

The Twilight Year

by Sean McMullen

Sean McMullen is the author of about a dozen novels, the most recent of which is *Before the Storm*. Here he brings us a gritty tale of life in Albion in the sixth century. Mr. McMullen tells us that in the mid-530s, the volcano Krakatoa exploded, blanketing the world in dust and giving Europe a year without a summer. He says also that it occurred to him that if the temptation to tell stories of a British warlord named Arthur is strong now, imagine how much stronger it must have been to storytellers back then!

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The overgrown ruins had been built at the height of the Roman Empire's power, yet they were still imposing after centuries of neglect. A rough-hewn Christian cross stood atop the tallest surviving column, marking the place as shrine, where sanctuary, rest, and prayer could be found in the wilderness. I arrived late in the evening and found the priest, Oswald, alone. We took an instant dislike to each other.

"Why do you bards sing of Arturian, but never Christ?" muttered Oswald, snapping twigs for the small fire outside his hovel.

"Because you priests never sing of Arturian," I replied.

Without looking up from his pile of twigs, Oswald said, "The sun is nearly down, go to sleep."

"But I have a fire, a harp, and an audience. I'll charm your soul with a ballad."

"More likely you'll play so badly that even outlaws would flee this place."

I was tuning a small harp that I had built myself. It was just a stout triangle of oak, ten gut strings, and ashwood pegs. I brushed the strings softly, as anxious not to mask the tread of approaching feet as to hear the notes. Suddenly a dead rabbit was tossed onto the ruddy snow beside our tiny fire.

Oswald and I bounded to our feet, axe and quarterstaff raised. A graying but well-muscled man walked into the field of the fire's glow, his arms folded and his shield slung over his back.

“Had I meant harm, you would both already be dead,” he announced.

“Then welcome,” said Oswald, still wary. “I am Oswald. My chapel offers shelter, prayer—”

“And good music,” I interjected.

“I watch over my guests as they rest,” sighed Oswald, waving a hand in my direction, “although the devil is tempting me to strangle that one.”

We sat down together. The newcomer was clearly a warrior, but neatly groomed and well spoken, unlike those who live as outlaws. I exchanged glances with the priest, then picked up my harp and brushed the snow from it.

“I saw several bodies two miles south of here, at Newberry Hill,” the newcomer said as he began to skin his rabbit.

“Dangerous times,” was my thought on the subject.

“You should be more vigilant,” he advised.

“Had the bard not been jangling his harp, I’d have heard you approaching,” said the priest smoothly, his chest puffed out in triumph.

“Just now you said my playing would drive outlaws away.”

“Bard,” the stranger asked, “is your harp damaged?”

“It’s built for strength,” I replied, pointing to two deep grooves in the wood. “It has been on my back through five battles, and has taken blows meant for me.”

“More likely they just wanted to stop your playing,” said the priest.

“I have been traveling here and there,” I explained, ignoring him. “I am a bard. I compose ballads about the doings of warlords.”

“Ballads about warlords that are paid for by warlords are all the same,” said the priest. “They slay a hundred of the enemy in every battle, drink enough for ten of their companions, are stronger than their own horse, but alas, are not as intelligent.”

“I am further embellishing my ballad about the mighty Arturian. He and

a dozen companions recently defeated a thousand Saxons at the battle of Newberry Hill. Three hundred of the enemy were slain and their king was captured.”

“The fight at Newberry Hill?” scoffed Oswald. “My last guest said nothing about Arturian being there. Nine Saxons died, five escaped, and a chieftain named Dermerrius the Rank is holding the Saxon warlord for a ransom of twelve sheep!”

“Er, and I only saw nine bodies,” added the stranger.

“If my ballad says that Arturian won, then Arturian won,” I said firmly. “Some people do not appreciate poetic license.”

“Dermerrius is a fine warrior,” began the stranger.

“Arturian roams the woodlands, robbing the rich and degenerate, and giving to the poor,” I proclaimed, strumming my harp. “That’s in my ballad, too.”

“I’m poor,” said the priest, poking a finger through a hole in his cloak. “He’s never given me anything.”

The stranger skewered the rabbit with a sharpened stick and began to roast it over the fire. By now we had grown less suspicious of him, because a man cooking with skill is never considered to be a dangerous man.

“What is your name?” I asked.

“Valcian,” he replied without either looking up or demanding to know my name.

“So, how come you to be about and alone in such dangerous parts?” asked the priest.

“All parts are dangerous, and we all must be somewhere.”

“Pah, true, it’s the times that makes the danger. There are great portents in the sky. The very sun itself is fading, noon is like twilight, and look at that sunset! Red as blood. Even the snow falls red from the clouds.”

“Snow of any sort in July is a novelty,” I added.

“The snow is mixed with fine red dust,” Valcian pointed out. “Perhaps

a storm raised it from a distant desert, or a volcano blasted it into the winds.”

“To me it resembles blood,” said the priest.

“It is gritty between the teeth, unlike blood.”

“A portent is a portent!” the priest snapped. “The snow still *looks* like frozen blood, it doesn’t have to *be* blood. The summer is chill, so the winter’s to be freezing. Mark my words, there will be famine. The Empire of Rome will fall.”

“The Empire fell a century ago,” said Valcian.

“There’s bits of the Empire left,” the priest pointed out. “They’ll fall.”

“Oh I agree, and they’re the very last fragments,” I said as I stood up and played a few introductory notes on my harp.

“Play that thing again and you’re a dead man,” warned the priest as he fed more twigs into the fire.

“The end of the Roman Empire! Could a bard ask for anything better than to chronicle the downfall of the mightiest empire in all the world’s history?”

“The world falls apart, but for you it’s an excuse for a song.”

“An excuse for a *ballad*, if you please. The most mighty of empires falls, blood rains from the sky, the countryside descends into lawless chaos, and into this land wracked by nightmares comes—”

“A plague of bards to sing about it!” cried Oswald, sounding as if his patience had run dangerously low. “That’s enough. No more.”

It was five hundred and thirty-five years since the birth of Christ, at least by the reckoning of the scholar Dionysius. The original Roman Empire had fissured into eastern and western parts a century and a half earlier, then Rome had fallen, and fallen again, and fallen yet again. There were now dozens of princelings claiming the title of the western Emperor of Rome. Emperor Honorius had withdrawn the last legions from Britannia when Rome first fell, and since then the rich Roman farmers refused to pay taxes, saying that they got nothing in return. They had retreated to their estates, raised private garrisons, and settled down to live in great luxury

amid the gathering chaos.

All around the great estates, the towns and cities decayed as the common folk plundered the abandoned Roman buildings for timber and stone to build their hovels. The Roman farmers traded with each other, and with the Saxon and Briton tribes. What little order there was outside the estates came from the forces of local warlords. Nevertheless, there were many who believed that the Roman Empire still existed.

“The rabbit is done, gentlemen,” Valcian announced presently. “Who is for a share?”

The scent of good food did its predictable work. Valcian was soon telling stories from Rome for the benefit of Oswald, and teaching me a few Roman tunes.

“So, Rome’s still a great empire?” asked the priest as Valcian finished a dance tune.

“Well, it is ... different. The Eastern Empire is strong and is expanding. It now holds much of Africa’s north coast.”

“But who is actually emperor in Rome?” I asked.

“There is no emperor as such.”

“So the whole place is away to the hounds?” said the priest.

“The Western Empire is ruled by bishops, more or less.”

“Then the Western Empire really is away to the hounds, the bishops rule nothing here. Can’t spit without hitting a Saxon pagan. What’s your business here?”

“I want to visit the lord of a great estate, Quintus Flavorius.”

“Quintus Flavorius!” exclaimed the priest. “There’s heathen worship on his estate. They worship the old gods. Jupiter, Apollo, Venus! All those statues showing their bums, titties and, and thighs, and....” For a moment an expression of longing softened the priest’s face, but he suddenly snapped out of his reverie. “Well, you never see Christian statues showing all that!” he concluded, crossing himself.

“More’s the pity,” I said.

“Hear that?” demanded the priest. “He’s another one! He works for the likes of Quintus Flavorius.”

“Do you really?” asked Valcian. “Can you take me to him?”

“Why, yes! I am on my way to charm his company with music.”

“He makes up lewd songs about adultery, fornication, obscene excesses, and forbidden lovemaking. Those degenerate, pagan Romans pay good silver for that sort of thing!”

“I would pay you to take me to his estate,” Valcian said to me. “Conditions are so confused hereabouts.”

“The journey will take less than a day,” I replied.

“What’s your business with him?” asked the priest suspiciously.

“The restoration of Roman law, the collection of taxes, and the defense of the land.”

“Strange, at first glance you didn’t look like a fool,” the priest said with a laugh.

* * * *

Although he had a horse, Valcian walked beside me as we set off the following morning. He was of a mind to learn as much as he could about Quintus and his estate before we arrived, and because it is my trade to talk and sing, I talked as much as he wished.

“This really is the age for bards,” I said to my new companion as we warily followed a track that was no more than a ribbon of countryside where the ruddy snow had been trampled down. “There are rich, idle lords of estates who want to hear songs of dalliance and revelry, warlords who want me to sing of their deeds of arms, and grubby villagers who want to hear anything by anyone who has come from further away than ten miles.”

“Do you never feel threatened?” he asked.

“Continually, but I have nothing of value upon my person and I am armed. I am a very poor prospect when it comes to easy loot.”

“Easy loot.” He laughed. “Surely the estate of Quintus Flavorius is just that?”

“The Roman has two score cavalry, and twice that number of men on foot with spears and bows.”

“Impressive numbers. How does he keep them loyal?”

“By being Roman. While all else around them is in chaos, his estate prevails. It grows a surplus of grain and meat for trade, and provides luxuries and pastimes that cannot be had elsewhere.”

“Indeed?”

“Oh yes. Within the villa’s walls the guests favored by Quintus may sleep in heated rooms under tiled roofs that do not leak when it rains, and there drink wine, eat fine food, make sport with ladies of pleasure, and ... well, you are sure to see the rest for yourself. It draws surprising goodwill from the chieftains and warlords hereabouts.”

“It cannot last.”

“But for now it is lasting, so Quintus has backing.”

“I have heard that Arturian and his riders have burned many Roman estates, and that he is bent upon scrubbing the last trace of Roman rule from the land.”

“Oh aye, I can sing you a ballad—”

“Later, but for now can you tell me *why* Arturian would hold such a grudge against Romans? There have not been Roman troops in Britannia for over a hundred years, and it is decades since a Roman ruled anything larger than a farm in this land.”

“If you want an answer, you must listen to a story.”

“Spoken like a true bard. Go on.”

“Say that a man kills your father and ravishes your mother when you are just a boy. Thirty years later you are in your prime, and you come upon the fellow. He is fifty, and has mellowed and prospered, he even has a large family that loves him. Would you have your vengeance, and kill him?”

“Of course.”

“What about when he is seventy, and growing frail?”

“The crime still stands.”

“Ninety? He’s drooling into his gruel, not even able to recall the crime? You are dead, but your son comes upon him?”

“He must still die, it is a matter of justice.”

“Say the man has lived one hundred summers. He is on his deathbed, just days from slipping into the afterlife? Your grandson chances to be there. Should he kill the miscreant?”

“Yes, yes, yes!” barked Valcian, suddenly displaying considerable emotion.

I have always been good at raising emotions in my audiences, and I never cease to practice.

“Why?” I asked simply, having found his measure.

“Others must be shown that time does not diminish guilt.”

“Now then, change your grandson’s name to Arturian, the felon’s name to Rome, your mother’s name to Britannia, and the length of time to just shy of five hundred years.”

Valcian did not answer at once. It was a sure sign that I had made my point.

“The killing of a felon in his dotage is not a valid comparison,” he finally decided. “Who could burn with hatred for deeds done fifteen generations ago? Could you?”

“Ah, but I am not Arturian. I am a mere bard.”

“Have you met him?”

“Alas, no.”

“I should like to meet him.”

“Then I pray that you find him while I am with you,” I said brightly.

* * * *

We reached the edge of some tidily cultivated fields, and in the distance could see white walls and buildings standing out against the red snow. A tall and sturdy lookout tower made of timber dominated the estate, however, reminding everyone that Roman rule was strong, skilled, and all-seeing. Slaves were at work, scraping snow aside so that the sheep could find grass, and guards mingled with them, alert for raiders.

We were quickly noticed and intercepted by a squad of horsemen. I established my identity by showing that I could play my harp, while Valcian was pressed on all sides with questions about the world beyond Britannia. Presently we were escorted into the presence of Quintus, who wore a clean, white toga and was groomed to perfection.

“I do not use the title warlord,” he declared proudly once Valcian and I had introduced ourselves. “I am a noble of Rome, and there is an end to it.”

“You must admit that Rome is not what it used to be,” Valcian pointed out.

“Ah, but Rome lives on, do you not see?” Quintus replied, turning about where he stood and gesturing all around him. “This estate is Rome.”

“This estate is but a mile square.”

“What is Rome if not organization, and we nobles of Britannia are organized. We grow more than we eat, have our own garrisons, and provide stability. People want stability. I command five dozen cavalry, foot and archers. They have the arms and armor of the legions of Rome, and are among the best equipped in all of Britannia.”

“From what I saw, their arms and armor are at least two hundred years old,” Valcian observed.

“Like the roads of the Romans, they were built to last,” I quipped.

“But don’t you see, they are *Roman*,” insisted Quintus. “The barbarians cannot even count past the number of their fingers and toes, what do they know of two hundred years? I parade my men in the surrounding villages a couple of times a year, and always kill a few hairy and unwashed layabouts after dressing them up in barbarian guise.”

“Ah, to what aim?”

“*Panem et circenses*, my boy, and the *pax romana*.”

“I can understand the estate providing bread and the peace of Rome, but how do you manage the circuses?”

“I proclaim that yet another barbarian warlord has been humbled, and after the wretch has been given a mild sleeping potion, I set him against the best of my own guardsmen in a fight to the death. The villagers get a show, and are left in awe of the might of my supposedly Roman warriors. Where did you say you were from?”

“Why, the Empire of Rome,” said Valcian.

“The Empire of Rome, you say?” asked Quintus. “But as you said, the Roman Empire is not what it used to be. What city are you from?”

“Constantinople.”

“Ah, I see, the *Eastern* Roman Empire.”

“The Byzantine Empire,” I added.

“Indeed, yet still the Empire,” said Valcian.

“Are you a Christian, Valcian?” Quintus asked suspiciously.

“I am.”

This made Quintus scowl with displeasure. “We here worship the gods that made Rome great and strong. The Christians sapped its strength. What is your business here?”

“We are looking for allies. Our intention is reunification. Why, at this moment the great general Belisarius is waging war against the Ostrogoths on the Italian peninsula. It is seldom admitted by the wise and powerful, but the intention of Emperor Justinian is to win back the entire Roman Empire of old.”

“Win back the empire?” said Quintus. “For that you would also have to fight the Vandals, Berbers, Visigoths, Sueves, Franks, Celts, Burgundians, Gephids, and Saxons!”

“You forgot the Lombards,” said Valcian, his face held firmly blank.

“Oh yes, how careless of me. So, Lord Valcian, what brings you here specifically?”

“To persuade such men as you to pay fealty to Justinian.”

“This sounds suspiciously like a poor joke.”

“Joke it is certainly not. Just think, an ally of Emperor Justinian on the northern borders of the Franks. They would be reluctant to ally themselves with the Ostrogoths opposing us in Italy if they knew that the Eastern Roman Empire had an army of two thousand Britons—”

“Raise an army of two thousands?” spluttered Quintus. “You are talking to a farmer with but sixty men bearing arms! Most of those are Briton field hands and artisans when I’m not parading them.”

“But Lord Quintus, there are many small forces such as yours throughout the southeast of Britannia. United, you could form a very impressive army.”

“Very astute of you, sir, but who will defend our estates with the warriors gone? While my men plunder the Franks, the local villagers will plunder my villa.”

“Emperor Justinian is aware of that. He has charged me to propose that should the lords of Britannia donate one man in three of their forces, he will match them man for man. That would amount to a formidable army if all kingdoms, estates, and warlords contributed. He is prepared to garrison some of the old Roman fortresses with his warriors, and—”

“*Byzantine* warriors, on *our* island, in *forts*?” cried Quintus, aghast and reaching for his wine. “Oh no no no, sir! Absolutely not!”

“Not Byzantine, but—”

“Byzantine they certainly are, sir. Let us cast aside silly pretensions and be honest. Yours is not the Roman Empire of olden times. The Eastern Roman Empire is really the Byzantine Empire, which is a *Christian* empire.”

“But we would provide stability and keep order.”

“Indeed sir, and very soon your emperor would be demanding that we must pay taxes for your upkeep. Before you know it, we would be having to pay for his wars and forced to raise yet more armies to fight in his name. Every time I tried to hold a private orgy his priests would be swarming into my villa, preaching hellfire and smashing my statues of the old gods. This villa is far more Roman than your empire, sir, and I intend to keep it that way.”

“United we would be vastly stronger.”

“And I would be paying taxes, wearing hairshirts, and confining my amorous exploits to a single wife! Absolutely not, Valcian, and that is my final word.”

Valcian now sat back, smiling and waving his hand dismissively. “Quintus, Quintus, do you really believe all that about Christians? Take it from me, we seldom practice what we preach.”

Quintus had sat forward, as if strings tied him to Valcian. He gave a knowing leer, yet suspicion was still in his features.

“In that case you would not decline an invitation to a revel, yes? There will be fine food, wine, song, and the exchange of bedmates. I could arrange it for this very night.”

“Oh, I most certainly would not, but alas, I have no wife to contribute,” replied Valcian.

“No matter, I have several. There also happen to be several other guests on my estate, enjoying delights of ancient Rome that my family has preserved for many generations.”

“How discreet are you?” asked Valcian.

“Have no fears, word of what is done here never finds its way to Constantinople.”

“I can see why Britannia’s warlords allow such lingerings of Roman rule to survive.”

“Ah yes, I am a master of political balance—but enough of all that. Tell me of court scandals and cuisine in Constantinople.”

“I hardly know where to start,” laughed Valcian, spreading his arms

wide.

It was only now that Quintus remembered me.

“Bard, can you sing?” he demanded.

“I am a bard, my lord, so naturally—”

“Splendid, splendid! You shall perform for us tonight.”

* * * *

I spent much of the afternoon singing old Briton ballads to idle guards and slaves. They knew that Arturian had been burning Roman estates, so everyone wanted to hear of him, yet I insisted that I would only perform my great Arturian ballad late that night. At sunset a lavish feast began, with Valcian as the honored guest. Torches of mutton fat burned smokily while the guests reclined on cushions, drinking wine and mead while listening to the estate’s poet read from the *Amores* of Ovid. Next, I got up with my harp and amused the company with songs of drinking to excess, adultery, and breaking wind. I was followed by a troupe of Briton women, who danced to the sound of drums and reedpipes while taking off their clothes in unison. With the dancing over, the main courses were paraded in by men in the guise of satyrs; that is to say they wore sheepskin trousers and rams’ horns.

Quintus had more than two dozen guests and entertainers. Aside from myself and Valcian there were three chiefs of local villages, the lord’s brother and sister, a visiting noble from the kingdom of Mercia, and two merchants from Wessex. Most of the guests had wives or companions, although none kept company with those they had escorted into the room. The dancers and servants made sure that nobody was wanting for a companion, and every so often a couple would slip away for a time while everyone else speculated upon what they might be doing. From time to time the guests would hurry out to vomit noisily, then return to consume yet more. Curiously, some servants had been stationed outside to cry out in Latin like street vendors. This was apparently meant to provide the illusion of being in Rome itself, centuries earlier. This was no mere orgy in Roman clothing; this was an experience of being Roman.

Presently I decided to have myself removed, so I chose to sing my ballad of Boudicia. When I began to sing of the Briton queen, and of how her daughters were ravished by order of the Roman invaders, Quintus and his guests were delighted, but once it became clear that I was presenting

the event as a tragedy rather than a titillating comedy, the mood soured. Quintus ordered me ejected with no further ceremony.

As I picked myself up and checked my harp for damage, I was approached by a woman who introduced herself in barely comprehensible Latin as Elenede. We quickly switched to the common tongue, however, and she told me that she had liked my singing. She offered me a bite from a leg of roast duck, then she tossed it aside and guided my hand to one of her breasts.

“You may not be in the favor of Quintus, but I’m not Quintus and I fancy you,” she declared in somewhat slurred speech. “The bed chambers are to the right, and they are heated.”

“I, ah, you favor me for my music?” I mumbled impatiently.

“Aye, but I’d like a chance to favor you for more than that.”

Embarrassed by her alarmingly easy familiarity, I withdrew my hand on the pretext of playing a tune for her. After that we began to talk of this and that, even though I was anxious to go into the fields and sing my ballad of Arturian to the waiting guards and slaves. I quickly noticed that Elenede made a point of asking me about myself, and made much of how important Valcian must be. In a more subtle fashion I coaxed her into talking about herself.

“Aye, I’m a Briton, but I feign well as a Roman, do you not think so?” she asked.

“Oh indeed, and where are you from?”

“A village to the north, two days by mule. I was the wife of the chief, but he died fighting the Saxons. I was sold to Quintus, and here I am, the mistress of a governor.”

“A governor?” I asked with sudden interest. “As in Quintus Flavorius?”

“Aye. He says he’s been to Rome, and he knows the emperor. He says he’ll take me there one day. Have you been to Rome?”

“Oh, yes. Bards travel very far.”

“Is Rome as Quintus says?”

“What does he say?”

“He says the streets are paved with gold, and the emperor likes women with such a face and figure as I have.”

“Only the grand streets are paved with gold,” I said diplomatically. “As for the emperor, I was too lowly to meet him.”

“I think the emperor will bear me away to his bed as soon as he lays eyes upon me. He will be so charmed that he will marry me and make me empress. Then I shall have Quintus beheaded, because he is too rough when at dalliance.”

“I was glad to be thrown out,” I said as she unsteadily poured wine into goblets of green glass that were chipped and frosted with age. “I am in need of rest from the noise and babble.”

“Oh! Well you’d best not be rough or I’ll have you beheaded too,” she laughed, taking the wrong meaning by reflex.

“No, no, first I have to sing to those outside. I promised them a ballad.”

“So, what are you to sing about?” she asked with vague interest. “Quintus wants ditties of buttocks heaving and legs spreading, but your song of Boudicia was very moving. Will you sing it again?”

“No, this time I think I’ll sing my ballad of Arturian, and of how he tried to rescue his wife from an evil Roman sorcerer.”

“His wife?” asked Elenede. “What is her name?”

“I do declare that she will be ... Elenede.”

“My name?” giggled Elenede.

“Don’t you want to be the wife of the king Arturian?”

“I’d prefer to be an empress, but it would still be nice. What’s the story?”

“It’s a ballad. Come along and listen.”

“Ballads are really long aren’t they?” she asked, her tone suggesting that she did not like long ballads.

“Indeed.”

“Longer than the story of Boudicia?”

“Much longer.”

“It’s cold out there.”

“The Briton folk have a fire in the field behind their quarters.”

“In the field, bard? That means under the sky and in the cold, fire or no fire.”

“As you will, then,” I said, turning away from her with no further ado and setting off down the path that bisected the courtyard.

* * * *

Before I reached the field I rubbed my hands in the dirt beneath the snow and then smeared the muck on my face, so that I had the guise of a grubby, exhausted traveler. After all, bards are meant to have come from far away, not merely the triclinium. The prospect of a ballad about Arturian had caught the interest of four or five dozen of the men and women, and they were gathered around a bonfire of branches. They had a large amphora of wine, which had been appropriated from the villa, and several drinking horns were being passed around as I arrived. I took the little harp from beneath my cloak and made a show of tuning it. This proclaimed that a ballad was about to begin. A drinking horn was handed to me, and I took a mouthful of passably good wine to settle my throat.

*“Of Arturian, ‘tis my song,
Vast were lands within his keeping.
And how as wayfarer he has gone,
All for his lady, he is seeking.”*

When I perform I try to start as any other bard might, then slowly shape the mood of my audience to my own needs. Once I have them, I work upon their emotions, building involvement with the characters. I had reached the part where Arturian’s wife had been ensorceled and abducted by the Roman governor when I saw that Elenede had joined the listeners. A

cavalrymen named Calcarat noticed her as she sat down, and draped his cloak over her shoulders. By now I was a tortured picture of raw, raving despair, describing in graphic detail how Arturian's wife was ravished and defiled by first the governor, then his guests. In contrast to those inside the villa, this audience was rapturously attentive.

I sang of how Arturian rallied his despondent warriors, inspiring them with the story of Queen Boudicia's revolt. Although the warrior queen had lived many centuries earlier, my audience responded by shouting their approval, for they knew the ballads about Boudicia and her war of honor against the Romans. There were many ballads of the rebel queen, but while those told the facts of the story and celebrated the bravery of the Britons in battle, I aimed for the hearts of those who listened. For several hundred lines I described how Boudicia had been forced to watch while a legion of Roman soldiers raped and degraded her daughters. Resorting to a little poetic license, I gave her three times more daughters than were generally credited to her, but then I am a teller of stories, not a chronicler of histories. My verses concerning her initial victories against the Romans were proudly proclaimed yet deliberately brief by contrast, and I described the queen's downfall in even more detail than the violation of her daughters. In my story, she did not take poison, but was crucified as a slave by the Romans, to show that all Britons were henceforth slaves.

Now that my audience was seething with outrage, I returned forward in time to Arturian, and sang of how his men rallied about him and vowed to smash the Roman armies in Britannia. I had them winning many victories, and pursuing the Romans all the way back to Rome itself. Arturian returned to reclaim his wife, but her shame was too much for her to bear. She fled the returning, victorious Arturian and went into hiding as a dancer and harlot. I concluded that to this day Arturian wanders the Roman estates of Britannia in disguise, seeking his lost beloved, "*Ragged of clothing and wild of aspect.*" By now I had managed to shed real tears, and those of my audience who did not merely share my grief were in a state approaching blind fury. With the ballad over, they crowded around me, in a truly ugly mood. They offered me wine, sympathy, even their swords, and swore that Quintus would never again lay a hand upon Elenede.

* * * *

It was two mornings later that I was again sheltering at the shrine of the priest, Oswald. I was awakened by a boot on my throat and the point of a sword pressing between my lips. Valcian stood over me, now wearing chainmail, and with him were two warriors. Having established our respective positions, he withdrew his blade and stepped back.

“You may sit up now,” said the Byzantine noble.

Very, very slowly, I sat up, holding my hands high.

“I am fairly sure you don’t want me dead,” I ventured.

“Neither do we want a ballad,” said Valcian firmly.

“Have I caused offense?”

“Barial, gag him and bind his hands,” ordered Valcian, turning away from me.

We rode at quite a brisk pace, and before noon were back at the villa of Quintus Flavorius. At the edge of the estate’s fields we reined in, and the Byzantine gestured to what was before us. Across the fields of reddish snow, smoke rose from the remains of the villa. The great wooden watchtower was no longer standing. I estimated that ten warriors, all horsemen, were encamped there.

Only now was my gag removed.

“What has happened here?” I asked. “Who are these men?”

“What has happened should be obvious,” replied Valcian. “The villa has been attacked and burned.”

“By these horsemen?”

“No, not so. They are elite Byzantine cavalrymen, dressed as Britons and in my service.”

“Byzantines!” I exclaimed in astonishment. “Are you invading Britannia?”

“You do not understand,” said Valcian. “These men are only my escort, I fled the villa and summoned them from the forest when the villa was burned.”

“Then ... who burned the villa?”

“Who indeed? From what I have been able to learn, it was Arturian.”

There was very little I could say to that. We rode on slowly. From a distance, the villa looked to be largely intact, but as we drew closer I could see that most of it had been burned out. A great number of rooks and ravens circled and wheeled overhead. The gate of the outer wooden stockade was open and undefended, and headless bodies littered the snow-covered ground. Dogs and birds were feeding on these, and they retreated warily as we passed. Some of the dead were naked, others were in the robes that they had been wearing at the orgy two nights earlier.

My hands were untied and I was told to dismount. One of the nearby bodies was of a man of quite substantial size. Both his head and genitals were missing, but he had the general look of Quintus. As far as I could tell from the remains of their bloodied clothing, the two merchants lay nearby. Valcian took me firmly by the arm and marched me over to two neat rows of heads on pikes flanking the path to the villa's entrance. I quickly identified Quintus, the chiefs of the three local villages, the lord's brother and sister, the lord from Mercia, the two merchants from Wessex, and several entertainers and servers.

"What do you make of this?" asked the Byzantine noble.

"I have seen worse," I managed.

"And I have done worse, but that is not the point. Until two days ago this was a small but prosperous remnant of Roman rule in Britannia. These people wore Roman togas, worshipped Roman gods, issued their guards with Roman armor and weapons, and enacted quite credible Roman orgies. Now all that has gone."

"Er, is this not a cause for celebration?" I asked. "That is, for Christians like you?"

"Indeed," he replied tersely.

A silence more icy than the snow slush beneath my boots established itself. Presently I decided that I was meant to take the initiative and ask another question.

"Who really did this?"

"As I said, Arturian."

"Ah. Er, so *you* ... are Arturian?"

“No!” he said firmly, his keen, brown eyes searching my face for guile and guilt.

“Er, then Arturian came here and did this?”

“Possibly. Bard, I was not really sent here to make alliances with pathetic pagan degenerates like Quintus Flavorius. Emperor Justinian himself charged me with meeting Arturian and securing his loyalty. Two nights ago, I very nearly did. Come.”

We walked between the rows of heads and into the villa’s courtyard, then proceeded up the central path. To the right, the bath house was just charred timbers and blackened walls, but the rooms of the slaves’ and servants’ quarters were undamaged. Ahead of us, the tablinum and triclinium were burned out and without roofs. At the center of the courtyard a bonfire blazed, and gathered around it were four Byzantine cavalymen, the cavalryman from the estate’s guard named Calcarat, and a woman that I recognized as Elenede.

“Good people, this is a bard,” Valcian announced as we arrived before them. “Do any of you recognize him?”

Both Calcarat and Elenede were dressed as Briton villagers now, and their bearing was different. They both stood proudly before us, their shoulders back and their heads high.

“Lord Valcian, he’s the bard who sang here the night of the burning,” responded Elenede.

“Aye, great lord, and he sang right well of Arturian on that night,” added Calcarat.

“Very good,” said Valcian. “Please excuse us now, I am giving the bard a tour of the villa.”

We proceeded up the path to the tablinum’s entrance. It was burned out, of course, and the ashes of the collapsed roof’s timbers still smoldered. Here and there I could see traces of furniture and the feast amid the burned-out remains of the roof. The kitchen and storage rooms were undamaged, but had been stripped bare. In one of the bedchambers, where the roof had survived, a naked couple lay skewered together by a single spear. They had apparently been caught in the act of lovemaking. Their heads had been removed. In the next bedchamber a pair of naked legs protruded from beneath the shattered tiles and charred beams.

“It is oddly chilling to think that I lay between those legs on that same bed just two nights ago,” said Valcian, with a tone in his voice that was somehow contemptuous and wistful at the same time.

“So you were here for the attack, my lord?”

“I was, just as you were. When this poor soul began to doze, I got up, dressed, and roamed the villa. While Quintus and his guests remained at play in the tablinum, I saw and heard you sing to the field hands and guardsmen out in the snow, beyond the gate. It was a ballad of Arturian.”

“Arturian is all the fashion, as ballads go.”

“So it seems. After this I walked out across the fields to where one of my escort was waiting amid the trees. He reported that no group bigger than my dozen disguised Byzantines was within five miles. Suddenly there was a commotion from the villa, and we saw flames and heard screams. Having only one of my men with me, I was not inclined to go back and investigate. Tell me, bard, what did you see?”

“Very little, my lord. I was finishing my performance when the fighting began. I did not even see the attackers arrive. As soon as the screams and fighting began, I fled.”

“So you did not stay to help defend the villa?”

“It was not my villa, great lord.”

“The estate’s guards also fled without a fight. There were none among the dead, you see. That is odd, because those guards were passably well armed and trained. What do you think, bard? Why did the guards flee?”

“I cannot say. Their mood was good while I sang to them. Quintus paid them well, and they lived more comfortably than they would in a village. They gave me hospitality and coin—which was more than Quintus did.”

“Indeed, Quintus was not pleased with your performance at his revel,” Valcian agreed.

“Some people just don’t appreciate art.”

“Elenede, you also left the revel,” said Valcian, turning away from me.

“What did you see?”

“Much the same as the bard,” she replied. “The attack seemed to come out of nowhere. Some of us fled, others joined in.”

“Calcarat, you have admitted to turning upon your Roman master. Why?”

“I ... the ballads that the bard sang were very moving. When the attack began, it was as if the ballad had come to life. I blazed with hatred for the Romans.”

“What did you see of the attackers?”

“Little, very little. They were dressed as we were.”

“So as to steal into the estate?”

“I suppose. Some even sat listening to the bard’s singing, I am sure of that.”

Valcian paced before us for a time, his head down and his hands clasped behind his back.

“By the time I had ventured across the woodlands, gathered my men and returned, the villa was ablaze, and the Romans and their guests were as they are now,” he explained, turning his attention back to me. “We found Calcarat and Elenede in the kitchen, hard at work making baby Britons. All the others were gone; guards, field hands, and attackers.”

A wall suddenly collapsed, startling the carrion birds into the air. Soot and ash was mixed with the red snow and blood in the villa’s courtyard, and had been churned into a foul, ugly mush by countless footfalls over the two days past. At that moment it began snowing again, and the flakes were still reddish pink. I had to remind myself that it was July, and high summer. Valcian turned back to Calcarat.

“Relate your story yet again, guardsman, with all the detail that you can recall,” he ordered.

“The bard sang the epic of Arturian. It was long in the telling, but once he had finished we all cried for him to sing it again. Most of the other guards left their posts to listen. Ah ... it was very moving. The bard lamented with real tears, he shrieked with passion, he even fell to his knees at the part

where Arturian is told that his queen has left him. We all roared for vengeance and blood, the guards brandished their swords. We cheered the victories of Arturian—then all at once Arturian and his men were with us, and we really were fighting the Romans.”

“Just like that?” asked Valcian.

“I have no clear memories of how the fighting began. We were just in a mood that rendered us dangerous.”

“Try harder,” said Valcian, resting a hand on the pommel of his sword.

“Er, well, the bard was repeating parts of the ballad. It was the passage where the Roman sorcerer defiled and degraded Arturian’s queen. Her name was Elenede, just as this lady is Elenede. There and then, we fancied that the queen *was* this lady. We raised her shoulder-high, shouting that the queen was free, we paraded her around the fire, cheering.”

“They interrupted my singing—” I began.

“Shut up!” snapped Valcian. “Calcarat, go on.”

“It was now that Quintus came out. He was in a rage, whip in hand, and demanding to know why the fires in the hypocaust had been allowed to die out. He began to lay about him with the whip. Someone, perhaps Arturian, slew him, then led us into the villa to kill all the others. We slew them, struck off their heads, then set the rooms of luxury ablaze after taking back the provisions, wine, and wealth that the Roman had hoarded by our toilings.”

“So, Arturian and his men fled with the loot?” asked Valcian.

“Indeed not, my lord. They are men of surpassing virtue, valuing justice above mere plunder. They withdrew with nothing, leaving we guards, slaves, and field hands to carry away what we would in recompense for our years of toil.”

“And to drink yourselves legless,” said Valcian. “Bard, what is your recollection?”

“It is precisely as they said.”

“Tell me more,” he insisted, drawing his sword and letting the point

rest in the slushy snow between us.

“Ah, I did not notice that Arturian and his men had joined our company. They must have been dressed as field hands to blend in all the better. When the fighting started, I fled for the woods.”

“Amazing. You sing so lustily of battles, yet flee as soon as one starts?”

“I am a bard. I avoid battles, except when forced to fight. I carry nothing but ballads, and I sing to all. Folk may not have what I carry if I am dead, thus outlaws and warlords suffer me to live.”

This did not satisfy Valcian, who now swung his sword idly as he began to pace again.

“I have been in this land for many months now, seeking Arturian. Word of his exploits has reached Constantinople; word of how he rallies Britons against Saxons, slays monsters, defends Christians against pagans, and above all, kills Romans. I have seen many burned-out villas, and all have perished within this, this twilight year past. In each and every case the local villagers said that Arturian had done the deed. Word has it that he has a small band of invincible horsemen, and that they can beat odds of hundreds to one. I have been charged by Emperor Justinian with forming an alliance with Arturian, so that the Roman Empire’s former realms may be gathered into the rule of the Byzantine Empire.”

“Arturian fights to free this island from the dregs of Roman rule,” I replied, striving to be defiant yet deferential at once. “Do you really think he would let Britannia be enslaved under a new Roman Empire?”

“My conclusion precisely,” declared Valcian. “That is why I am taking you prisoner and returning to Constantinople with you.”

He waited for my reply, but who could reply to such words as those? After a lengthy pause he continued.

“Bard, you are Arturian.”

Elenede and Calcarat gaped, while I too tried hard to look astonished.

“I would have thought that you were a better judge of warriors than that, my Lord Valcian.” I laughed uneasily.

“There are warriors, and there are leaders, bard. You are a leader. Amid the ruins of countless Roman estates I have been told by the survivors of how Arturian appeared in the guise of a bard, surveyed the defenses while singing to the guards and slaves, then returned with his invincible horsemen and annihilated the place. I was lucky this time. Lucky that I arrived as you did.”

“Er, so I am all that you will take back to your emperor? He will surely be disappointed. I am but a grubby bard.”

“No, I will take with me Arturian, and word that any number of Saxon warlords live in fear of Arturian, and would gladly ally themselves with the Byzantine Empire if he is to be imprisoned there. Calcarat, Elenede, go.”

* * * *

Because it was snowing, Valcian did not lead us out of the ruined estate immediately. My arms were bound and my feet hobbled, then I was taken to the slaves' quarters, which like the villa's kitchen, were undamaged. Here we stayed for the rest of that day and the following night. As dawn rose the snow continued, blanketing the villa, fields, and woodlands more deeply in red. Valcian untied my hobbles and marched me over to the horses.

“The snow is deep, Lord Valcian,” said one of his men as they hoisted me into the saddle.

“If we wait any longer the snow will be too deep for the horses; we must leave now,” insisted Valcian.

“What sort of place is this? Snow in summer!”

“If there is snow in summer, imagine what the winter will be like. Hurry, we are racing both the snow and Arturian's men.”

“Do you expect an attack, my lord?”

“Not just now. This man travels from target to target as a lone bard, while his horsemen go by other routes. Most likely they are already near some Saxon stronghold, waiting for him to arrive and lead them. We must be long gone when they come in search of him.”

“You are greatly mistaken—” I began.

“Not another word, or you will be gagged!” warned Valcian.

Apart from the heads on the poles, the carnage of three days earlier had been hidden under the newly fallen snow. Valcian reined in as we drew level with the head of Quintus.

“Farewell, Quintus Flavorius,” he said with mocking formality. “Take what satisfaction you will from the downfall of your conqueror, Arturian. Take comfort too from the knowledge that you were the last Roman ruler in all of Britannia. I have looked everywhere. There are no others.”

I had no interest in being gagged, so I said nothing. We rode out across the fields toward the woodlands. The trees were laden with red snow, and because they still had the leaves of summer, the loads of snow had snapped many branches. It was from the shelter of fallen boughs and detritus that the attack came as we reached the outskirts of the woods.

Valcian and his men were on the alert—that cannot be denied—yet what they had been expecting was Arturian’s cavalry, and in numbers little different to theirs. What erupted from the snow-shrouded woods were hundreds of villagers with spears and pikes, runaway slaves with clubs, former estate guards with swords, hunters with bows, and even women and children throwing stones.

Although my hands were bound and my horse was tethered to the saddle of Valcian’s mount, I had not been tied into my own saddle. Valcian glanced back to ensure that I was still behind him, then shouted to his men to charge out of the ambush. It was the work of a moment to roll from my saddle and into the snow once Valcian looked away, and I lay there as still as death while the other Byzantine warriors rode past me, the hoofs of their mounts kicking ruddy snow about and covering me.

I only raised my head once the riders were well clear of me, and I did not try to run. As warriors the Byzantines were more deadly than any save those in my own ballads. Those with bows quickly had them strung, and without mercy they shot down the villagers who surrounded them. Other Byzantines charged the ranks of the Britons with spear and sword, their warhorses lashing out with their hoofs and trampling the vanguard of the ragged little army. From a distance the woodland hunters circled with their bows, however, picking off riders or horses as the opportunities offered themselves. By sheer press of bodies the escape of the Byzantines was blocked, and as the fighting continued I used my teeth to work at the cords that bound my hands.

I had freed myself just as Valcian was overwhelmed by the villagers, who swarmed up over his horse and pulled him down. Picking up a Byzantine sword seemed like a particularly unwise idea, so I took a spear from the hand of a dead villager as I shambled forward, hoping to blend in with the crowd. I was quickly recognized, however. Both Calcarat and Elenede hailed me as Arturian, and after that there was no escaping my liberators.

In all, five Britons had died for every Byzantine warrior killed, but there had been hundreds against a dozen. Those hundreds had fought with the mindless, fanatical bravery of people who follow a legend. Standing on a rock and gesturing back to the estate of Quintus Flavorius, I did the only thing possible in the circumstances. I became Arturian, for the first and only time.

“People of Britannia, three nights ago you joined with my men to wipe out the Roman ruler Quintus Flavorius,” I shouted. “You ended five hundred years of Roman rule. This day you have annihilated the vanguard of a new empire, whose emperor casts greedy eyes upon our fair lands.”

There was much cheering at these words, and I allowed it to continue while I thought about what else to say.

“The red snow, the midwinter gloom in summer, even the threat of famine, they are all signs,” I concluded. “Signs to take the stores and riches from Roman farmers to survive. You are being forced to destroy the last traces of Roman rule by this twilight summer in the twilight year of the Roman Empire. Never again will Britannia be conquered by any empire. Britannia will have its own empire. Britannia will conquer Rome itself!”

This time the cheering continued for much longer, but it did not surprise me. My talent is for raising passions in those who hear me speak, whether the hermit priest, Valcian, Quintus, the guards and slaves of his estate, or even the subjects of Arturian. The Britons would now follow me anywhere. What to do, I wondered. My talent was to start riots, not rule wisely.

When I finally stepped down from the rock, I thanked Calcarat and Elenede for rallying those who had rescued me. My little harp was returned, and nearly every man present seemed to want to arm me with his own sword. Gold looted from the Byzantines and the villa was offered to me, and every girl and woman that I met made it clear that they wanted a chance to allow me little sleep in the nights to come. I traded wise but meaningless words with leaders and warriors, judged minor disputes over the division of

loot, conferred fabricated titles upon the bravest of those who had fought, and had more food offered to me than would be needed for a Roman orgy.

All the while I was troubled. Perhaps it showed in my eyes, for many of those attending me noticed it and were clearly concerned. I had become Arturian. I had riches, followers, warriors, and a reputation that could spread my domains across an area that would become a large kingdom. I had nothing to fear from the real Arturian turning up, for I had created him for one of my ballads. Well did I remember the night that I first performed it, and how the listeners rioted and burned a villa that had survived the fall of the Roman Empire by many decades. Just as clearly I remembered my subsequent decision to journey from villa to villa, inspiring rebellion in the name of Arturian, and single-handedly cutting down the last of Rome's legacy in Britannia.

I had shaped a hero with incomparable command and wisdom, and now I was being hailed as that very hero. It would have been so easy to let myself be swept along. I could have been King Arturian, ruling lands and peoples, commanding armies, and living in such splendour as was possible in Britannia in that twilight year of the Roman Empire.

I could not do it.

As Arturian, I would be a disappointment. Arturian was greater than the rulers of kingdoms like Wessex, Mercia, or Deria, and he was certainly far greater than a mere bard like me. I could have prospered as Arturian, but *he* would have been diminished by me. What father could wish that upon his child? Were Arturian to remain a legend within ballads, however, he would always be what I had made him.

* * * *

That night I declared a great feast to honor our victory, then slipped away into the woods while my followers distracted themselves with drink, song, fighting, and all associated revelries. Falling snow covered my tracks, and thus it was that I vanished out of time, legend and chronicle, leaving Arturian in my place.