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ANNE McCAFFREY

Druids



Their mystical rites
ruled the Celtic world....

MORGAN LLYWELYN

author of *Red Branch* and *Lion of Ireland*

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PROLOGUE

HE HAD BEEN dead a long time.

With a profound sense of shock he realized he was no longer dead.

Beyond an increasingly vivid sense of self he was still aware of the tender network from which he was being separated. From its fabric those who were dear to him reached out, calling to him, seeking one more communion.

Do not abandon me! he cried to them. Follow me, find me!

Tightening around him, existence throbbed with the pulsing of a giant heart. He was expelled into lightlessness, he was tumbled into the unknown.

Down and down he spun.

Gradually he began recalling long-forgotten concepts such as direction and distance and time. Concentrating on them, he found himself spiraling amid stars. Constellations bloomed around him like flowery meadows.

He reached out, hungry for the suddenly remembered sensation of touch . . . and slipped and slid and came to rest in a warm chamber lit by a dim red glow.

There he lay dreaming. Sheltered and content, he was suspended between worlds, floating on tides regulated by the rhythms of a universe. In this building-time he sorted among his memories, deciding which to keep. So few could be retained and it was hard to anticipate which he might most need. Yet a voiceless command urged him to remember, remember. . . .

He drifted and dreamed until the pounding began. Shocked, he tried to fight back, but he was seized and squeezed and ultimately ejected into a place of hard surfaces. A burning flood poured into his nostrils and open mouth.

The infant used that first breath to scream his outrage.

CHAPTER ONE

I AWOKE TO terror because I heard them singing.

Yet we were a people who sang. We were of the Celtic race, that tall people famed for their fierce blue eyes and fiercer passions. Most of my clan, my blood kin, had fair hair, but in my youth mine was the color of dark bronze.

I have always been different.

Nine moons after my birth our druids gave me the name of Ainvar. I was born of the tribe of the Carnutes in Celtic Gaul; free Gaul. My father was not considered a prince, as he had no swords sworn to him personally, but he was of the warrior aristocracy and entitled to wear the gold arm ring, as my old grandmother frequently reminded me. My parents and brothers were dead before I was old enough to remember them, so she raised me alone in their lodge in the Fort of the Grove. I remember when I believed the fort with its timber palisade was the entire world.

The air always rang with song. We sang for the sun and the rain, for death and birth, for work and war. Yet when I was startled awake by the druids singing in the grove, I was badly frightened. What if they had discovered me?

I should not have slept. I had meant to stay alert in some hiding place until dawn, watching until the druids came to the grove. But I was raw with youth; the events of the night had exhausted me. When I finally found a refuge, I must have tumbled into sleep between one breath and the next. I knew nothing more until I heard the druids singing and realized they were already in the sacred grove. They must have passed very near me.

Spying on them was strictly forbidden, subject to the direst punishments, unnamed but whispered.

My mouth went dry, my skin prickled. I had not expected to be caught. I just wanted to see great magic done.

With agonizing slowness I got to my feet. Every dead leaf rustled my betrayal. But the druids continued without interruption until I began to think they were unaware of me.

Perhaps I could creep close enough to watch them after all, I told myself. My fear was not as great as my curiosity.

It never has been.

My refuge had been a depression between the roots of a huge old tree, a hollow filled with dead leaves. As I eased out of it, a winterkilled twig snapped beneath my foot and I froze. If the druids had not heard the twig, surely they could hear my heart pounding. But their singing went on. And so, in time, did I. Very cautiously.

Everyone in the fort had known our druids were going to try to force the wheel of the seasons to turn. The traditional ceremonies for encouraging the return of the sun had failed, and the druids had devised a new and secret ritual said to be of great power. Only initiates were to be allowed to see the attempt, born of desperation.

We were suffering a winter without end, a season of blowing granular ice and icy granular wind. Gaul was cloaked in clouds. Livestock was emaciated, supplies exhausted, people frightened.

Naturally we looked to our druids to help us.

When I was only a knee-child my grandmother had caught me staring, finger in mouth, at several figures swathed in robes of undyed wool. The robes had hoods like dark caverns from which eyes glowed mysteriously.

"They are members of the Order of the Wise," Rosmerta had said to me as she took my hand and led me away, though I continued to look back over my shoulder. "Never stare at them, Ainvar; never even look at them when their hoods are raised. And always show them the greatest respect."

"Why?" I was always asking why.

Knees creaking, my grandmother had crouched down until her face was level with mine. Her faded blue eyes beamed love at me from amid their network of wrinkles. "Because the druids are essential for our survival," she explained. "Without them, we would be helpless against all the things we cannot see."

So began my lifelong fascination with druidry. I wanted to know everything about them. I asked a thousand questions.

In time I learned that the Order of the Wise had three branches. Bards were the historians of the tribe. Vates were its diviners. Though all members of the Order were usually called druids for the sake of simplicity, in truth that title belonged to the third

division, who studied for as long as twenty winters to earn it. Druids were the thinkers, teachers, interpreters of law, healers of the sick. Keepers of the mysteries.

No subject was beyond the mental scrutiny of druids. They measured the Earth and the sky, they calculated the best times for planting and harvesting. Among the practices attributed to them, in avid whispers, were such rituals as sex magic and death-teaching.

The learned Hellenes from the south called the druids "natural philosophers."

The principal obligation of the druids was to keep Man and Earth and Otherworld in harmony. The three were inextricably interwoven and must be in a state of balance or catastrophe would follow. As the repositories of a thousand years of tribal wisdom, the druids knew how to maintain that balance.

Beyond our forts and farms lurked the darkness of the unknown. Druid wisdom held that darkness at bay.

How I envied the knowledge stored in those hooded heads! My young mind was as hungry for answers as my belly was for food. What force pushed tender blades of grass through solid earth? Why did my skinned knees ooze blood one time, but clear fluid another? Who was taking bites out of the moon?

Druids knew.

I wanted to know, too.

Druids instructed the children of the warrior class, who comprised Celtic nobility, in such skills as counting and telling direction by the stars. We met in the groves and sat at our teachers' feet in dappled shade. Sometimes there were girls in the group. Celtic women who wished to learn were allowed the privilege. But our teachers never shared any real secrets with us; they were only for the initiated.

I wanted to know.

So of course I found a secret ritual of sufficient power to change the season irresistible.

The diviners had declared the fifth dawn after the pregnant moon to be the most auspicious time. The ritual would be conducted in the most sacred place in Gaul, the great oak grove on the ridge north of our fort. The fort itself had been built to garrison warriors like my father who guarded the approaches to the grove, which must never be profaned by foreigners.

Other fortified villages and towns in Gaul were the strongholds of princes, but not ours. Ours was the Fort of the Grove and the chief druid of the Carnutes was its supreme authority.

On the night before the secret ritual was to take place I had lain in a froth of impatience, waiting for my grandmother to fall asleep. I had always lived with Rosmerta, who tended to my needs and scolded me as she saw fit. She would never allow me to go out on an icy night to spy on the druids.

Of course, I had no intention of asking her permission.

On this night of all nights, unfortunately, she seemed wide awake, though usually she was nodding by sundown. "Aren't you tired?" I kept asking her.

She smiled her toothless smile at me. Her collapsed mouth was as soft as a baby's. "I am not, lad. But you sleep, that's a good boy."

She hobbled around our lodge, doing little woman things. I lay tensely on my straw pallet, burrowed amid woolen blankets and fur robes, letting my eyes wander from Rosmerta to the faded shields hanging on the log walls. They had been untouched since my father and brothers were killed in battle shortly before I was born. My mother, who was really too old for childbearing, had given birth to me and promptly followed her men into the Otherworld.

The shields were a constant reminder of my warrior heritage, but their dimming glories did not excite me.

I wanted to see the druids work great magic.

My supper lay in my belly like a stone. Rosmerta glanced in my direction occasionally, but she seemed preoccupied. At last she pulled her three-legged stool close to the central firepit and sat down, gazing into the flames.

I waited. I feigned a yawn, which she did not echo. I closed my eyes and made snoring noises. Old woman, go to bed! I thought, peeping at her through slitted eyelids.

When I thought I could stand it no longer, she finally got up, joint by joint, in the manner of the very old. She took a small stone bottle I had never seen before from the carved wooden chest that held her personal belongings, and drank its contents in one long swallow. Her wattled throat trembled. Then, with one hasty glance at me to be sure I was asleep, she took her heavy cloak from its peg and left the lodge. An icy blast of air eddied through the briefly opened door.

I assumed she had gone outside to relieve herself. The bowels of old people are unreliable. Seizing my chance, I bunched my bedding to resemble a sleeping figure, then grabbed my own cloak and hurried from the lodge.

The fort was asleep. The only living creature I saw was a cat

hunting rats near a storage shed. The moon was shrouded in cloud, but the wintry night had an icy luminosity that allowed me to see well enough to make my way to a section of the palisade concealed by the sheds of the craftsmen. The lone sentry at the main gate was dozing at his post in the watchtower.

With a run and a leap I scrambled up the vertical timbers of the wall, a forbidden feat that every boy in the fort, and not a few of the girls, had mastered by the time they had all their meat-eating teeth.

We were a people who dared.

The palisade was built atop a bank of earth and rubble with a considerable drop on the far side. Though I landed with bent knees, the shock of impact took my breath away. As soon as I recovered I set off for the grove.

Carnutian tribeland included much of the broad plain traversed by the sandy-bedded river Liger and its tributaries. Beside one of these, the Autura, a great forested ridge thrust upward from level land, dominating the landscape, visible for a day's march. This ridge, which was considered the heart of Gaul, was crowned with the sacred grove of oaks that was the center of the druid network.

Sacred sites are not chosen by Man, but revealed to him. The earliest settlers here had felt the power of this place. Anyone who approached the oaks was gripped with awe. They were the oldest and largest in Gaul, and Man was nothing to them. Through their roots they fed on the supreme goddess, Earth herself, while their uplifted arms supported the sky.

The clamor of human habitation must not be allowed to disturb the atmosphere of so sacred a place, so the Fort of the Grove had been built at some distance from the ridge, but close to the river which was our water supply. Upon leaving the fort I fixed my eyes on the dark mass of the ridge against the slightly paler sky and settled into a ground-covering trot.

I had gone over halfway when I heard the first wolf howl.

In my excitement I had forgotten about the wolves.

The terrible winter had deprived them as it had us, making game scrawny and scarce. The wolves were hunting closer than ever to the settlements of men, seeking meat.

I was meat.

I began to run.

Only an idiot, my head tardily informed me, would have left the fort in the middle of the night with no weapon and no body-guard. But youngsters hold only one thought at a time. Years of

study are required before one can think, as druids do, of seven or nine things at a time.

I might have no years left me.

I did not run; I flew.

If I could only reach the grove I thought, in my panic, that I would be safe. The grove was sacred, everyone knew that. Even the animals of the forest were said to revere it; surely the wolves would not kill me there.

Surely.

At fifteen, one believes any amount of nonsense.

I had run until I thought my lungs would burst. Frozen grass crunched under my feet. Another howl sounded, closer than the first. My heart was pounding so hard I thought it would leap into my throat and choke me. Could a person die that way? I did not know, but I could imagine. I was always imagining.

The ground lifted, the ridge rose before me, black against black. Miraculously my feet found the way without stumbling over a stone and pitching me headlong. The trees swallowed me. But even then I was not safe, I had to get to the grove of the oaks, the sacred grove. I pushed through a tangle of undergrowth, holding an up-flung arm in front of my face to protect it. My harsh breathing was so loud the wolves could have tracked me by the sound alone.

A stitch of pain tore through my side like a bolt of lightning. Perhaps it was lightning. Perhaps I had been struck dead and would not have to run anymore. Then the pain ebbed and I struggled on, tripping over roots, sobbing for breath, trying to hear if the wolves were behind me.

The undergrowth thinned; I was on the last steep rise leading to the grove of ancient oak trees. I gave a gasp of relief. Next moment I stumbled and fell forward into a hollow filled with dead leaves.

The leaves closed over me.

I lay panting, listening for the patter of feet. Nothing. Only the thunder of my blood in my ears. I dared to hope the wolves had not been after me at all, but on the trail of some smaller, easier game.

When it seemed I might be safe, I settled deeper into the bed of dry leaves. It was as good a place as any, and warmer than most. I could wait in relative comfort until the dawn, knowing I was well concealed at the very edge of the grove. The druids would come with the dawn. . . .

Then I heard singing and the night was over.

They must have come right past me on their way to the grove.

Cautiously I crept forward, trying to get closer to the clearing in the center of the grove where the most powerful of druid rituals took place. An immense holly bush barred my way. It stood at the very edge of the glade; if I could get inside it I could see without being seen. Or so I thought.

I flopped down on my belly and wriggled forward, propelled by knees and elbows, smelling cold earth and leaf mold, until I was beneath the lowest outstretched arms of the holly. Meanwhile, the druid song for the oaks gave way to a rhythmic chant that hid any sound I was making.

When I reached the holly trunk, I wormed my way to my feet between the branches, only to discover my view into the glade was still blocked by its evergreen leaves. Impatiently I started to push a branch out of the way . . . just as the central figure in the glade turned in my direction.

Brandishing the carved ash stick that was the symbol of his authority, Menua, chief druid of the Carnutes and Keeper of the Grove, seemed to be looking straight at me. I froze. Cold sweat ran down my bare legs below my tunic.

If I were already counted as an adult, which I should have been after surviving fifteen winters, I would have been entitled to wear the tight-fitting woolen leggings grown men wore. But I had not been initiated into adulthood. My legs had not officially reached their final length. My manmaking was to take place in the spring, and spring would not come.

The full weight of the danger struck me. I could be classed as a criminal for breaking a druid prohibition. Criminals were, at the option of the druid judges, fodder for sacrifice.

I stared in horror toward Menua, convinced that he with all his powers could see me through the most solid leaves.

But to my enormous relief, he did not. The chief druid continued the slow turning of his body. Murmuring in counterpoint to the chanting, he began weaving designs in the air with his hands, letting the ash stick fall.

There was a sudden tingling on my skin such as one feels before a storm breaks. The hair stirred on my forearms and lifted on the nape of my neck, moved by the inrush of unseen forces. The murky morning dimmed and the air grew colder, denser, thick with tension.

In the glade the druids began circling sunwise around a central hub. Between their moving bodies I glimpsed something white lying on the raised stone slab used for sacrifices.

I thought I understood. A gift of life would be offered in exchange for a gift from the Otherworld.

The adult members of the tribe were privileged to attend all the sacrifices except those which involved some secret ritual, like this one. Children, however, were forbidden. But we boys sometimes re-created the sacrifices for ourselves, using some hapless lizard or rodent.

For the son of a warrior, I was strangely squeamish about seeing blood shed. It troubled my belly. I always let someone else take the role of the sacrificer, and I dropped my eyes at the crucial moment when the others were watching the knife. I was great at chanting and exhorting, however.

Now the real chanters and exhorters were at work. Their voices filled the grove, calling on the sacred names of sun and wind and water while their feet wove a complex pattern on the earth. Chanting rose to thunder amid the oaks.

Then Menua lifted his arms. Like the bare twigs of the trees, his fingers clawed space. By his gesture, sound was torn from the grove, hurled into the air, gone. The other druids halted in mid-step, freezing the pattern.

The air crackled with gathering magic.

Menua flung back his hood. In the style of the Order, his head was shaved across the front from ear to ear, leaving a bald dome of forehead surrounded by a flaring mane of white hair. In sharp contrast were the black eyebrows that almost met above his nose. Menua was only of average height for a Gaulish man, but he was wide and solid, and the voice booming from his chest was the voice of the oaks.

"Hear us!" he cried to That Which Watched. "See us! Inhale our breath and know us for a part of you!"

I shrank inside my tunic. My crawling flesh informed me of a Presence, larger than human, occupying visibly empty space, aware of Menua and the druids. And of me. A terrible, awesome power, gathering itself in the grove.

"The seasons are entangled," Menua was saying. "Spring cannot free itself from winter. Hear us, heed our cries! Your sun does not heat the earth and soften her womb so she will accept seed and grow grain. The animals will not mate. Soon we will have no cows for milk and leather, no sheep for meat and wool.

"The pattern of the weather is damaged. Our bards tell us that we came to Gaul many generations ago because the patterns of existence had been damaged in our homeland to the east. We had

too many births and not enough food. We fled here to save ourselves, and in this land learned to live in harmony with the earth.

“Now that harmony has somehow been disturbed and must be put right. The confusion of the seasons threatens not only the Carnutes, but our neighbors the Senones, the Parisii, the Bituriges. Even such powerful tribes as the Arverni and the Aedui are suffering. All Gaul is suffering.”

Menua paused to draw breath. When he spoke again, his voice was thick with pleading. “We implore the help of the Otherworld. Aid us in healing the pattern. Inspire us, guide us. In exchange we shall offer the most precious gift we have to give, not the spirit of a criminal or an enemy, but the spirit of our oldest and wisest, a person revered by all the tribe.

“We send you the spirit of one who bore the deaths of her children with courage and never failed to give good counsel in the circle of elders. Her spark comes to join yours, life moving to life. Accept our offering. Help us in our need.”

Gesturing to Aberth the sacrificer, Menua lowered his arms. Aberth stepped forward, throwing back his hood to reveal himself to That Which Watched. He had a foxy face and fox-colored hair behind his tonsure, and a curly red beard that never grew below his jaw. On his arm a circlet of wolf fur denoted his talent for killing.

Strapped to his waist was the sacrificial knife with its gold hilt.

The chanting began again, low but insistent. “Turn the wheel, turn the wheel, change the seasons.” The druids were circling again. “Turn the wheel, change the seasons, join with us, accept our gift, now. Now!” The voices rang with desperate urgency.

Aberth paused beside the shrouded figure on the altar stone. He pulled away the cloth, baring the body for his knife. In the moment before I meant to drop my eyes, I had a clear look at his intended victim.

My grandmother lay with her gentle face turned toward the sunless sky.

CHAPTER TWO

"No!" At first I could not imagine who screamed. Who would dare interrupt a druid ceremony?

Then I realized I was screaming. Like some madman, I had burst from concealment and was running recklessly into the glade, waving my arms and yelling for the druids to stop.

I expected lightning to strike me and shrivel me into a cinder at Menua's command.

Instead, he and the others merely stared at me. Aberth's up-raised arm hung in the air, holding the knife above Rosmerta. Only the chief druid seemed able to move; he tried to catch me as I flung myself protectively across my grandmother's body. I beat him off with clubbed fists, then took the old woman in my arms. I was surprised to discover how thin she was. It was like holding a bag of sticks.

We lay together on the stone of sacrifice with the knife poised above us. I did not look up. I pressed my lips against Rosmerta's cheek, feeling the dry old skin, inhaling her scent, her individual odor of woodsmoke and desiccation.

Her flesh was cold to my lips.

Menua's hand clamped on my shoulder. "Step aside, lad," he said, more kindly than I expected.

I intended to obey him; we always obeyed our druids. But instead my arms tightened around Rosmerta. "I won't let you kill her," I said in a muffled voice, my face against hers.

"We aren't going to kill her. She's already dead." Menua waited for his words to sink in. Aberth took a step backward, perhaps in response to some signal from the chief druid.

I lifted my head so I could look down at Rosmerta. Her eyes were closed, sunken into pits lost amid the wrinkles. When I

raised myself higher I could see her scrawny neck, where no pulse beat. Her chest did not rise and fall.

"You see?" Menua asked in the same gentle tone. "The knife is only a formality to conform to the ritual of sacrifice. Rosmerta chose, with nobility and fortitude, to die for the common good. When she thought you were asleep last night, she drank a potion we had given her. Winter-in-a-bottle, we call it. She took winter into herself, she became winter, the season of death. Then she came to my lodge and we brought her here before dawn. Her spirit left her body just before sunrise, which is the time spirits prefer for migrations.

"This is the new ritual, Ainvar. Rosmerta shows winter how to die so spring may be born. In such ways, with such symbols, we encourage the healing of the pattern."

He was only speaking words, they meant nothing to me. All that mattered was my grandmother, who could not be dead. As clearly as if I still saw it, I remembered the look on her face the night before as she gave me my meal—a thin gruel and a lump of badger meat. She had claimed she was not hungry.

Now I held her with arms nourished by the food she had denied herself. I would never surrender her.

Above my head Menua said to the others, "This may be the help we sought. The Source of All Being has sent this lad to us. Think on this symbol. What better way to show the seasons how to change than by tearing a boy in the spring of his life away from the corpse of winter?"

He seized my shoulders and tugged. I sobbed in grief and defiance. Later they told me I had actually twisted around and bared my teeth at the chief druid.

"She isn't dead. I won't let her be dead."

"You have no choice. Come now, Ainvar." He pulled harder. There was an edge to his voice; the time for handling me gently had passed.

I shouted again, "I won't let her be dead! Rosmerta? Live, Rosmerta!"

Then it happened.

The corpse opened its eyes.

The knife fell from Aberth's fingers. One of the other druids muffled a cry by cramming her knuckles into her mouth. They fell back, leaving us alone.

Rosmerta's body shuddered. Air hissed into her mouth.

"Grandmother! I knew you couldn't be dead, I knew it. . . ."

I shook her bony shoulders, I rained kisses on her defenseless face.

Her voice was the papery whisper of dry leaves. "I should be dead. I'm so tired. So tired. Let me go, Ainvar. I need to go."

Tears choked me. "I cannot. What would I do without you?"

She fought to draw another breath. "Live," she whispered.

Menua urged, "Listen to her, Ainvar. The law says we must respect the requests of the old. Rosmerta's body is worn out. Would you have her remain in a collapsing dwelling?"

I could not think, I did not know what to feel. I was all knots inside. I looked from Rosmerta to Menua and back.

When my grandmother breathed she made a dreadful rasping noise, a sound of agony. The next breath she drew was worse.

Menua was wrong. I did have a choice, but making it was the most difficult thing I had ever done. Something seemed to tear loose inside me as I gave Rosmerta one last, urgent hug, and pressed my lips to her ear. "If you truly want to go," I murmured, "go. I salute you as a free person," I added, the words one Celt customarily said to another when parting.

She sank in upon herself. A rattle sounded in her throat. A strange, bitter odor came from her gaping mouth.

Something as insubstantial as a sigh sped past me into the morning.

For a few heartbeats no one moved. Then Menua gently pulled me away. There was no resistance left in me. He bent over the old woman's body. His examination of her was thorough. Later, when I had more wisdom, I would recall that, among other things, he had pressed his fingers very firmly against Rosmerta's wind-pipe and held them there for a time.

He straightened up and looked around the glade, seeking the eyes of the other druids. "Winter is dead," he announced. "Gone beyond recall." He flicked a glance at me.

The ritual resumed, swirling around me like a mist. I paid no attention, I could not make sense of it. I was numbed by a sense of being alone which I had never imagined before. I would not starve, my blood kin occupied the Fort of the Grove and no clan allowed any of its members to be abandoned. But the warmth of affection Rosmerta had blanketed me with would not, could not, be replaced.

I felt cold and naked.

The druids chanted and circled. A hole was dug among the roots of the oaks. Rosmerta would sleep forever as I had slept the night before, embraced by the trees. Her shrouded body, wrapped