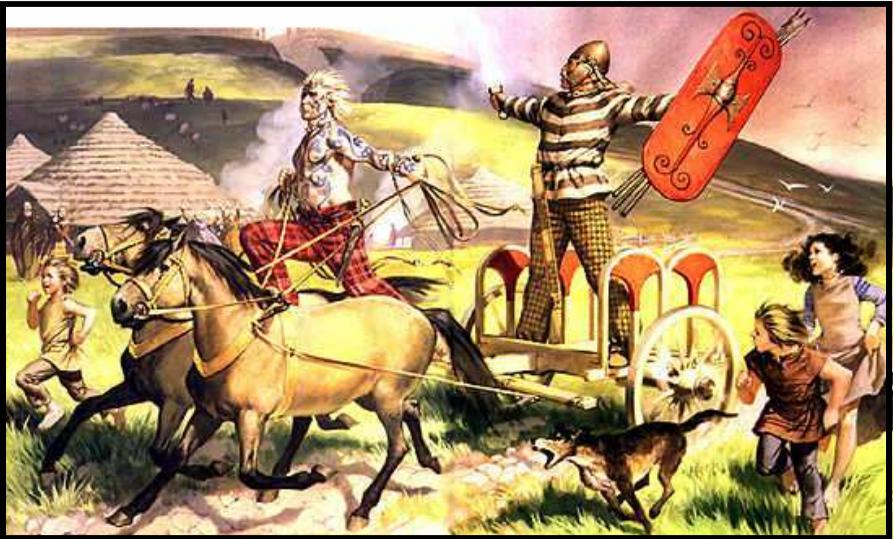


The Adventures Of Bran



(an iron-age boy)

David Freeman & Pauline Giles

This story is the combination of two talents.

David Freeman

A historical Interpreter who teaches the Iron-Age

and

Pauline Giles

An award winning writer

The result is an exciting children's story, set in pre-roman Britain, presented as historically accurate as possible.

The story was written with primary school children in mind.

Aimed at Key Stage 2

Settlers and Invaders - The Celts

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Chapter 1

Leaving Home

Bran stirred and opened one eye. The grey light of morning crept into the roundhouse, but it was still cold so he snuggled down into the furs on his bed, preparing to go back to sleep. Suddenly he sat bolt upright with a gasp, remembering what day it was. It was to be the start of a whole new life. He was to leave his family and his farm, and go to live with the warrior Ambiorix, whose exploits were told and retold round the fires of the local settlements.

Ambiorix was a distant relative of Bran's father, and had agreed to take the boy; who was tall for his age, fit, and intelligent. Bran was to be trained up as a warrior, and would then serve Ambiorix for most of his life.

Bran had slept in his tunic, so he only had to pull on his trousers and shoes. His father Marbod, his mother Cara, and his two small sisters Elvina and Bettrys, were still asleep. There were also two elderly relatives in the house, his mother's uncle, Welland, and a distant cousin of his grandfather, Derdriu.

The boy went to the fire. It was everyone's instinct to keep an eye on it, as it was important to have the fire alight at all times. It had been banked up overnight, and was now reduced to embers. Bran picked up some thin sticks and got them burning first, put on some logs, then swung the great iron cooking-pot over the fire to heat up the remains of last night's dinner for breakfast.

Now he wrapped his woollen blanket round him and whistled softly. A grey shape crept out from under the furs on his bed. It was his dog Bod. He opened the door of the roundhouse, automatically reaching out to touch the house-god for protection, and boy and dog crept out together.

The air struck bitterly cold, smoke from the fire seeped through the

thatch and hung low in the chilly air. Bran began to run, Bod bouncing at his heels. At the low place that they used on the riverbank, he knelt to splash his face and drink, and then he walked into a coppice of trees to relieve himself. He picked up one of the leather buckets stored by the river, and filled it with water. As he began to carry it back to the roundhouse, he heard his mother's voice calling.

“Bran! Bran! It's breakfast time.”

Hurrying as fast as he could with the heavy bucket of water, Bran was soon warm and very hungry. The family was stirring, and his mother was fussing over the fire. She handed him a bowl of stewed meat and a piece of bread.

His father came and sat down next to him.

“Big day son. No doubt you'll do us credit in your new home”

“I'll try father.”

“Work hard for Ambiorix, learn all you can, and you'll do very well.”

“Leave the boy alone, let him eat his breakfast in peace.” Cara ruffled his hair gently. Bran pulled away.

“You leave the boy alone,” Marbod laughed, “he's a man leaving home, you can't ruffle his hair like a baby!”

After breakfast, the whole family went to see to the animals. They had cows and pigs, some geese, and a small flock of sheep. Even little Bettrys, who was only six, could milk the ewes. By the time their chores were done, the sun was getting higher in the sky.

“We must go now,” said Marbod and so they set off. Marbod walked in front with Cara, Bran and his sisters following, and Bod racing here, there, and everywhere, looking for hares.

Bran had a strange feeling, half excitement, half sadness. He was on his way to a new and fascinating life, but all that he had ever known was being left behind. Soon, even his family would be gone, and he would be alone amongst strangers.

It was a rather a frightening thought, for a ten-year-old boy.

Chapter 2

New Beginnings

Ambiorix's farm was on a plateau, higher than the surrounding countryside. A palisade surrounded it, and the only entrance was through a pair of big wooden gates. In front of the half-closed gates stood a boy of about fifteen, tall with an open, pleasant face.

"You must be Marbod."

"I am".

"I have been told to tell you to wait here whilst I fetch Ambiorix."

"We will."

Bran realised that his father was nervous. That was strange. It never occurred to him that his father would be scared of anything.

The gates were flung wide open and Ambiorix and his wife, Gwenfrew stepped out followed by a slender girl with long fair hair and blue eyes. She looked curiously at Bran, who felt himself redden.

"Welcome Marbod and Cara." The warrior had a deep, strong voice, "I see Bran has grown since I saw him at Beltain when we discussed his future"

Gwenfrew and Cara exchanged hugs. "You have a fine son Cara, rest assured I will look after him, see that he eats well, and gets enough sleep. I'm sure he's a good boy."

"Oh he is." Cara replied. Bran reddened again as he saw the young girl smile to herself.

"Come and eat with us Marbod." said Ambiorix, "You must be hungry after your long walk." He led the way into the compound.

Bran gazed about him. There were four roundhouses in the enclosure, with the largest one in the middle. To one side was a forge where a blacksmith worked at his anvil. Some boys were grooming horses, rubbing them down with hay and combing their coats with teasels. They cast sly glances at Bran, but kept on with their work. One grinned at him, showing a gap in his teeth.

Ambiorix called to the boy who had met them at the gate.

“Conan, take Bran and find him a bed space, see he gets something to eat and drink,” turning to his daughter, he went on,” and you, Lynne, take the girls to find some food “

The adults went off into the biggest house and Bran followed Conan to a smaller one out by the palisade.

“So you’ve come to train as a warrior?” Conan asked.

“Yes. Is it hard?”

“Hard? You wait and see! Be careful of Ambiorix, he’s a hard task-master and very strict.”

“Have you been here long?”

“Nearly two years. I shall be going on my first foray soon.”

They went into the roundhouse. A fire burned in the centre, and firewood was stacked neatly beside it. There was a pile of wooden swords and shields to one side, and a leather bucket of water next to some horn drinking cups. Around the inside of the roundhouse were eight beds, covered with furs. At the foot of each bed were a blanket, some spare trousers, and a tunic.

“That’s yours,” said Conan, pointing to the bed nearest the door, ”the longer you are here the further you move from the door. I’m afraid you’ll find it draughty at first. Put your things down, and we’ll go and find some food.

“How many other boys are there here?” Bran asked

“Seven, including me. Most of them are all right, but beware of Commix. He’s nasty. He seems to be permanently unhappy, because his father was a servant.”

“A servant? How come Commix is training to be a warrior then?”

“Well, Commix’s father was defending Ambiorix’s wife from a raider. In fact he saved her life. He thought he’d killed the man, but as he turned away, the raider threw his knife and killed Commix’s father. Ambiorix buried him with honour and adopted his son.”

“Well, why is Commix so nasty?”

“He thinks we all despise him because he’s the son of a servant, but in fact he’s very interesting, if you can ever persuade him to be normal for a while.”

The two boys left the dormitory and made their way to one of the other roundhouses. The rest of the boys were waiting for their food. Conan introduced Bran, and they all crowded round, talking at once. "You boys be quiet if you want some food." Said the woman who was standing by a huge cauldron suspended over the fire. They stopped talking and stood in line. They each received a bowl of stewed hare, flavoured with wild herbs and thickened with oats. They also had a hunk of bread, and a horn of watered down ale. There was not too much conversation during the meal, they were all too hungry. Just as they were finishing, a servant ran up. "Conan, you are to take the new boy to Ambiorix's roundhouse, his family are leaving."

The two boys raced across the compound and into the house. Ambiorix smiled at Bran.

"Your family are about to return home, walk with them to the gate."

At the gate, Cara hugged Bran, and for a moment he clung to her. His father put an arm round his shoulders

"Come and see us when you can, in any case we'll see you at Lugnasa. Goodbye son."

As they walked away, Bran surreptitiously wiped his eyes with the sleeve of his tunic, then glanced round to make sure no-one had noticed.

Suddenly Lynne appeared.

"Come on," she cried, "I'll show you round. Race you to the forge."

She dashed off. She was fast for a girl, but Bran caught up with her before she reached the anvil. They were both laughing. Perhaps life would not be too bad after all.

He felt less homesick already.

Chapter Three

The First Night

Lynne and Bran stood watching the blacksmith, who was working on a bronze shield. He was clad only in a kind of leather skirt, to protect him from the heat, and his huge arms and shoulders were covered in sweat. Having given the children a friendly grin, he continued with his work.

“You boy,” he suddenly said to Bran, “fetch me my other hammer.” He pointed to the corner of the forge. Bran ran eagerly and bent to pick it up. He fell forward on his face. He could not even move it. Lynne and the blacksmith roared with laughter, and eventually Bran joined in. The blacksmith walked across and picked it up effortlessly with one hand, still chuckling to himself.

“Come on,” Lynne called, and raced off. Bran and Bod followed. This time she led the way out of the enclosure and down to the river.

“Can you swim?” she asked.

“Of course,” Bran replied. They went into the cold water. Bod stood on the bank watching them, until he decided it looked like fun and followed them in. Bran was a strong swimmer and crossed to the other bank and back. Lynne stayed closer to the home side. They came out puffing and blowing and trying to stop Bod shaking himself over them. Pulling handfuls of long grass from the riverbank, they dried themselves as best they could. They were dressing themselves when a horn sounded.

“Come on,” cried Lynne, and raced off again. Conan met them inside the gate.

“Time to get ready for your initiation,” he said to Bran, and they went to the dormitory. The boys were all there tidying themselves up, and combing their hair. Gwenfrew came bustling in.

“Have you all been to the river to wash? Good. Bran! Let me look at you! Yes! You’ll do. Come on, quickly.” She led Bran out, the other boys following behind.

In the biggest roundhouse, Ambiorix was eating his supper with his warriors, the noise was immense, they talked all the time whilst they ate and drank. Bran could hear some of them boasting of their exploits, and there was much laughter.

The boys stood quietly until Ambiorix noticed them. He blew a blast on his horn. Everyone fell silent. He beckoned to Bran to come to his table. Bran knew exactly what to do. He stood in silence. Ambiorix picked up a small knife, with a beautifully carved handle. He speared a piece of meat off his own plate and offered it to Bran, who took the knife and ate the meat off it. Next, Ambiorix drank from his horn and passed it to Bran, who took a sip and passed it back, (it was mead). Ambiorix came round to the front of his table, and turned Bran round to face the company.

“This is Bran, son of Marbod. He has come to be trained as a warrior here. He shall want for neither food ‘nor drink in my house. We will nurture him. Make him welcome!” Bran offered him the little knife back.

“No, it is yours to keep, here is its scabbard.” Ambiorix said.

Bran stared in delight. The only knife he had ever had was an old one, which was past sharpening.

“Thank you.” he whispered.

The noise broke out afresh. The warriors raised their horns and drank to Bran, who walked the length of both tables. The warriors slapped him on the back or grasped his forearm in salute. He felt very embarrassed, but also very excited.

The boys followed him out of the roundhouse, and ran across to the smaller one where their supper was prepared. Now they were noisy, talking, laughing, asking Bran about his home. Only Commix hung back, sneering at all the fuss.

Several women were busy at the cooking pots, and this time they had mutton stew and barley, again flavoured with herbs. The boys were given a chunk a chunk of bread to soak up the gravy, and soon pellets

of wet bread were flicked back and forth, until Gwenfrew appeared. “All right, all right, enough! Time you were in bed, or you’ll be messing about for hours yet.”

The boys went off to their own roundhouse. Once inside they pounced on Bran, and began to tickle him. Commix went and sat on his own bed. Conan, older than the others, watched from the door to make sure things did not go too far. The boys began to throw ash from the edge of the fire over Bran, until he was grey from head to foot.

“He can’t go to bed like that!” someone cried.

“No!” another voice joined in; “he needs a wash!”

They manhandled him down to the river. Grabbing his hands and feet they began to swing him.

“One, two, three,” and they flung him into the middle of the fast flowing stream. He went under the water then came up spluttering. The other boys laughed as he swam to the bank and climbed out. He staggered along behind them, pretending to be gasping for breath. Suddenly he spread his arms out and leapt forward. Caught unawares, the five boys toppled into the river.

With a shriek of laughter he ran back to the dormitory and by the time the other boys arrived, he was snuggled down under his furs. He looked up a little apprehensively, but the boys were laughing.

“Well done Bran.” “We fell for that one.” “Welcome.” Soon they were all in bed, singing and repeating some of the stories they had heard from the warriors, and discussing the girls who lived in the village.

Suddenly Ambiorix appeared in the doorway. Instantly there was silence. He roared with laughter.

“Well my pack of wolf cubs, you are in fine form tonight. Now that’s enough for now, you have a lot of hard work to get through in the morning. So no more noise, sleep well, may the gods protect you.”

He left.

Soon there was silence, except for the odd snore now and then.

Chapter Four

Work, Work, Work.

It seemed to Bran that he had only just got to sleep when Conan was shouting,

“Come on boys, up! up! up!”

He dragged himself out from under his furs, and followed the others. He found himself next to the smallest boy whose name was Brennus.

“Firewood first,” Brennus said as he ran, “you and I have to get enough for our house, and the cook’s house.”

They picked up a big basket and went into the woods. They picked up broken branches and twigs and any very dry leaves that they found.

They had to go a long way into the woods, and they could hear the other boys talking and crashing around. When it was full, the basket was almost too heavy for them to carry. They staggered back and added to the piles of wood under the eaves of the two houses.

Bran was starving.

“Is it breakfast time?” he asked hopefully

“No,” Brennus laughed, “we have to fetch a bucket of water each, first.”

They collected the wooden buckets, and ran down to the river. Coming back up the hill with full buckets was hard work. The buckets were heavy. Just as they entered the enclosure, Commix met them, carrying his empty bucket.

“How nice of you to fetch my water for me, new boy.” He snatched the full bucket from Bran, and dropped the empty bucket beside him.

“Hey!” Bran cried.

“Leave it,” Brennus said, “he’s a terrible bully. Come on, I’ll help you.”

They ran down to the river again and filled the third bucket. Between them they carried it back.

“You’re late,” Ambiorix called as they set it down by the fire, “Get on with it tomorrow.”

After breakfast they went to their own roundhouse and tidied up their bed furs, they swept up the ash they had thrown the night before. Gwenfrew appeared. She looked round, ‘Tut-tutted’ now and again and

then said.

“I suppose that will have to do. Now off you go and see to the horses.” Bran was with Brennus again. One of the warriors, Verica came to show Bran what to do.

“Take a bundle of clean straw, wipe all the dirt off. Damp it if the horse is very muddy. Make sure he is absolutely clean. Talk to him as you work, keep him calm and happy. That’s it. Now take some fresh straw. Lean your weight on it. See the shine coming? Now comb out the mane and tail with one of these teasels.”

All morning Bran worked on the horses, the sweat pouring off him. By mid-morning his arms and back ached and his legs were trembling. He and Brennus ran down to the river and splashed their hands and faces. He waited quietly for his food then sank gratefully down onto the bench to eat it. He was too tired to talk and was almost nodding off when Conan said, “Come on Bran, time for a run.”

“A run?” Bran asked desperately.

The boys gathered outside, the warriors mounted up on their horses, the boys each went to a horse.

“With me Bran,” called Ambiorix, “hold onto my horse’s tail and run as fast and as far as you can.”

Bran cautiously took hold of the horse’s tail. He was a cobby little horse, dark brown with short, strong legs and good deep shoulders.

“His name is Belenus and he can run forever...” “Ambiorix said, with a twinkle in his eye, “however I shall keep it shorter than forever, today.” He drove his heels into his horse’s flanks and moved off.

Bran was surprised. It was easy to run fast behind the horse, the animal’s forward motion transferred itself to the boy, and he ran further and faster than he ever had before. When they finally arrived back at the enclosure, he fell flat on his face in the dust. The other boys were puffing and blowing but were still on their feet.

“You did well Bran, go and lie on your bed until meal time. You, Commix, can groom my horse, as well as your own, seeing as you did not carry any water up this morning!”

Bran, staggering wearily to his feet, was astonished. How did Am-

biorix know? He had yet to learn that Ambiorix knew everything that went on the farm.

Bran's life settled down into an exhausting routine. Fetching wood and water, grooming horses, running for miles, learning to fight with a wooden sword and shield, throw a spear, and practising with his slingshot.

At first, the days blurred into one another, and all he longed for all the time was to get to his bed. But as he became fitter, he began to enjoy his new-found strength and all the things he was learning. He began to put on muscle, and to fill out all over.

Then one day, everything changed dramatically.

Chapter Five

The Slingshot

Sometimes the boys had a little free time to do whatever they pleased. Bran usually spent it with Brennus who had become a good friend. One day, Bran, Brennus and Bod had gone deep into the woods to hunt for deer. Bod was racing about in all directions as usual, investigating the myriad smells. Suddenly he began a frantic barking, and then he snarled. The boys knew something was wrong and raced towards the noise. They came on a scene that filled them with horror.

Lynne stood backed up against a tree, and facing her, pawing the ground and snorting, was a huge wild boar, preparing to charge. Between the two, was Bod, his lips drawn back in an angry snarl. Bran reached for his slingshot.

“Run Brennus, fetch help!” He shouted.

Brennus turned and raced off. At that moment Bod leapt at the boar, trying to get at its throat. It lowered its head, and thrust one of its great tusks into him. Bod yelped, staggered a few steps then collapsed, streaming with blood.

Bran found the biggest stone in his pouch and loaded his slingshot. Once, twice, three times he whirled it round his head, then let go of the thong. The stone flew straight as an arrow, and struck the boar on the side of its head. The boar gave a furious roar and turned to look at Bran, who was loading his slingshot again; but then the animal turned back to Lynne, and again prepared to charge.

Bran fired off another stone, this time hitting the boar on the thick part of its side. It hardly took any notice. Bran ran forwards, and placed himself in front of Lynne, who was white with fear. Reaching for his knife, Bran kept his eye firmly on the angry creature. It was so close that he could feel the heat coming off it and smell its unpleasant breath. He knew his knife, which was really too small to kill such a big animal. He had only one chance. He had to get it right in the eye. He braced himself staring at one of the bright shining eyes. As

the animal raced forward, he waited until it was right on him, then he thrust with all his strength into the eye. His knife went in up to the hilt. The boar stopped in its tracks, with a surprised grunt. Bran pulled the knife out, the boar shook its head as if to ease the pain. Bran sprang forward and thrust his knife again, this time into the windpipe. Blood spurted everywhere and the boar collapsed, just as Ambiorix and a group of warriors came tearing through the trees.

“Lynne,” Ambiorix cried and swept her into his arms. Bran sank to his knees, his legs suddenly too weak to support him. He was trembling as he sat down on the floor.

“Bod,” he cried remembering the great tusks tearing into the dog.

“He’s here, he’s got a nasty gash on one leg,” one of the warriors said, “but he’ll be alright.”

“Bran, you killed this wild boar by yourself?”

“Yes father, he did. First with his slingshot, and then with his knife,” and

Lynne went on to tell the story of Bran’s bravery.

Bran just felt unbelievably weary now that the danger was over, he thought of the long walk back to the farm and sighed.

“Bran, you are already a warrior,” Ambiorix cried, “I shall be grateful to you forever, you have shown great courage.” The warriors cheered. Ambiorix lifted Lynne up onto his shoulder. Bod was placed on a blanket and carried. Some of the men tied the boar’s feet together and thrust a branch through them to take it home. Two of the warriors lifted Bran, and carried him back to the farm.

Word of the event had spread rapidly from mouth to mouth, everyone had gathered in the open space behind the gates to meet them. Gwenfrew ran forward to take Lynne from Ambiorix. He raised his hands for silence.

“We have a new warrior. Bran, son of Marbod has saved my daughter’s life. He killed this wild boar with a child’s knife. Tonight he shall dine with me.”

A great roar went up. The warriors set Bran down. He staggered a little. Gwenfrew put her arms round him and he was glad to cling to her.

“Tomorrow - Ambiorix. He shall dine with you tomorrow. We will prepare a great feast for everyone, but tonight he needs quiet and rest.”

She took Bran off to his roundhouse.

Chapter Six

A Celebration

All the boys, with the exception of Commix, made a fuss of Bran the next day. Although he was the hero of the hour, he was not excused from his chores, or from training in the afternoon.

Any of the warriors who came across him during the day, slapped him on the back or had a word with him. Commix watched all this with a jaundiced eye.

“Little upstart,” he muttered, “he needs taking down a peg or two. I’ll work something out.”

That afternoon they were practising their slingshot skills. Vodemus, one of the older boys, was brilliant. They were aiming at a leather bottle placed on a rock and as they moved further back, a long pace at a time, he, Conan and Bran kept knocking it off with their first stones. Finally there was only Bran and Vodemus.

Bran shot first. It was the longest distance he had ever tried. As he let go of the thong, his stone flew at the bottle; it hit it on one side. The bottle wobbled, but stayed upright. Vodemus stepped up, he aimed his slingshot, whirled and fired. The bottle shot up into the air and fell to the ground. All the boys cheered.

“Do your special trick Vodemus,” someone begged.

Ambiorix, who was watching, added his voice.

“Go on Vodemus, just this once.”

Conan and Vodemus stood side by side. Conan slung a stone high into the air, as it fell back; Vodemus fired and hit it before it fell to earth, splitting it into a thousand shards.

“That’s brilliant!” Bran said.

“I’ll teach you how to do it.” Vodemus replied.

Later that day the boys waited in the roundhouse full of excitement, they were to eat with the warriors and the women, to celebrate Bran’s killing of the wild boar.

Ambiorix came in.

“Come on my wolf cubs,” he said, “and behave yourselves. Bran,

come with me, you sit at my table tonight.”

He put his arm round the boy’s shoulder and led the way to the big roundhouse. As they entered, the warriors stood up shouting and cheering, banging their mugs on the table.

As Bran sat down next to Ambiorix, Lynne came up to him with a present. It was the boar’s teeth, strung on a length of leather. She hung it round his neck. Ambiorix had a present for him too. “You did a man’s job with a child’s toy. I think you deserve a man’s weapon.”

He produced a full sized sheath and withdrew a big knife with a beautifully carved handle and blade.

“This belonged to Dinaghue, another hero from among my men. He died defending my womenfolk. Treasure it, and wear it with honour.”

“I will. Thank you Ambiorix.” Bran fastened the knife to his belt with great pride.

The food was delicious. The wild boar had been chopped up and stewed for hours with vegetables and mead. Some of Ambiorix’ store of salt had been used for extra flavour, and the women had baked plenty of bread.

Lynne sat next to Bran and they talked as they ate. She was very funny and made him laugh a great deal. He became less shy with her, and in his turn made her laugh about his sisters. Suddenly someone began to sing. Everyone was quiet listening to the words, and joining in the chorus.

*“There was a boy of courage great,
Who found a maiden like to die.
Threatened by a raging boar,
He struck the creature in the eye.
Lulla lulla lulla lul lie
Bran left the wild boar there to die.*

*The creature snarled and raged around,
It's ire with pain now fed.
But Bran drew out his little knife,
And left the creature dead.
Lulla lulla lulla lul lie
Bran left the wild boar there to die.*

*A hero he, though but a child,
His courage like a flame,
And we will raise our voices up
And honour now his name.
Lulla lulla lulla lul lie,
Bran left the wild boar there to die.*

When Bran realised they were singing about him, he went bright red. Lynne, singing along with the rest, laughed at him. He took a sip of mead to cover his confusion. When they had finished eating, they gathered round the fire and began telling stories.

The story was told of Ambiorix and the three warriors of Dunim, a hill fort some way away. During a battle with the men of Dunim, Ambiorix had got cut off from his own warriors and surrounded by three of the opposing ones. He was riding Belenus and had his sword drawn. Controlling Belenus with his legs and feet, he used his heavy shield as a second weapon and routed all three, riding back with their heads hung from his horse's bridle.

When the story was over, the men and boys cheered and Ambiorix waved in acknowledgement. The stories of this warrior and that went on for hours. Bran felt his eyes closing. He crept close to Bod who was lying with his bandaged leg stretched out towards the warmth of the fire. When the dawn began to break and everyone had gone Gwenfrew found boy and dog fast asleep. She fetched a fur and covered them up.

“We won't disturb them tonight,” she said to Ambiorix.

Chapter Seven

Commix Strikes

Through all the excitement of the boar killing and subsequent celebration, Commix had sat scowling, taking no part, jealous and angry. Why that Bran had only been here a short while and he was everyone's favourite. It would not do. He made plan after plan for Bran's downfall and discarded one after the other. He followed him about and watched for the opportunity to get him into trouble.

Ambiorix and most of his warriors had taken the boys to the market at a nearby hill fort. The boys had run all the way holding onto the horses' tails. Ambiorix had driven in his chariot to make an impression on Tincommius a warrior of equal standing whom he had agreed to meet to discuss a marriage alliance between Tincommius' son and Genevieve, Ambiorix' brother's daughter who lived with them.

Climbing out of the chariot, Ambiorix tossed the reins to Bran. "Dry the horses off and stay with them. See no-one touches him," he said nodding at Belenus. He strode off leaving Bran rubbing Belenus down with dry grass. The other boys went off to explore the market and to brag to other warriors' boys about their prowess in fighting.

One of Tincommius' boys was boasting that no one could a slingshot as well as he could. Commix, looking round to make sure he was not overheard said, "Bran can shoot better than anyone."

"Who's Bran?"

"One of Ambiorix' boys, he's over there with the chariot."

Tincommius' boys looked across.

"Him? He's only a kid!"

"He may be but I bet he could outshoot you." Commix said.

They walked over to Bran. Bodvic the boaster said,

"I hear you think you're good with the slingshot?"

"Yes" Bran replied simply, "I'm good."

"Huh! Bet you're not as good as me."

"I am, but I can't leave the horses to show you."

The boys jeered, “Oh yes? You’re afraid. All Ambiorix’s boys are cowards.”

“We are not.”

“Well, tie up the horses and shoot against me.”

Bran looked round, no one was in sight, Commix was hiding but listening in. Bran took the reins and tied them to the branch of a tree. He went with the boys to a clear space and they set up a pile of stones to shoot at.

As soon as they had gone, Commix crept out. He picked a handful of vernam; a plant beloved of horses but dangerous to them. He offered it to Belenus. He was delighted and ate it quickly. Commix untied the reins and led Belenus to a place where the vernam grew thickly, then he hurried off and joined Conan who was surprised to find him so friendly.

Bran and Bodvic had found little to choose between them with the slingshot and had become quite friendly. They were after a hare now, stalking it together and trying to drive it into a corner where a thick hedge blocked its escape. Suddenly Bran heard a horn blaring out. Oh no! It was Ambiorix’s horn. He raced back to where he had tied Belenus. He was gone. He saw Ambiorix and his warrior a little way off. Trembling with fear he ran up. Belenus stood with his head hanging down, shuddering and vomiting up green slime. His usually bright eyes were dull and glazed over.

Ambiorix looked up.

“You,” he roared at Bran, “where have you been? How dare you leave my horse unattended to wander at will.”

“I—I didn’t, I tied him to that tree.”

“I left him in your care, your were ordered to stay with him weren’t you? Weren’t you?”

“Yes,” Bran whispered.

“I’ll deal with you later, fetch me Gwynn, the wise woman.”

Some of the boys raced off and returned with an old lady. She listened to what had happened and reached into her leather pouch. She drew out several different kinds of leaves. Some of the boys went to fetch water being heated over one of the many fires. She crushed the leaves and poured the water over them stirring them with a stick. A pleasant smell

rose into the air.

Gwynn offered it to Belenus, who would not drink it. She put some in a small pot. Ambiorix and one of his men held Belenus' head and opened his mouth. The old woman trickled some of the liquid down his throat. Belenus coughed and shook his head but soon he trembled less and stopped vomiting. However, he was very weak. "You cannot move him tonight," Gwynn said, "he needs rest and as much of this as he will drink."

Ambiorix looked at Bran fiercely.

"Go home. All of you go home. Caradoc, put your horse to the chariot, I will stay here with Belenus and ride him home when he is better. I will deal with you when I come," he added to Bran.

It was a silent group who made their way home, no one spoke to Bran and they seemed to keep away from him, only Commix looked cheerful and he tried to hide his glee. The men were morose and had little to say. By the time they arrived at the farm, they were weary. Bran was sent off by himself to the dormitory, and the others went to get some food.

He sat on his bed thinking and thinking about the knot he had put in Belenus' reins. He was positive it was secure. Bran heard a quiet footstep, it was Lynne.

"Are you alright?" she whispered, "I'm not supposed to be here but I've brought you this."

She handed him a piece of bread and some meat.

"I don't believe what happened. I think Commix had something to do with it."

"Commix! Yes! I never thought of that,"

Bran's head came up "But how can I prove it?"

"Well you can't yet, but we'll both watch and wait for a chance to find out what really happened." And she was gone.

Bran rolled himself up in his furs and lay quietly. He heard the other boys come in but there was none of the usual chatter though, Commix did call out, "Goodnight, Bran the hero."

It was a long, sleepless night for Bran.

Chapter Eight

Ambiorix Returns

On the morning of the second day, Ambiorix came riding slowly into the enclosure on a very much thinner Belenus. The whole farm had carried an air of unease whilst he was gone and he was welcomed quietly. He went into his roundhouse and Gwenfrew hurried to bring him ale and food. Soon his horn sounded and everyone assembled to hear what he had to say. For once the boys were quiet and Ambiorix, seated in his huge chair with his warriors behind him, called “Bran, son of Marbod, step forward.”

Bran walked up and stood in front of the warrior, hands clasped tight behind his back so that no one could see how they were trembling. “Tell us exactly what happened.”

Bran took a deep, steadying breath. He hoped he would not be sent home in disgrace.

“You told me to stay with Belenus and to dry him off. I dried him off. Then some boys from Tincommius’ farm came over boasting about how good they were with the slingshot. I said I was as good as they were, and they challenged me. When I said I had to stay with the horse, they said I was afraid and that all your boys were cowards.”

Bran was too nervous to see one or two of the warriors glance at each other and smile faintly. He continued.

“I tied Belenus to a tree branch. I’m sure I tied him securely. We went off and had a competition and I kept up with them. When I heard your horn, I came back, and Belenus had got loose, and you were all there.” He kept his eyes on the ground. Commix was sure Bran would be sent home. After some time, Ambiorix spoke.

“Bran, I must know that I can depend on my warriors, that they will obey orders. You failed to obey a very simple order and my horse nearly died. You have let the other boys, your family, and me down badly. I am disappointed.” He paused. Bran flushed scarlet with shame. “I’m sorry. So very, very sorry.” He whispered.

“Sorry is not enough, I’m afraid you must be punished. For half a moon you will keep out of my sight. You will be spoken to by no one

except those who give you orders. You will work as a servant for the next half moon and will accept any task that is given to you. Any task at all.”

Bran was so relieved not to have been sent home that he heaved a great sigh. Commix was furious.

“I thought I’d got rid of him.” He muttered, then he thought of all the awful jobs he could find for Bran to do, and he smiled craftily.

If Bran thought he had been let off lightly, he soon found that he had made a mistake. He was given a little space in the cook’s roundhouse to sleep in and from morning ‘til night he was kept running back and forth, back and forth, doing all the worst jobs. He had to clean up all the animal dung and take it away to the pit. He had to prepare all the newly killed animals for cooking and clean out the entrails. He was made to help the women wash clothes in the river. Commix made sure he collected loads of firewood and staggered up and down to the river for water over and over again. When he fell into bed at night he was often too tired to cover himself up properly. No one spoke to him, except to give orders, although Lynne gave him a sympathetic smile every time she passed him. He came face to face with Ambiorix once but the warrior completely ignored him.

Gwenfrew began to worry about Bran, he looked so pale and thin and very miserable. She saw to it that he had good food and plenty of it. She was counting the fifteen days almost as keenly as Bran was. At last the sun rose on the last day.

Bran took the night pots out, emptied them in the pit and washed the pots out below the drinking place on the river. He skinned and gutted four hares, and carried so much firewood that he ached all over. Commix sent him for four buckets of water.

As the sun dropped down the sky, he sank down on an upturned bucket to rest. Lynne came up smiling and patted him on the back. “Well done,” she said, “my father wants you.” He stood up and walked over to the big roundhouse. When he walked in, Ambiorix was alone.

“Come here boy,” he said. Bran stood just in front of him.

“You’ve done well. No complaints. No tears. It has been hard for you.”

“I’m tired that’s all.” Bran was suddenly close to crying, and he bit his lip.

“Well, it’s over. You go back to the others and carry on training.”

“Thank you Ambiorix.”

“And Bran, although you disobeyed my orders I feel that there is more to this matter than meets the eye. Perhaps we’ll never find out, but take care. Off you go.”

When Bran returned to the roundhouse, a cheer went up and the boys crowded round him.

“Good to have you back Bran.”

“We’ve missed you.”

Commix was furious.

“You’d think he was a hero, instead of someone who let us all down.”

He snarled.

“Shut up Commix,” said Conan, “You’d never have kept up with all those chores.”

“I wouldn’t have got myself into trouble in the first place.”

“No,” chimed in Brennus, “You only get other people into trouble.”

Commix slunk off planning to make more trouble later.

Bran settled back into the routine of chores in the morning, training after the noon meal. He was very happy and popular with the other boys and the warriors. He learned to ride a horse and to wrestle and his swordplay improved. He and Conan often practised together with the wooden swords kept for the boys to learn with.

Soon, everyone was busy preparing for Lugnasa, the festival of the harvest.

Chapter Nine

Lugnasa

When the crops had ripened in the late summer sun, everyone was out in the fields helping with the harvest. Ambiorix and all the warriors worked their way round the fields with sickles, cutting down the wheat. Gwenfrew and the women, and young boys tied the stalks into sheaves. Others stacked them on four wheeled carts pulled by oxen, and were then taken back to the farm to be built into round stacks with the heads pointed inwards. As each one was finished, a thatched roof would be put on to keep off the rain.

Some of the women stayed at the farm to begin threshing the first wheat to arrive. On the hardest, smoothest piece of ground, they laid the first sheaves out, and beat them with flails to knock the grain out.

As soon as the grain was beaten out, the youngest children picked out the stalks and any dirt that had got in amongst the grain, the women then heaped it onto large baskets to winnow it. They tossed it up into the air, the wind blew away the chaff and other light waste and the heavy grain fell back into the basket. This grain would be ground into flour and made into bread for the festival.

Bran was put to cutting the crop. He had helped his father many times at home and he set to with a will to show what he could do. He worked too hard and too fast, and was soon sweating and aching all over. He had to slow down. By noon he was exhausted, and when some women brought cold water and bread and cheese, out he hardly had the strength to eat and drink. He crawled into the shade and fell asleep.

Bran wakened with a jump. Ambiorix was trickling water onto his face. Everyone laughed at him. "Come on, time to start again," Ambiorix laughed, "and this time, go a bit slower, or you will not last until dark." The work continued. The fields were cut from the outside to the centre

concentrating the spirit of the grain in the last sheaf. Day after day everyone worked under the hot sun until they were exhausted. They ate their evening meal, drank deeply of ale, and crawled into bed.

On the day they reached the last field, there was an air of excitement. This was the eve of Lugnasa, the harvest festival. Ambiorix had chosen a warrior called Tincommius to cut the last sheaf, capturing the spirit of the harvest. When it was bound up, Ambiorix himself raised it in his strong arms, and carried it back to the farm. Everyone else was walking behind, talking and laughing, sometimes bursting into song, all tiredness forgotten. The women had gone back earlier and a huge feast was in preparation. The last sheaf was placed on a stand near Ambiorix's seat in a place of honour.

The men and boys went down to the river to bathe and there was a great deal of splashing and horseplay. The whole farm gathered at the sacred spring, making offerings to the gods, and asking for blessings. There were beautiful pots; some of the best grain; blankets; a torque; and some loaves of bread made from the first sheaves. They were all so grateful to have grown and harvested another crop, to have food for another year. They went back to the big roundhouse to begin the night's feasting.

The roundhouse looked welcoming and comfortable lit by the flames from the central fire and the oil lamps. The noise was overwhelming, mead and ale circulated rapidly. Bran was enthralled, he kept forgetting to eat. He had never attended a feast like this before.

Tasciovannus, an older warrior, stood up and told the saga of Ambiorix's ancestor, who had stolen the farm from another warrior, and built it up until it was too powerful to be attacked. There were cheers and triumphant thumping on the table. "They don't make heroes like that any more," muttered an old crone who had lost all her teeth. "Nonsense," cried Ambiorix, full of mead, "we just don't need to fight

as much as we used to.”

“You’re not the men your ancestors were,” insisted the old crone. There was a roar of disapproval from the warriors. Ambiorix leapt to his feet.

“We will show you that we are the warriors our ancestors were.”

Cheers from the warriors.

“It’s time we went out and collected some more cattle.”

“Yes!” shouted the warriors.

“We will go now!” Ambiorix checked his sword in his scabbard, wiped his knife and put it in its sheath and strode out of the roundhouse. As he reached the door he paused.

“Conan, time for you to come with us.”

Conan reddened with excitement. Bran and the other boys were very envious; it seemed to them that it would be a lifetime before they too would be old enough to ride with the warriors.

Outside, everyone mounted his horse, they formed a circle round Ambiorix. He drew his sword.

“We will ride to the farm of Novantco, he has recently brought many cattle back from the coast. When we get near, I will go ahead with you, and you three,” he pointed at four warriors, “The rest of you will keep guard whilst we drive the cattle out. We will send them on ahead with the most experienced drovers and the rest of us will act as rearguard. Come on then, forward.”

With a great roar of sound they set off at speed, adrenaline pumping, spirits high. They were off doing what they loved best. Raiding and testing their courage.

And the happiest of them all was Conan.

Chapter Ten

The Raid

It was a magnificent sight to see. Ambiorix mounted on Beleun, now back to his full strength, brandishing his sword, and uttering great war cries. The other warriors rode behind, each trying to outdo the others in speed and controlling their horses and yelling their own battle cries.

Conan felt as if it was unreal, here he was a man at last. The blood raced through his veins and he began to shout with the others. They galloped flat out for a couple of miles, long hair streaming in the wind, then Ambiorix pulled his horse up and raised his hand for silence. “There is Novantco’s farm, the cattle are in his big field just beyond. You Cunnoris and Eppillus go down that path and watch the gates, if they hear us and start to come out, blow your horns. You three, stay here and prepare to help us guard our backs, the rest of you, with me.”

Conan was in the group with Ambiorix who walked their horses down the path quietly. They circled the field to get downwind of the cattle they intended to steal. The cattle would not smell the men and become restive. They were used to the sound of horses and would not be alarmed.

In silence they went. Two of the warriors opened the gate into the field. Circling round they began driving the cattle in front of them and out of the field, others now kept them moving in the right direction. Ambiorix and a small group stayed behind in case of trouble.

All went well and the cattle and the warriors were just vanishing over a nearby hill when one of their horses whinnied. Immediately several dogs in the farm enclosure began to bark and the farm stirred into life. Some warriors came running out on foot, others ran for their horses and were soon thundering after Ambiorix and his men. With a great shout, Ambiorix held his ground, his men behind him, they knew what he would do next. Suddenly he galloped back towards the defending warriors who were so surprised that several of them were unhorsed immediately.

With a clash of swords, they met. Sparks flew from the blades, and there were grunts, shouts, and the sound of heavy breathing. Conan, with a sideswipe, cut the ear off one of the opposing side who screamed and clapped his hand to his head. The defenders were losing ground rapidly, and they turned and fled back inside the enclosure, slamming the gates and barring them. Ambiorix and his men cheered and headed off after the stolen cattle.

The sky was lightening with the dawn as they arrived home but none of them felt like sleeping, they were too excited. They marched into the big roundhouse making a great deal of noise. Everyone else had woken up, and had come running to hear the story of the raid. Very quickly, the ale began to flow. The boys hurried to feed and groom the horses and then they came to join in the fun, they listened with bated breath, then Ambiorix raised his horn and cried,

“Drink to Conan, on his first raid he severed an ear, he will be remembered on that farm for a long time. Well done lad.”

There was a huge cheer. Conan looked proud and embarrassed. One of the warriors filled his tankard up with ale.

“Drink up Conan, you’re one of us now.” He cried.

“Ambiorix,” Gwenfrew looked anxious, “That lad will be very ill if he goes on drinking like that.”

“Leave him be,” roared Ambiorix, himself well into his cups, “You only become a man once.”

Bran and the other boys were wild with excitement They moved from table to table stealing a mouthful of ale here, the dregs of cider there. They laughed and shouted and felt very grown up, but suddenly Bran began to feel very, very ill. He ran outside and threw up. His head throbbed and his stomach felt sore. He sat on the ground and groaned.

Inside, Ambiorix rose unsteadily to his feet,

“Conan, the warrior Bodvac has offered to take you as his son. You will move out of the boys’ roundhouse and move in with Bodvac.”

More cheering.

Bodvac, a huge, redheaded warrior, strode forward. He slapped Conan on the back and took him to his table to sit beside him. Brennus, who had not had as much to drink as the others, looked extremely worried. Bran, his head throbbing painfully, his face a greenish white said, “What’s up? You don’t look too happy.”

“Conan is moving in with Bodvac and his wife.”

“Lucky him. Why does that upset you?”

“Because Commix is the next oldest and he will be in charge of us.”

Bran looked at him in dismay.

Chapter Eleven

Lugnasa (part 2)

By noon, Ambiorix and the warriors were nearly all asleep where they sat. Their heads were on the tables, and loud snores reverberating round the house.

Gwenfrew and the women prepared some food for when they wakened up, they sent the boys down to swim in the river to clear their heads and then kept them busy with chores. Presently the men woke up and tucked into the food, then they felt restless, and it was a festival after all.

Suddenly Bodvac leapt to his feet.

“I challenge anyone to one fall,” he roared. Bodvac was a brilliant wrestler, and usually even the toughest warriors would have thought twice about accepting his challenge. But the celebrations had been going on rather a long time, the raid had been successful and their blood was up, so four warriors leapt up too, and called to him to come outside.

They stripped off their clothes and Bodvac faced up to his first opponent. Calgacix came towards him, knees bent, weight pressed into the ground. Bodvac, although he was a huge man, could move fast and almost before he could draw breath, Calgacix flew through the air and landed with a thud in the dust. Great cheers went up.

The second and third challengers went the same way very, very soon, but Epaticcus, the last challenger, was not so easy. He made a good struggle of it, the two men fell to the ground and rolled over and over first this way then that each trying to pin the other down for the required five heartbeats. They were both gasping for breath but suddenly Bodvac pinned Epaticcus under him, held him there then leapt to his feet amidst more cheers.

“There is no-one, no-one who can beat me!” he boasted, turning round to face each section of the crowd. “I am unbeatable!”

Suddenly a voice rang out.

“No! You are not! I can beat you.” Ambiorix strode forward. He stripped off his clothes. A silence fell on the crowd. No one had seen Ambiorix wrestle for at least two turns of the year and it would not be good if he failed the challenge.

“Oh no,” Gwenfrew muttered to herself, ”You foolish old man. Supposing he beats you?”

As Ambiorix squared up to Bodvac, he drew in a deep breath and let forth his mighty war cry, and then he launched himself at his opponent. The crowd came to life cheering and yelling.

First Bodvac had the advantage then Ambiorix began to force him back, then they broke away from each other and as Bodvac came towards him, Ambiorix ducked under his point of balance and suddenly Bodvac was down but only for a second. He rolled over and came up fast and there was a mighty gasp from both men as they met head on.

Now it was a question of strength. Bodvac had already had four bouts, so Ambiorix was fresher and suddenly he stepped backwards, unbalancing Bodvac and pulling him forward and Bodvac found himself flying over Ambiorix’s shoulder to land with an almighty crash on the ground.

Gwenfrew rushed forward before they could start again.

“Ambiorix, your chief, the winner,” she yelled and the crowd cheered. Ambiorix got dressed.

“Ale!” he roared, ”this wrestling is thirsty work.”

It was decided that the boys should have a race so they lined up outside the gate. They were to run down to the river, swim across, run up the hill on the other side and return with a piece of purple heather which only grew in one patch.

“Are you ready?” Ambiorix blew his horn and they were off, each one determined to win. The ground sloped down to the river, but then climbed quite steeply up to the heather patch.

Bran was soon in the lead with Commix at his heels. He picked

a clump of heather and headed for home down the slope to the river. Just as he was about to dive in, Commix came up behind him, snatched the flowers from his hand and tossed them into the river then he dived in and swam across.

“Hey” cried Bran furiously, he would have to run up the hill again and pick some more. Brennus arrived at that moment.

“Here” he said and thrust half his bunch of heather into Bran’s hand. They dived in and swam across. Commix was half way up the hill to the farm. Fuelled by anger, Bran hared after him and was actually on his heels when he ran up and threw his heather down at Ambiorix’s feet.

“Well done Commix,” Ambiorix said, ”and of course you will be in charge of the boys now that Conan has become a man.”

Commix gave one of his rare smiles and looked at Bran triumphantly. Bran took a pace towards him but Brennus took his arm.

“Come away Bran. Come and have a game of five stones.”

They walked across the farm and squatted down by a smooth piece of ground. From his pouch, Bran took five pebbles roughly the same size. They played to see who would go first. Bran took the pebbles and threw them up into the air, turning his hand over, he caught three of them on the back of his hand. Brennus did the same and caught four. “I’ll go first,” he said. He tossed all five pebbles and caught three. Putting two down, he threw the other one up into the air, snatched one of the remaining stones and caught the flier, the stone he had thrown up. He repeated that then did the same with the final stone. Now he threw all five stones to the ground, he picked one up to be the flier and tossed it into the air. He had to pick the others up two at a time. He picked up the first two stones safely, but when he went to pick up the second two, he caught his nail on the ground and missed catching the flier. It was Bran’s turn.

Ambiorix and Conan were choosing teams for a tug of war Bodvac of course went with Conan but the warriors were evenly divided. Two lines were drawn in the dust and each team had to try to get their opponents over their line. An old man raised his arm.

“Ready, steady, pull.” And the two teams began to heave and strain. There was a tremendous noise, cheering and shouting, puffing and grunting from the teams and horns blown for encouragement. Inch by inch, Conan’s team drew the others over their line. Suddenly, they gave a great shout. They had won! Some of the biggest warriors carried Conan round the farm. They set him down. He was rather glad, he had drunk more ale and mead than he had ever drunk before and he felt slightly dizzy and unwell.

As the day began to fade, tiredness crept over everyone. The meal was rather subdued. Gwenfrew sent the boys off to bed immediately afterwards, Conan went with them for the very last time. “Tomorrow I move out,” he said sleepily as they settled down. “And then I’m in charge.” Commix muttered to himself.

They were all soon sound asleep.

Chapter Twelve

Commix in charge

It took a great effort to get back into the routine of chores and training after the excitement of Lugnasa. The boys were up early next morning and down to the river for water. Bran passed the two smallest boys struggling up the hill as he went down. He was very surprised to see them going down again with empty buckets.

“I thought you’d fetched your water,” he said.

“Well we have to fetch Commix’s as well,” one of them replied.

“But that’s not fair,” Bran cried, “Conan always fetched his share of water.”

“Well, he said we’d be in trouble if we refused.” And they hurried off. Bran was working hard grooming a horse, enjoying himself making the coat shine, talking away to the horse and relishing the lovely leathery smell that came off the warm body when Commix came up.

“When you’ve done your horses, you can do one of mine.”

“No!” Bran replied, “you will do your own chores.”

“It’ll be the worse for you if you refuse.”

“No! You don’t scare me” Bran said, “if you want to go for me, you try it.”

Commix paused.

“Very well then, some of the others will have to do them.” And he slunk off.

Bran watched the smaller boys doing Commix’s chores and he wondered what he could do about it. He could not go to Ambiorix and tell tales, that would not be well thought of. Who could he speak to? After the evening meal the boys had some time to themselves. Bran went looking for Lynne. They went outside and Bran, after a couple of false starts, began to speak.

“If someone knew that something wrong was going on but they couldn’t stop it, what should they do?”

Lynne looked puzzled.

“I don’t really know what you’re talking about but obviously he should speak to my father, he should tell Ambiorix.”

“But that would be telling tales.”

“I suppose it would but I don’t see what else you can do”.

“Perhaps I—that is he can do something himself.”

“Bran, tell me what is going on, I won’t tell anyone else I promise.”

He hesitated a moment.

“It’s Commix, he’s a bully, he’s forcing the smaller boys to do all his work. They’re scared of him, so they do it. I can stop him when I am there but I can’t be everywhere at once.”

Lynne considered what he had said then,

“I think Commix is new to being in charge. I expect he’ll settle down soon.”

“I’m not so sure,” Bran said, “Well, I’ll just have to do the best I can myself.”

When the boys were in bed that night they called cheerfully to each other as usual.

“Be quiet,” Commix shouted.

“Why?” asked Bran, “we always talk for a bit.”

“Not any longer, we have silence once we are in bed.”

“But why?” Brennus called.

“One more word out of you and I’ll come and sort you out.”

There was a sudden silence. They lay on their beds and said not another word.

The next day, Commix passed all his chores over to the other boys, although he left Bran alone. After lunch they went for a run as usual. Ambiorix called Bran over.

“Come after my horse, he’s the fastest horse, and you’re the fastest boy.”

“Ambiorix, may I swap with Commix? He’s got the slowest horse and I’ve got a sore leg today.”

“Oh? What did you do to it?”

“I just twisted my ankle a little.”

Ambiorix looked at him hard.

“Very well. I don’t know what you are up to but I’ll go along with it.

Commix, take my horse’s tail!”

By the time they returned from their run, Commix was pouring with sweat and panting as if his lungs would burst. Bran grinned at him. "Not in very good condition are you Commix?"

He could not reply, he had no breath left.

The boys went out into the field with their wooden swords. They paired up. As usual Commix was one of the last to find a partner.

"Come on Bran." Brennus called, he and Bran usually worked together.

"No Brennus, go with Vodemus, I want to go with Commix."

Bran was good with his sword. He managed to give Commix several prods then he made a wide sweep and caught him thwack across his legs.

"Steady Bran," called Ambiorix, "You're not supposed to kill each other."

"Sorry Commix," Bran said, "it's not nice being on the receiving end of someone better than you is it?" he added in a whisper.

After the sword practise the boys were mounted up on the horses. They cantered round the field. They had to turn right round on their horse's back and end up facing the front again, then the horses were brought to a halt They had to kneel up on the bare slippery back or their mount, then they had to stand up. It was very hard. They all fell off at first but as they practised they discovered the way to keep their balance, feet turned out and knees slightly bent, then they had to draw their swords and make a few parries and thrusts at each other whilst still standing there.

By suppertime they were tired, sporting a few bruises and starving hungry. Gwenfrew laughed as she watched them shovelling down mutton stew and endless cakes of flat bread.

"You're right to call them your wolf cubs," she said to Ambiorix laughing, "they certainly fall on the food like ravening wolves."

Back in the boy's house, Bran drew Commix aside.

"Listen Commix, I'm not scared of you, and if you bully any of the other boys, you'll have me to settle with."

Commix looked as if he would say something but he thought better of

it, he just glowered and got ready for bed.

When they were under their furs, Commix suddenly said, "Bran, I want that dog of yours out of here. You know he is not allowed in here. Tie him up outside."

"He's slept in here with me ever since I arrived," Bran replied, "I'm sure Ambiorix and Gwenfrew know he's in here."

"Nevertheless it's not allowed." Commix insisted

"Alright Commix, you can take him out yourself."

Commix went over to Bran's bed, Bran lifted up the furs to show Bod snuggled up by his feet. Bod was the friendliest, most docile of dogs but when Commix reached out to take the scruff of his neck to drag him outside, his upper lip lifted in a snarl and he showed his long white teeth ready to bite. Commix snatched his hand back and stomped off to his bed. There were subdued giggles from all sides and someone whispered, "Good old Bod".

Bran patted his dog and snuggled down again. In the middle of chuckling to himself, he fell asleep. Soon they were all asleep dreaming of the wonderful deeds they would do when they were finally warriors. After that night, Commix did not do so much bullying but things were not the same any more. The boys were not so light-hearted as they used to be, there was less laughter in the house and everyone was constantly watching Commix. He continued to pass his chores on and Bran could not stop him.

There was only one thing on his mind.

How to get his own back on Bran.

Chapter Thirteen

Commix's Revenge

Belenus, Ambiorix's horse had been resting for several days. He had hurt his leg and it had been wrapped in cloths soaked in water in which herbs had been boiled. Ambiorix ran his hand down the injured leg.

"It seems much better. He needs some exercise though. Bran, ride him out through the field and back. Don't let him trot or canter. He must only walk."

"Yes Ambiorix." Bran was very proud to have been chosen. He mounted up and walked slowly through the gates. Commix was furious, he was the senior boy, he should have been the one to ride the warrior's horse. He slipped out of the gate and followed Bran keeping in the shadow of the hedges.

Bran was having trouble keeping Belenus in check, he wanted to stretch his legs and kept mouthing the bit. Bod trotted along happily with his slight limp, getting very excited about all the wonderful smells, hares, mice, birds. His tail wagged happily. Commix slipped through a hole in the hedgerow and ran ahead of Bran. He hid in a clump of bushes. He pulled off a long hard stem from one of the bushes, it had sharp thorns on it. Bran walked slowly past on Belenus. Commix stepped forward and slashed the horse as hard as he could across his rump with the prickly stick. Belenus whinnied in pain, reared up and set off at a fast gallop, he managed to get the bit between his teeth and went like the wind.

Bran was nearly unseated in the first moment but then regained his balance. He fought to pull Belenus up but the horse was thoroughly spooked and raced on. Commix hurried back and made sure he was seen around the farm. Lynne had seen him come in and thought he looked rather shifty but thought no more about it.

At last, Belenus had run himself out. He pulled up and stood trembling and sweating. Bran slid off his back and looked at him in dismay. He held his injured leg up off the ground and was obviously in great pain. There was nothing Bran could do but lead him back to the farm very slowly.

Commix had kept himself very busy where and visible to everyone all the time Bran was out but he was hugging the thought of the trouble to come with great glee.

“He’ll be sent home for sure now.”

It took boy and horse nearly two hours to get back to the farm, Ambiorix was practising swordplay with Eppillus but when he saw Bran and Belenus, he sheathed his sword and came at a run. He ran a hand down Belenus’s leg.

“Red hot,” he said, ”get him into the small roundhouse and fetch some feverfew tea and get the Gwynn, the wise-woman here.” They took Belenus into the shelter of the roundhouse. The feverfew tea arrived, Eppillus and Ambiorix forced some down the horse’s throat, it would take his temperature down.

When Gwynn arrived, she sent for some hot water and took a handful of herbs from her pouch. She steeped them in the hot water and then soaked a piece of clean cloth in the water and bathed the swollen leg. She did this several times then she tied the cloth on with thongs of leather.

“We will leave him to rest,” said Gwynn. ”He should have a small feed and as much water as he will drink.”

Bran fetched some food and Belenus ate a very small amount but he drank a great deal of water.

“I’ll sleep in here with him tonight.” Bran said. Ambiorix had not spoken to him yet, now he turned and looked at him.

“What happened Bran?”

“I was walking as you told me, very, very slowly when something spooked Belenus. He reared up and bolted. I pulled him up as soon as I could.”

Ambiorix looked at him long and hard.

“Is that the truth Bran?”

“Yes.”

“You didn’t it would be exciting to see how fast Belenus would go considering he is my horse?”

Bran stood tall and straight, and looked Ambiorix in the eye.

“No Ambiorix, I wouldn’t do that. You told me to walk him and that’s what I did.” There was a short silence.

“Alright lad, these things happen, you can sleep here and call me if he gets worse.”

Lynne ran off and came back with a bowl of stew and some bread. She sat watching whilst Bran ate.

“You know, I bet Commix is at the back of this.” She said.

“Commix? What makes you think that?”

“Well,” she continued, “I saw him come sneaking back in whilst you were out and he kept making sure everyone noticed that he was in the enclosure.”

“But why? And even if it’s true, as usual he’s made sure I can’t prove anything.”

They thought about it in silence for a while, talking quietly. Occasionally Bran gave Belenus another drink of water. The horse fidgeted about trying to get comfortable on three legs. His skin felt hot and dry to touch, he flicked his ears and rolled his eyes.

“He’s burning up,” Lynne whispered miserably.

“We need to cool him down,” Bran replied. He sent Lynne to fetch another piece of cloth. He went to the river for another bucket of water. He soaked the cloth in the water and sponged Belenus all over. Gwenfrew sent a servant to fetch Lynne to go to bed.

“I do hope he’s alright,” she said as she left.

Bran kept sponging the horse for hours. He struggled to keep his eyes open and stay on his feet but finally he had to lie down.

“I’ll just sleep for a few minutes,” he muttered, the next thing he knew, daylight was seeping into the roundhouse. He leapt to his feet. Belenus was quiet. He walked up to him and stroked him.

The horse felt cool to the touch and nuzzled Bran’s hand. Ambiorix

and Gwynn came through the door.

“How is he?” Ambiorix asked.

“He seems a bit better,” Bran replied.

The Gwynn took the cloth off Belenus’s leg and felt the sore place.

“The swelling has begun to go down. If he can be rested, he’ll be all right.”

Bran’s face lit up. Ambiorix took hold of him.

“Is there anything else you want to tell me?”

Bran thought about Commix. He was sure Lynne was right and that he had been the cause of the trouble but he could not tell tales and even if he did, he had no proof of anything.

“No Ambiorix,” he said. The warrior looked at him for a long moment.

“Very well. Get something to eat then go to your roundhouse and get some sleep.”

When Bran went into the big house to get some food, Commix looked up with a sneer.

“Well, I thought we had seen the last of you. Aren’t you going home in disgrace?”

“No,” replied Bran

“What? Isn’t Ambiorix angry with you?”

“No. He never even raised his voice.” And Bran went to sit with Lynne
Commix’s face a study he finished his food and stormed outside. He met Ambiorix.

“Ah Commix, just the person I need. Belenus needs plenty of water, fetch up six buckets.”

“Six buckets?” Commix gasped

“Yes. Six! And bring them all up yourself. I shall be watching you.

Hurry up.”

Under Ambiorix’s eye, Commix had to hurry up and down

“Right Commix, now go and groom those four horses.”

All morning, Ambiorix kept finding hard chores for Commix to do until he was exhausted.

“Well Commix, go and get something to eat then join the other boys at training and no slacking.”

Bran had been asleep all morning and he ate his food and went to see how Belenus was.

The horse had his bad leg to the ground but he put very little weight on it, however he looked better and his fever had gone.

Giving him a final pat, Bran went off to find the other boys.

Chapter Fourteen

The Ambush

Soon after Lugnasa, Ambiorix went on a visit to Bran's father's farm to look at some horses he was thinking of trading. He took Bran and Bod with him together with several warriors.

Cara and Marbod were delighted to see Bran although Cara restrained herself from putting her arms round him, but when they had dismounted and Ambiorix had been given the customary welcome he turned to Bran.

"Well go on, give your mother a hug, we only get one mother you know."

Bran ran to Cara and for a moment, felt like a child again, she of course was delighted but let him go after a moment. They all went into Marbod's roundhouse. Bran was amazed at how small it looked; he had remembered it as much bigger. Bettrys and Elvina, his sisters came forward shyly to greet him.

"You've grown," he cried, "why Elvina you're nearly a woman."

"You've grown too son," Marbod put in proudly, "why you're nearly as tall as me."

"He's a good boy," Ambiorix said and sat down in the place of honour. "He'll make a great warrior before he's finished."

They all ate together then Marbod, Ambiorix and his men went to look at the horses but Bran stayed with his mother and sisters telling them stories of his life since he left home. He exaggerated a little here and there, and his sisters crept closer and closer listening with shining eyes. By the time Ambiorix came back, Bran was already a great warrior in the girls' eyes.

"Time to go home Bran." Ambiorix had drunk some of Cara's best mead. "I have sent the men on ahead with the horses."

Goodbyes were said, gifts offered and accepted and Ambiorix and Barn set off at a gallop. Bran's horse was slower than Belenus and he dropped back a little.

They entered a small wood. The lowering sun cast long shadows from the trees. Suddenly out of the shadows some men emerged

with wild cries and surrounded Ambiorix, brandishing swords, he in turn drew his own sword and began to turn his horse on his haunches lashing out at his attackers.

“Fly Bran,” he called but Bran drew his own small sword and drove his horse forward, Bod barking at his heels. He raised his horn and blew the loudest blast he could. Before he reached Ambiorix, the attackers had pulled him off his horse and although he fought mightily, he was well outnumbered. A blow on the head felled him.

Bran yelled a savage cry and placed his horse over Ambiorix’s prone body. Leaping up to stand on his horses back as he had been trained to do, he began to strike out at the warriors and Bod bit and nipped wherever he could. In the first surprise of their onslaught, the enemy fell back a little but then they closed in again.

Bran was to say afterwards that he had no feeling of fear, just a terrible rage to see Ambiorix lying so still. His sword thrust and flashed and two men fell wounded, but there were four more, and it was inevitable that they would soon kill him, but suddenly there were hoof-beats and Ambiorix’s warriors crashed through the trees

Within seconds, three men fell and the fourth ran for his life. Bran jumped off his horse and led him away from Ambiorix. Bodvac knelt down to look at his leader. Bran was suddenly trembling and crying.

“He’s dead isn’t he? He’s dead.” “No lad,” Bodvac replied, “he’s got a couple of sword thrusts, nothing dangerous. He’s unconscious because he’s been hit on the head. Let’s get him home.”

They lifted Ambiorix onto his horse and one of the lighter warriors leapt up behind him to hold him steady.

“You’re bleeding,” Bodvac said suddenly to Bran. It was true; he had a deep gash across one thigh. Tearing a piece of cloth from his tunic, one of the warriors bound it round the wound. Suddenly Bran felt the pain of it. He groaned.

“Up here.” Bodvac said. Willing hands lifted him up in front of Bodvac and they rode slowly home but they sent two men ahead to warn the women. By the time they arrived there were bowls of hot water and

cloths ready to deal with their wounds.

In the big roundhouse, Bran was laid on some furs and his wound bathed with hot water and herbs. Ambiorix lay very white and still, but his steady breathing indicated that he would be alright.

Lynne came up to Bran; her eyes were wet with tears.

“You saved my father’s life,” she whispered.

“Oh I don’t think so,” Bran replied, embarrassed

“Yes you did, all the men say so.” She took his hand, “thank you.”

“Lynne, leave Bran alone and let him rest,” Gwenfrew’s face was sombre.

“Oh please let her stay,” Bran pleaded, “I feel a bit scared, please let her stay.”

Gwenfrew looked at him, he looked such a child, pale and still shivering from shock.

“Very well,” she said, “lie down there beside him and keep very quiet.” At that moment Ambiorix gave a great groan and opened his eyes. His hand flew to his head.

“Ouch,” he said, “what happened?”

“Lie still,” Gwenfrew commanded, “You’ve had a bang on the head, drink this.”

She held a bowl to his lips. He took a mouthful

“Yuk!” he shouted, “that’s disgusting. Bring me mead.”

“For once you’ll do as I say,” Gwenfrew was suddenly as fierce as Ambiorix, “you are not having any mead, you will drink this herb tea, and then I shall bathe your head.”

Ambiorix subsided, grumbling. When Gwenfrew had finished looking after him, she gave him a little food then chased everyone out except for Lynne and Bran who were fast asleep, soon the whole enclosure was still and quiet.

The next morning, people arrived one by one to sit round the fire in the big roundhouse. No one really knew what had happened the night before. Presently Ambiorix was up and about, his wounds dressed anew, and with a sore head. Bran too, was awake, his wound

dressed, he was called to sit beside Ambiorix and then the story began. “The attackers came swiftly out of the shadows of the trees. I drew my sword but they pulled me from my horse. I called to Bran to flee then I was hit on the head and knew no more. What happened next Bran?”

Bran reddened but he spoke up.

“I blew my horn and rode up to Ambiorix, I was very frightened. I put my horse over him and stood up on his back. I tried hard but there were so many of them. I thought Ambiorix was dead.” His voice broke and he paused. Ambiorix patted him on the back. Bodvac took up the story. “We heard Bran’s horn. We left the horses with two men and raced back. It was an incredible sight. This little scrap stood up on his horse yelling like a banshee and giving a very good account of himself. We drove the attackers off and came home. What a hero.” He stopped. There was a pause then someone banged the hilt of a knife on the table and shouted “Bran!” Soon there was a roar of sound. “Bran! Bran! Bran!”

He didn’t know where to put himself. Lynne came and sat next to him again. Presently Ambiorix stood up and held up his hand for silence “Bran, you have made yourself a warrior in good time. I am aware that you saved my life, you showed courage beyond your age and we are all very proud of you.”

Cheers and more cries of ”Bran!” Ambiorix let it go on for a few minutes then he continued,

“I have decided to adopt you for my son, you will live here with us. I also have for you the sword of my grandfather Dunnorix. It is too big for you yet, you could hardly lift it but it now belongs to you.”

The mead and ale came out again, and another party began.

Bran slipped away and joined the boys. They were pleased for him of course but they seemed a little subdued. He wondered why at first then Brennus said,

“We are really glad for you and you deserve the honour but who will stand up to Commix if you are not there?”

Bran looked round at them their faces strained with fear. He looked across at Commix watching him angrily. He went to Ambiorix.

“Ambiorix”

“Yes my son?”

“I am so very proud to be chosen to be your son, but could I go on living with the boys for a while please?”

“And why would that be?”

Bran paused; he still could not bring himself to tell tales. Lynne jumped in.

“He wants to protect the other boys from Commix, he’s such a bully.”

“Is this true Bran?”

“Yes,” he replied.

Ambiorix stood up and went to sit next to Eppillus. He put his arm round his shoulders and spoke to him seriously for some time. He walked back to his own place.

“Commix,” he bellowed. Commix looked up guiltily and came over. He looked searchingly at Bran and then at Ambiorix.

“Commix,” Ambiorix said to him, “you are in luck, Eppillus has noticed you and has asked to adopt you, you will move out of the boys’ house right away and move in with him and his wife.”

Commix was speechless, he tried to look pleased but Eppillus had a reputation for being strict, and devoid of a sense of humour.

“Thank you,” he stammered. Eppillus came over to him.

“Go and collect your things from the boys’ house and bring them to mine. My wife will show you where to put them.”

Commix left, and Bran’s face lit up.

“Can I go and tell the boys please, Ambiorix?”

“Yes you can and tell them that they have someone new in charge of them.”

“Who will that be?”

“You Bran.”

“Me?”

“Yes you. You shall still be my son but you need a little longer having fun with lads your own age.”

“Oh thank you Ambiorix.”

Bran was off; he raced up to the boys.

“Come outside, I’ve got something to tell you.”

The dashed outside into the chilly sunlight.

“Commix is going to live with Eppillus and I am in charge of you.”

They stared at him in delight then they cheered.

“Let’s go down to the river and have a swim.” Someone cried. They raced off.

Bran paused for a second. He looked at the big roundhouses and at the horses tethered by the stockade. He watched the smoke from the fires drift up into the sky. Happy voices were ringing out from these people who had become his family. He heaved a sigh of sheer joy then with a cry of, “Wait for me.”

He raced off after the other boys.

If you would like to know more about Round Houses, here are some books to read, and sites to visit.

Iron Age Communities in Britain/3rd edition- Barry Cunliff
Routledge ISBN 0-415-05416-8 £75

Danebury/An Iron Age Hillfort Vo1 2- Barry Cunliffe
CBA ISBN Vo1 2 0-906780-29-2 £20

The Social Foundations of Prehistoric Britain- Richard Bradley
Longman ISBN 0-582-49164-9 £ ?

Britain before the conquest/Celtic Britain- Lloyd Laing
Granada ISBN 0-586-08373-1 £2.50

Hillforts of England and Wales -JamesDrye
Shire ISBN 0 -85263 -536 -2

Towns,Villages and Countryside of Celtic Europe
-Francoise Audouze/Olivier Buchsenscutz
Batsford ISBN 0 -7134 -6523 -9 £35.00

Museum of the iron Age, Andover - Excellent display of finds from Danbury Hill Fort.

Butser Ancient Farm, S. of Petersfield - Experimental site.

Chiltern Open Air Museum, Bucks - Round house in enclosure.

Castell Henllys Iron Age Fort, West Wales - Original site with good quality reconstructions.

Welsh Folk Museum, S.Wales - Enclosure with three round houses.

Craggaunowen Project, Ireland - A cranouge (a man made island) settlement.

Flag Fen, Peterborough - Large excavation with a very good museum.

Peat Moors Centre, Glastonbury - Small enclosure with three round houses.

More about Warriors

- Rome's Enemies (2): Gallic and British Celts. Peter Wilcox
Osprey Men-At-Arms ISBN 0-85045-606-1
Aimed mainly at the warrior. Good drawings.
- Hannibal and the Enemies of Rome. Peter Connolly
Macdonald, ISBN 0-356-05905-7 It may be
old, but as always Peter's illustrations are out
standing.
- Celtic Warriors. W F and J N G Ritchie
Shire, ISBN 0-356-05905-7
Good archaeology, but dated reconstructions

Web Sites

David Freeman
<http://www.gallica.co.uk>

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