

Forest of the Mighty Elm

by Lady Ragnell

A Breton community must defend itself in post-Roman occupied Britain.

Chapter 1

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The battlefield was completely quiet but for the jingle of the bridle of a horse or two. It was almost as if the world was holding its breath, waiting to see which side was victorious. As the smoke from the pitch fires began to clear, the moans of the injured began to filter through. Up in the fort on the hill, I stood in the doorway of the great hall, a bloody sword in my hand, and listened for the sound of approaching footsteps. Behind me, huddled together in the hall, were the other women, the children, and the old men of the fort and nearby villages. At my feet lay the body of the marauder who had tried to get in.

I raised my sword and turned to my right as I heard footsteps coming towards me. I set my feet and prepared to meet the attacker. The boy who rounded the corner and slid to a stop in front of me was no marauder. It was my young cousin Jobi.

I lowered my sword and let out the breath that I had unconsciously been holding. "Damn it, Jobi, you scared me. What news?"

"It is over," he panted. "Come, there are injured to attend to." He turned and hurried on towards the stables.

Two old men had moved up beside me as Jobi spoke and now turned to the people gathered behind us and began assigning chores to the members of the group.

"You children," commanded Janus, a crusty old soldier who had given his right eye and the use of his left hand in defending his people, "go get buckets of water and load them on the wagons. Our soldiers will be thirsty."

I walked back into the hall and grabbed my bag of bandages and herbs from a bench along the near wall. Manus, twin brother of Janus and also a veteran of many battles, nodded at me as I turned and headed for the battlefield. I knew there would be many dead on the field, but I also hoped to find many who could be saved and healed. I hoped that the training in the healing arts that I had received in my years in Avalon would be of help to me and to the injured men.

I reached the main gate to our fort and stopped. The smoke was lifting to show the battlefield on the plain below. It was littered with bodies. I made my way down the slope as quickly as I could and approached the first group of bodies. Bodies covered with blood, soot and mud. I listened closely for a moan or groan as I slowly walked through the bodies. As I came upon one that looked like the wounds were not fatal I stopped and kneeled beside him, checking for signs of life.

The man was one of our own soldiers, a man called Martek. He was not much older than I, but he had already fought in many battles. He regained consciousness, and his eyes snapped open when he felt my fingers on his left wrist checking for a pulse.

"Kellen. Dear girl, is it over?"

"Yes, Martek," I answered as I checked the bleeding gash on his right forearm.

"I take it we won then," he said grinning at me, "or else you would be at the mercy of some stinking brute and not tending to me." He grimaced slightly as I tied the dressing over the cut on his arm.

"Your arm will heal, the cut was not deep. How is your head?" I asked looking into his eyes and reaching to unfasten his helmet.

"It's fine," he said as his left hand came up to grasp my own. "It was just a bump on the head. There are others in greater need of your attention, Kellen. Go. Find them and help them. I promise you I will mend."

"Alright, Martek. But promise me you will get up slowly."

He nodded, and I picked up my bag and stood up. I turned around to find a new chaos in the battlefield. The fort's physician and his assistant were tending to a seriously injured man as stable boys and other villagers arrived on the field with carts and horse drawn wagons to take the injured back to the fort. A few of the old men carried water to the soldiers. Others of our fort and village began sorting through the dead. I moved on to the next body lying before me. I stooped to check for any signs of life, but the man's heart was still. I closed his eyes before moving on.

Most of the men I passed were dead. Gingerly, I stepped over and around them, noticing how out of place the vacant eyes looked on faces that were twisted in agony. The faces of our men and our enemies, not so different now in death.

Suddenly, I felt a hand wrap about my ankle, and I had to bite back a scream. I looked down to see a marauder staring up at me. His blond hair and sun-tanned face were streaked with blood that flowed from an open wound on his head. His eyes were a deep dark blue and wild with pain and terror. His lips moved, and I knelt down and leaned over him to hear what he was saying.

"Help me, child," he whispered in his native tongue.

I looked at his chest then and saw the shaft of the arrow that was deeply imbedded there. It had pierced the leather of his over tunic and sunken in between two ribs. His lung was punctured at least, maybe his heart as well. I looked back to his face, and I could almost see the color draining from it.

"Your wound is bad," I answered. His eyes locked on mine in wonderment as I spoke in a language he could understand, a Celtic language not much different from his own. "I cannot save you."

"Do not let me die alone."

I looked around to the hundreds of dead and injured men of the field. I thought of how many I could possibly help instead of staying here watching and waiting for this one man to die. I felt his hand still around my ankle, and I knew I had no choice. I reached into my bag and pulled out a cloth that I used to wipe some of the blood from his face. His breathing grew more strained but the wild look in his eyes lessened. I waited patiently as his life slipped out of him. I felt his hand on my ankle loosen and watched as his last breath rasped out of him. I placed the cloth over his eyes and stepped out of his grasp and on to the next man.

The fort's surgeon noticed me moving among the fallen warriors and called out to me. I carefully and quickly made my way to his field hospital.

"Kellen, I need you to help those men over there," he said jerking his head to the left. "Those men without immediate life threatening injuries are over there. I need you to tend to them so I can try to save the others."

"Yes, Lucan," I replied and hurried past him and the seriously injured man on the table in front of him. I moved to the gathering number of injured men and set about stitching up flesh wounds and setting broken bones. Those I tended stared solemnly towards the hospital tent behind me, trying to see who was inside.

The afternoon was growing late by the time I tied my last bandage. I looked up and turned back towards the battlefield to see that the dead had been separated into two groups, those of our soldiers and those of our enemies. Large pits were being dug at either end of the plain to serve as two mass graves. A scribe was moving among our soldiers identifying the men we had lost. A few of the women had made their way down from the fort and were either saying farewell to a lost loved one or quietly waiting for a live one to be released from duty for the night. Torches were being lit so that the men digging at both ends of the plain could see their work. I looked into the hospital tent and saw Lucan and his assistant, Andros, bent over the body of a soldier as they tightened a leather strap about his forearm. Lamps were burning brightly about them, and I made my way into the tent and picked up a wooden bit. I put the bit into the soldier's mouth and slid past Andros to hold the soldier's legs down. Lucan looked at Andros and then at me, and we both leaned down onto the soldier. Lucan nodded and pulled his saw across the man's arm just above the wrist. The soldier screamed and nearly kicked me away before he passed out.

"Thank God," Lucan muttered as he continued to amputate the mangled hand of the man on the table. "Andros, get the hot iron." I watched in silence as Lucan and Andros applied a heated iron plate to the stump of the soldier's arm to seal the blood vessels. They then pulled down the skin of the arm and sewed it shut over the stump. Lucan nodded to me as I handed him a bowl of the paste he used to fight off infections. He covered the arm stump with the paste and moved to the side so that I could bandage it.

"He is the last of them," Andros said sticking his head back into the tent. "Most of the others have been taken up to the fort."

"Good. You go on up there too and make sure the injured are all settled into the infirmary. Check everyone's stitches. Kellen and I will pack up and join you there soon."

Andros nodded as he moved to the side to let in two men who had come to get our last patient. They left quickly, and I began packing the surgical tools and bandages that lay strewn about the table along the one wall. Lucan said nothing as he cleaned and packed the saw he had just used to remove the soldier's hand. I let the quiet grow as my own mind recalled the events of the day and the vast number of men lost on both sides of the battle.

"Lucan," came the voice of the fort's military leader, Titus Cornelius, from the entrance to the tent, "how many men have we lost?" He nodded to me as he suddenly realized I was there.

"Too many, Commander. There were eighteen seriously wounded, one of which died on the table, and three more who may not survive the night. How many minor injuries, Kellen?"

"Thirty-two, sir," I answered. "All of whom, will be unable to fight for at least three weeks, up to two months for those with broken bones." I watched both men nod silently as they quietly assessed what the total number and extent of injuries meant to them in their own daily duties within the fort. I turned my attentions back to packing up the medical supplies as the two men stepped outside. Other soldiers began to dismantle the tent, and as the sides were removed, I saw that the graves had been dug and bodies were now being placed inside.

Once all the medical supplies were packed and loaded onto wagons, I looked around to see where else I might be useful. It appeared that my work on the battlefield was done. Two groups of soldiers were burying the dead, and everyone else was headed back towards the fort. I fell into step behind one of the infantry units on its way back up the hill. My thoughts ran back over the events of the day as I listened to the rhythm of the men marching in front of me. These men and all the others who fought for us were trained to march and fight in the old Roman fashion. Strictly disciplined, their steady footfalls were almost hypnotic. I was unaware of our progress until I saw the guards at the main gate of the fortress.

As soon as I was inside the fortress, I made my way to the main forge. I looked inside, hoping to find my father, but the forge was empty. I quickly cleaned the sword I still carried strapped to my back and added fuel to the fire, an old habit formed in my youth when I had accompanied my father to his forge everyday. I stepped back outside and waited for my eyes to adjust to the late evening dusk and torchlight. The sounds of normal daily life in the fort began to heal the trauma of the battle.

I became aware of a large stocky figure headed towards me and walking fast. The slight limp of the left leg gave me to know instantly it was Varn, fortress smith and my father. He was wearing a large smile as he spread his arms wide and swept me up into a giant hug.

"Kellen, my girl. I heard you did well today. Old Manus told me you killed the one who tried to get into the hall."

"Yes, Papa, that was me," I answered and squeezed him back as hard as I could.

"And young Ferd said you were on the field as well, helping Lucan with the injured. Said you straightened out his nose that one of those damned marauders broke."

"Yes, and there's blood on my dress to prove it," I said as he released me from the hug. "Father, I have never seen so much blood or so many bodies."

He put one of his massive hands behind my head to hold it still as he leaned down to kiss my forehead. His next words were spoken softly and with a sadness to his voice. "I'm sorry, child. I should have left you in Avalon where you would have not seen such things."

I smiled up at him and slipped my hand into the crook of his elbow. "I know," I said as I turned him toward our house. "But I am here now and happy to be back home with you. Come, I need to wash and change this filthy dress. And your dinner...What kind of a daughter am I to not have my father's dinner ready at this hour?"

"Ha. Tonight, daughter, I have taken on that chore," he said as he followed me into the house. "Now get you cleaned up."

I hurried upstairs and removed the stained dress. My father had seen to it that a basin of fresh water had been placed in my room, and I smiled as I washed the dirt and sweat from my body. Once I was dressed again and had combed my long chestnut colored hair, I made my way back downstairs as the wafting scent of my father's hearty stew made my mouth water. The dining table had been pulled out from the wall, and two of my younger siblings were setting out bowls and spoons for each of us. I made my way over to the crib by the kitchen door and looked inside. There I saw the smiling face of my baby sister, Evelyn.

It had been Evelyn who brought me home. I was sent to Avalon as a young girl to be trained in the ways of the Great Goddess. I had studied all of the ancient lore made available to me and was quite happy in that study. But then word had come that my pregnant mother was ill. I hurried home as quickly as I could, but while on the road, I dreamed of my mother dying in childbirth. Two days later when I arrived at the fort, I learned that my dream had been true. Now my father was alone with two children and a baby and no wife. I knew that he needed me to stay and help raise my siblings. Finding a wet nurse for Evelyn had been easy as babies were often being born in our fort and the surrounding villages. And despite hardly knowing my ten year old brother, Rufus, and my eight year old sister, Flynn, we had quickly bonded and become a true family.

I grabbed the mugs and a jug of water as my father came out of the kitchen carrying a large steaming pot of stew. "Guess what this fine stew is made of, Kellen?" my father said as he winked at me and sat the pot on the table.

"I don't know," I answered, "but it smells wonderful."

"It's rabbit!" Rufus interjected. "I caught it this morning."

"You caught it? That's wonderful, Rufus." I said as I ladled out some of the stew into everyone's bowl. "Father, we are lucky to have such a fine hunter in our family. Now we shall never fear for going hungry."

We sat down and ate as we discussed the normal everyday happenings in our lives. We did not speak of the battle or of the dead and injured men. The day's happenings were for a while barred from entering the house and disturbing the family. After we had finished eating and cleaning up, I hurried my siblings off to bed. The baby's wet nurse arrived and took her upstairs for a feeding and I looked at my father.

"I should go see if Lucan needs anything," I said as I started towards the door.

"Kellen, stop," replied my father. "Lucan has plenty of help. You are tired and need to sleep. Tomorrow will be a full day as we all try to get on with our lives."

I had not realized how tired I was until he mentioned it. Then I was suddenly aware of a heaviness in my arms and legs. I simply nodded and let him kiss me on the head again before turning and going upstairs to my room. The wet nurse, Tess, was just preparing to leave when I reached my room. She smiled at me and quietly slipped from the room and left. I slipped out of my clothes and blew out the only candle in the room before slipping into my bed and falling fast asleep.