?"

"I will not."

"Will Zadar's army kill us both?"

"No, no. They can't do a thing. They may all be Warriors but it's just a small part of his army, and we outnumber them ten to one. They can't outflank us because of the river, and they can't attack us head-on because we've got spears and they've only got horse troops. If we stay in this line we're fine. Although if they get off their horses we might have problems, and if we break we're in all sorts of bother, whereas if we'd stayed on the other side of the river or, even better, in the hillfort. . ."

"What?"

"Don't fuss. We'll be fine."

The procession continued. After the chariots came the cavalry, again in heavy and light order. Those fifty horsemen who had followed directly after him were plainly Zadar's famous elite, but the couple of hundred heavy cavalry didn't look much less useful. Dug wouldn't have been surprised if they were all Warriors too.

Most interesting to Dug were the light cavalry – one section in particular. On the near side of the procession were

six mounted female archers with long hair and bare legs. The blonde one at the front was staring at the Barton line. She was the only soldier in Zadar's army who'd turned her head.

"Are they goddesses?"

"Aye, son, I think they might be."

"And what are these?"

"Musicians."

As if to prove his point, the men riding at the rear of Zadar's army raised brass instruments to their lips and blared out a cacophony. The wooden clackers fixed on hinges in the instruments' mouths added a buzz like a swarm of giant bees.

"I say musicians, but that's no music!" chuckled Dug.

The men and women in Barton's battle line looked at each other then back to the horn blowers. Other than thunder, this was the loudest noise that most of them had ever heard. The boy's legs tightened around Dug's neck.

"Don't be scared, it's just noise!" Dug yelled over the increasing din, for the benefit of those nearby as well as the boy. "We'll be fine! Can you loosen your legs?"

Zadar's army was all in view now, stretched out to match precisely the length of the Barton line. *That probably isn't an accident*, thought Dug. The cavalry and chariots wheeled as one to face them. The trumpets screamed louder. Mylor's ramshackle pseudo-army took a step back. The horns ceased. A gap opened in the centre of the Maidun line, and a lone chariot wobbled slowly towards Barton. Instead of horses, it was drawn by two stumbling, naked, blood-soaked men. They were harnessed to the chariot by leather thongs attached to thick iron bolts that had been hammered through their shoulders. Standing in the chariot, whipping the men forward, was a young woman with large, wobbling bare breasts.

Chatter spread through the Barton line like wind through

a wheat field. Someone said one of the men drawing the horrific chariot was Kris Sheeplord, king of Boddingham. The other was the messenger sent by Elliax to Zadar to tell him about the parade plan.

The king of Boddingham toppled forward, pulling the messenger down with him.

“Big badgers’ balls,” said Dug. “I don’t like the look of this.”

Chapter 2

Zadar's army stood motionless. Dug took the boy off his shoulders, squatted and drew him in close.

"Run," he said. "Back over the bridge, up to the ridge."

"To the fort?"

"No. Stay on the ridge and watch. This may be a display. But if Zadar's army attacks, run along the Ridge Road, away from Barton. Don't stop until you reach another fort."

The boy stared at Dug.

"Go!"

He went. Dug stood.

Zadar's army remained motionless, other than the troop of six female mounted archers, who trotted forward. Just within range of Barton's slingers, they reined back their horses and halted, perhaps ten paces between each. The horses' tails swished and the mild breeze played in the women's hair. The metal tips of the heavy bows that each held in her left hand glinted in the bright morning sunlight. Most bows were no more powerful than slings, but these looked different. They had the double arc of a gliding seagull and were made of much thicker wood than the slender, single-curve bows Dug had come across. Probably nothing to worry about. Over-elaboration made a weapon weaker in Dug's experience. He tapped his hammer.

The women reached for arrows, nocked them, pulled back bowstrings, aimed high and shot. The six arrows went much higher and further than arrows were meant to go. Five sailed over the Barton line and landed harmlessly in the gap between

army and spectators. One flew a little further and speared an elderly man through the chest. He squawked, dropped his cider and fell backwards. The six women lowered their bows and sat on their horses, looking calmly ahead as if appreciating the view.

"Prepare to shoot!" came the order from somewhere in the Barton line. There was a pause while a couple of hundred slingers fumbled in their bags.

"Shoot!" Hundreds of little round missiles flew in graceful parabolas. They would have landed on or near enough the six Maidun horse archers had the riders not galloped forward, hooves drumming on the hard ground. By the time the salvo landed where they'd been, the archers were twenty paces from the spear line. As if it were a synchronised dance, the women lifted their bows and pulled arrows from the quivers on their backs. They nocked the arrows, drew, aimed and loosed.

Six arrows thrummed into the Barton line. Four smashed into shields with explosions of splinters. Two of these held in the thick wood, two passed through and spitted the shield holders, one in the chest, one in the stomach. The arrows that missed shields hit the faces of two men who'd peeked round their wooden protection to ogle the women. Their heads burst in sprays of blood and brain.

The dead men fell. The injured men shrieked. People screamed. Six more arrows hummed through the gaps left in the shield wall by the fallen. More screams tore the air. Wails of panic drowned out the howls of the wounded. They'd never seen missiles like these.

The six Maidun horse archers, driving their mounts with their legs, long hair streaming behind them, charged up and down, pumping arrows into the line of Barton spearmen.

The line reeled, then crinkled. The better shields did stop the arrows, but these were few. As men and women fell, more gaps opened in the shield wall and more arrowheads ripped through leather, wool, linen and flesh.

The Maidun women turned and swooped like a flock of birds, pounding arrow after arrow into the Barton ranks. The Barton army seemed to wake from its torpor and several people ran at their attackers, only to be impaled by arrows before they'd gone a few paces.

Dug watched, eyes narrow, stomach somersaulting.

The Barton slingers couldn't get a clear shot at the archers past their own spearmen, so they pushed forward. Shields were moved aside to give them a clear view, but it was as if the women knew where each breach would appear before it did. They shot through the gaps. Slingers died.

"Concentrate!" Dug shouted. "Have courage! If you all shoot together you'll take them out!"

He managed to gather a gang of slingers. With shouts, pushes and a couple of punches, he primed some men to drop their shields on his command, and readied his slingers. The women headed towards them. Just a few more heartbeats . . . As he drew in breath to shout the command, the archers spun their horses and galloped back to Zadar's lines, kicking up soil at the shocked people of Barton.

"Badgers' cocks," said Dug.

Barton's men and women breathed a collective sigh of relief. The dead and wounded were dragged back, and people began shouting, trying to reorganise the line. Their shouts were drowned out by cries of terror as Zadar's heavy cavalry trotted, then thundered towards Barton's right flank, spears lowered. On the left, Zadar's fifty elite cavalry charged, brandishing long swords in circles about their heads. Leading them, swinging his heavy sword around his horned helm as if it weighed nothing, was King Zadar. His musicians, still blaring a throbbing storm wave of sound, followed behind.

"Hold! Hold! Hold!" shouted a few in the Barton line including Dug. But before Zadar's cavalry had covered half the distance between them, more than half of Barton's forces

turned and ran. The line collapsed. What should have been a parade and could have been a battle became a rout.

Those who didn't flee were impaled by spear point, slashed open by swords, trampled under hooves and separated from their lower legs by chariot blades. Those who fled didn't fare much better. Zadar's men slowed into a trotting line of hacking and stabbing butchery.

Elliax Goldan stood on the cart next to King Mylor, his mouth widening. *What the Bel was Zadar doing?* He looked at Mylor. The king gulped up at him smilingly.

"Back across the bridge!" Elliax shouted at the carter.

The carter whipped the oxen, which lumbered forward to begin a wide turn.

"Can't you go backwards?"

The carter looked him in the eye and shook his head with what looked like disgust.

"Fuck this shit!" said Elliax. He leaped off the back of the cart and headed for the bridge.

"Elliax!" He spun round. It was his wife Vasin, looking after him from the back of the cart, hands on hips. "Where do you think you're going?" she boomed at him.

Cromm Cruach, he thought. *Why am I the only one who can think?*

"Come on!" he shouted. Then, much more quietly, "You silly bitch." Splinters exploded as an arrow hit the cart next to her. She seemed not to notice. Another zipped into the ground not three paces from him. "*Come on!*"

"But you know Zadar! We won't be harmed."

"Yes, but I don't know the arrows, do I?"

"Oh really, Elliax. Come back here and—"

"This is happening *now!* Stop complaining about it and *fucking come on!*"

Finally she began to climb heavily from the cart, which had now trundled about a tenth of the circle that would

bring it back to the bridge. Not waiting for her, Elliax sprinted across the bridge and didn't stop on the other side. He didn't turn until he was a good way up the slope to the hillfort. Vasin was panting her way towards him across the riverside pasture, a beacon of brightly dressed fatness in the muddled stampede of young and elderly who'd been nearest to the bridge. She stopped, bent over with her hands on her knees and panted. She looked behind her, seemed to be reminded of her predicament, and lumbered on as tiny children raced by.

Cromm fucking Cruach, thought Elliax.

The cart was halfway across the bridge. King Mylor was still sitting on his chair and looking about smilingly as if on an outing to view autumn leaves. The carter was whipping the oxen like a madman, but if they felt his urgency, it didn't show. The vast majority of Barton's people were stuck behind the cart on the wrong side of the river. Zadar's forces were advancing steadily, slaughtering as they came.

The six horse archers who'd started the battle broke from the Maidun line and wheeled in a wide galloping loop around the fleeing Barton people. Reaching the river, they raised their bows as one and shot the oxen. The beasts bellowed and bucked, kicking chunks of flesh out of each other and smashing the cart's front wheels to pieces. The cart pitched forward. The oxen panicked and surged, trampling several children. The splintered axle of the cart jammed into the stonework, pulling the cart sideways and blocking the bridge.

With the bridge jammed, it was safe for Elliax to wait for his wife. He watched Zadar's forces advance in their organised line, chopping Barton's bakers, fieldworkers, chandlers, smiths and bards into piles of meat.