Dark Places

A scenario written for Fastaval 2021
by Mo Holkar

> "And this also," said Marlow suddenly,
> "has been one of the dark places of the earth."
>
> Joseph Conrad, Heart of Darkness (1899)

Introduction

Dark Places is a scenario for four participants and a GM. The characters are three Roman legionaries, and a local guide, in Britain in 43AD. They are on a secret mission up the River Thames, into barbarian territory, to track down a Roman officer, Curtius, who has apparently gone 'rogue' and set up a private fiefdom in the woods.

The guide is a British woman, from a tribe that is (in theory) now allied with the Romans. She is a priestess; and her loyalty is doubtful.

The GM will play a collection of NPCs with whom the characters interact: they introduce stimulus and new material into the story, but the motivation and direction of play will come from the participants themselves.

There are nine major scenes, which form a progress up the river. Inbetween these scenes, the characters will have interactions amongst themselves: but these are the set-piece elements that drive the narrative towards its conclusion.

This scenario is about the clash of civilized values with the mystery and confusion of the world outside civilization. It's about disintegration, and about what might be found in the wreckage.

It's intended that participants will take away a feeling that civilization is quite a thin crust, which we can only successfully maintain by mutual agreement not to look beneath. As the saying goes, 'a dog is only two missed meals away from a wolf'. People – perhaps, us – perhaps, quite soon – will find themselves in situations where what usually works, now no longer does: and it'd probably be good to be prepared for that.

Dark Places was inspired primarily by Joseph Conrad's novel *Heart of Darkness* (1899) and the related film *Apocalypse Now* (1979), and also by Alan Garner's novel *Red Shift* (1973).

Acknowledgements

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For the GM

This document contains a set of instructions and guidance for you to run this scenario. At the end of it are the materials for participants – there are notes here on how and when to use these. They are also available separately as standalone PDFs, to make it easier during online play to send them to individual participants. Read the whole thing through, and familiarize yourself with how it fits together.

Then when it's time to run the scenario:

Read out the **Introduction** (p2) to the participants, or at least the bits of it that you think will be useful for them to know.

Give them each a copy of the scenario **Background for participants** (pp23–24). It might be good to get them to read it out loud together, each reading a paragraph and then handing over to the next person.

Explain about **Safety** (pp4–5) and about **Civitas** (pp5–6).

Give them the **Character summaries** (p28) and let them choose which of the four characters they wish to play.

Then give them each their own full **Character briefing** (pp29–36). Let them have a little while to read this and absorb it.

Tell them that at three points during the scenario, there will be a set of **Relationship changes,** and how this will work (p7). If you're running this online, make sure that they can all successfully access the online version of the cards at https://playingcards.io/ysfcv3.

(You will also at two points during the scenario hand out their **Dreams** (pp37–44), but there's no need to tell them about that in advance, unless you want to.)

Then you're ready to start!

If you need to schedule breaks, then before **Scene 4** and/or before **Scene 7** – so, immediately after sleeping and dreaming – are the best times.

The role of the GM

Your task is to guide the characters along their journey, making it feel challenging but not impossible. Each scene should feel like a threat – but one that they can overcome, using their skills and resources.

You will frame each scene, as outlined below: describing it to the participants, and placing the characters within it. You will play the various NPCs and the natural environment, responding to the characters' attempts and initiatives and narrating the consequences. They are aiming to resolve each scene in a way that leaves them able to move on to the next one, rather than being dead or having to go back to London. You need to make sure that is always possible – but sometimes, at a cost.

For each scene, there are many possible 'solutions' – some are suggested, and the participants will probably think of more. If they seem stuck, then remind them that they can do something uncivilized, un-Roman – but that this will require the voluntary loss of a point of *Civitas* (see p5 below for an explanation of what this is).

(If they want to do this but don't have any ideas as to how to make it work, you can give suggestions, of course. It should feel challenging to them, but not too challenging.)

You can and should also remove a point of *Civitas* from characters who do something barbarous, even if they weren't deliberately aiming to lose one. This is the trouble with losing one's grip on civilization – it becomes more and more slippery.

Safety

This scenario is set in a brutal time, among brutal people. It's quite possible that participants will not want to go into detail about the gruesome horrors that may be encountered – or they may prefer to avoid certain topics altogether. This is absolutely OK, and everyone must respect each other's wishes in this.

Explain to the participants that firstly, **The Door is Open** – they can leave at any point they wish, without needing to explain why. (If they wish to tell you why, at the time or afterwards, that's fine of course: but don't debate or question their reasons.) If this happens, then you should have their character

killed shortly afterwards: there will be plenty of opportunities for this to happen without it seeming too extreme for the story.

Then, explain that they can also say **"Cut"** at any point. If they do, you will stop describing the current piece of action, and instead fast-forward to its consequences and what happens next. Participants should use this if in general they're OK with the way the scenario is going, but for some reason what's currently being talked about is particularly disturbing and they would rather skip over it. They don't need to tell you why.

Note – it's important that the participants understand that the three male characters must not use gendered violence or bullying against Senovara. They may dislike or mistrust her, but they respect and fear her as a priestess.

About Civitas

[*Read this out to the participants – or use your own words to explain it, if you prefer.*]

Civitas is a measure of how civilized a person is. (Where 'civilized' means 'like the ideal Roman'.) Emperor Claudius probably has a *Civitas* of 10: barbarians have 0.

Romans thought of civilization differently than us, of course. Violence and brutality can be perfectly civilized, as long as they're controlled and purposeful. But going 'off the leash', or showing cruelty without a good reason, is barbarous. And most barbarous of all is betraying Roman cultural values – pretending to be what you're not, swearing by foreign gods, and so on.

A person's *Civitas* is not fixed – it will go up and down during their life. Exposure to, and participation in, civilized activities will cause it to rise: behaving like a barbarian will cause it to fall. But if it falls as far as 0 – meaning that the person has effectively rejected all civilized values – then it may be that they prefer to remain barbarous, and are now forever lost to the civilized world.

In ordinary life, *Civitas* can be regained (or gained) by doing things like going to the theatre or gladiatorial games, or attending a banquet, or going to a temple of one of the major Roman gods, or reading in a library, or conversing with highly-civilized people. But when you're out on your mission up the Thames, none of that will be possible. During this scenario, *Civitas* cannot be gained or regained – it can only be lost, or spent.

A character can spend a point of *Civitas* to successfully resolve a scene which otherwise looks like it will go badly and ruin the mission. Essentially this means:

the character does something uncivilized, which has the effect of turning around the dynamic of the scene. The player of the character who is spending the point can decide what actually happens: they describe what uncivilized thing the character is doing, and the GM narrates the successful outcome. The player then reduces the character's C*ivitas*.

Any character can spend C*ivitas* in any scene (as long as they have more than 0 to spend). Some scenes can be resolved easily, without needing to spend anything. Some will be more difficult, and you may find that you have to make the decision to spend a point. No civilized person enjoys acting like a barbarian – but, the lower their C*ivitas* score gets, somehow the easier it becomes.

The GM may also decide that a character must lose C*ivitas*, if they do something particularly barbarous. Hopefully it was worth it…

You'll decide for yourself how to represent your character's descent towards barbarism – how it will manifest in their manner and their behaviour. And, if they end by losing all of their C*ivitas* – will they want to come back?

It might seem like you would 'win' the scenario by getting through it without spending as little as possible of your character's C*ivitas*. But it's not that kind of scenario! That's one possible happy ending, for sure: but you might equally well feel that to spend all of your C*ivitas* and give way to barbarism is a better story. Or to leave it in the hands of the gods, and see which way Fate takes you…



(*image public domain on pxhere.com*)

Relationship changes

For the participants to know

[*Read this out, or explain it in your own words, to the participants.*]

After scenes 2, 4, and 6, relationships between the characters will evolve. You will each draw, randomly, one of the four relationship cards. Two of the cards have '+' symbols on – the characters of the two participants who draw these will have their relationship become more positive. The other two cards have '–' symbols on, and those two characters will have their relationship worsen.

Each pair of participants will decide together why and how this improvement or worsening take place – what was the incident that caused the change in relationship, and how did each character react, etc. The GM will help with suggestions, if required. Either just decide it, or narrate it together – or even play out a short scene, if the GM says that you have time to do so.

For the GM to know

Cut out the **Relationship cards** (p25) and keep them shuffled and face down. After each set of changes, gather them back in.

If you're running the scenario online, there's a deck of these cards set up at https://playingcards.io/ysfcv3. To use it, the GM and all the participants should open that link. Each participant should drag one card from the deck to an empty part of the table, and click it to flip it over. (They can do this in turn or all at the same time, it doesn't matter.)

After everyone's seen who has the + cards and who has the – cards, the GM can click the 'Recall and shuffle' button to restore the deck for next time.

Summary of the scenario

Day 1 – Descent

The characters leave the civilized world behind, and journey into the dark forest.

- **Scene 1 – The Frontier**
  The characters receive their mission briefing. They take to the river, and cross the border into Dobunni territory.
- **Scene 2 – The Mudbank**
  The boat sticks on a mudbank. The characters struggle to free it.
- **2A:** first set of relationship changes
- **Scene 3 – The First Mooring**
  The characters moor for the night, cook food, and set alarms. They have disturbing dreams.

Day 2 – Abyss

The trials of the forest. The characters find that they need each other, however little trust they may have.

- **Scene 4 – The Hunters**
  An encounter with two Dobunni hunters. They have useful information.
- **4A:** second set of relationship changes
- **Scene 5 – The Rapids**
  The boat must be carried around a set of rapids. The characters are attacked by a stag.
- **Scene 6 – The Second Mooring**
  The team pass a troubled night, with more worrying dreams.
- **6A:** third set of relationship changes

Day 3 – Exaltation

The confrontation with Curtius. Have the characters become like him? The resolution.

- **Scene 7 – The Sinking**
  The boat is destroyed by Dobunni attack. The team are captured and taken to Curtius's base.
- **Scene 8 – The Horror**
  Curtius's camp embodies their worst fears. They must confront and deal with him, one way or another.
- **Scene 9 – The Aftermath**
  Who survives, who stays, who makes it back to London?

Senovara's grindstone

Senovara has the power to ask Sulevia to curse a person or group of people, if she grinds her grindstone anticlockwise and spills some blood on it. It's up to you what effect this will have. It should be something that's within the bounds of natural possibility (eg. person falls sick; person drowns; weather becomes extremely bad) rather than supernatural (so, not person gets eaten by dragon, or explodes, or shrivels into a lifeless husk).

Senovara herself doesn't have control over the outcome: it is in the goddess's (ie. your) hands, and it may end up being more serious than she was intending.

The idea is that at the time and within the scenario, everyone believes that such magic works: but from a present-day rational perspective, we might think that it was coincidence or the power of suggestion.

Senovara can also ask Sulevia to heal people: you can manage this, if it comes up, as you think best for the story and the balance of the scenario.



(*image by user* Bazonka *on* Wikimedia Commons)

Pressuring the characters

In this scenario, you as GM represent the outside forces that are (mostly) working against the team's mission – making things difficult for them, and making them spend *Civitas* and so run the risk of being caught by barbarism. But as well as the active foes and forces that you'll be presenting to them, you can apply more subtle pressures upon them individually.

Marcus Constantinus is the nominal leader of the group, and likely to be the one most dedicated to the mission. You should take opportunities to undermine his leadership, if he provides them – it should feel to him like much of what he has learned over the years simply doesn't apply here. Don't always look to him first for answers – turn to the others, too. It may be that they will provide better solutions, and then it will be up to him to somehow keep his authority.

Gellius Pulcher is perhaps the most likely to descend into barbarism. He will be called upon to shed blood – lots of it – and he may find it hard to stay in control. His appearance, and his fighting strength, would make him revered among the British. Play on this – make it apparent that he could have a rather nice life here, if he chose to give in to the wild side of his nature, and to stay here rather than going back to London.

Felix is not so far from being a barbarian already – the skin of civilization is thin on him. He would only need to take two long steps into the shadows, and he could blend in perfectly with the British tribespeople. As a practical man, this may be the best way – or the only way – to stay alive, if the mission goes wrong. Make sure he's aware of this.

Things are different for **Senovara** – she is expecting to remain a barbarian, returning to her own tribe. But perhaps she might make a strong enough connection with these Romans that she would choose to live among them, afterwards. Or perhaps she will see benefit in remaining with the Dobunni rather than going back to her own people, who are likely to still undervalue her (especially if she doesn't gain the totem). Try to make her feel that her options are open.

More than one person can spend *Civitas* in a scene, if they both have good ideas for how to use it and you can think of a beneficial outcome from it. But this should probably be pretty rare before the climactic scenes.

Day 1 – Descent

The first day of travel is about the transition between the civilization of London and the barbarian lands of the British tribes. The contrast is between the order, predictability, cleanliness, and reason, of where they are coming from: and the chaos, senselessness, mud, and mysticism of where they are going.

None of this will be unfamiliar – the three soldiers have spent time in barbarous Germany, and this is not far from Senovara's home – but all the same, penetrating into an unknown space, where the familiar rules don't apply, is threatening and should make people wary.

Scene 1 – The Frontier

The characters receive their mission briefing. They take to the river, and proceed to a guardpost where it leaves Catuvellauni (now Roman) territory and enters that of the Dobunni.

Briefing

The Roman military camp has been quickly and efficiently built, on the outskirts of the British settlement of London. It has a square plan, with the headquarters tents in the centre.

The mood in the camp is relieved – to have received the surrender of the Catuvellauni is a big step in the pacification of Britain. But there are many wounded, receiving medical treatment: and many captives, being held pending the victory parade which will take place when Claudius Caesar arrives, in a couple of months' time. British civilians from the allied tribes and from those recently subjugated are allowed in for trading purposes, but closely monitored.

The briefing is delivered by the tribune Sextus Licinius, a member of the staff assisting the general: the closest thing that they have to an intelligence officer. He will tell the three soldier characters that Curtius went missing the day after the battle, during which he performed bravely and capably as normal: he took a boat, supplies, and money, plus perhaps some items that he had captured or looted from the defeated Catuvellauni. He had told friends that he was going up the river to be a king among the Dobunni, but they hadn't thought that he meant it seriously, so didn't report him until after it had happened. (They have since been severely disciplined.)

Licinius will then introduce Senovara and explain why she is present in this briefing: she is to be their interpreter, as she speaks both Latin and the Dobunni language.

The team will be issued with their equipment: a boat, food supplies and clean water, and some glassware and jewellery that might be useful for gifts or bribes. They have some British-style outer clothing to wear, so it's not quite so obvious that they are Romans. And of course they have their standard military kit: weapons, blankets, fire-making tools, etc.

The boat is powered by two rowers when going upstream, steered with the oars. It's not big enough to sleep on: they will need to make camp on the bank overnight. They should reach the Dobunni heartland on the day after tomorrow.

Journey

This part of the river is broad, slow, and lazy, and it passes through open farming land. The banks are muddy, with lots of reeds and rushes. Leaving London, it crosses Catuvellauni territory: occasional fisherpeople and waterfowlers, and others on the banks, may glare at the team in a hostile manner, but they won't cause any trouble.

Felix will know that in these waters you need someone at the front of the boat, peering down into the water, looking out for shallows marked by changes of colour. They can then instruct the rowers to steer one way or the other, to avoid the boat getting stuck.

The first part of the journey will pass without incident, as the characters get familiar with the boat and who will do what. Senovara as a priestess will not expect to be doing any rowing, for sure, and probably not anything else relating to the boat either. If the others try to get her to help with rowing, or any other physical task, when she clearly doesn't want to do so – either here at the start, or at any later point during the journey – then it will cost them (probably Marcus, if he's still in charge) a point of *Civitas*.

Frontier

As the trees start to thicken on its banks, the river turns slowly and reveals a large island midstream, with a channel on one side, a muddy morass on the other. To the channel side of the island is a guard post: this is the start of the Dobunni lands.

The guard post is a wooden hut on legs, commanding a view down the river. The team will realize that the guards must have seen the boat, if they're at all alert. There are two stout canoes tied up against the legs of the hut. There is no way of sneaking around it – to go up onto the bank would mean abandoning the boat. To try and rush past the guard post without stopping would make the boat very vulnerable to missile fire, as well as pursuit by the (faster) canoes.

If the team approach the guard post peacefully, they will be challenged and asked to state their business. The team will have to come up with some sort of plausible story.

(The jewellery etc that they have been given will not work for bribing these guards – it is intended for use on village chieftains and that kind of person, not for warriors.)

Whatever reason the team give that persuades the guards to let them through, they will also have to swear an oath – on their own gods and those of the Dobunni – while shedding some blood into the water, to obey the laws of the tribe and to cause no strife during their visit. Swearing this oath will cost a point of C*ivitas* to Marcus Constantinus – as it involves foreign gods, and also he has no intention of keeping it.

Another possible way through is to fight. There are six guards, armed with swords and slings. They can quite easily be defeated, though, if Gellius releases his inner beast: he won't himself know exactly what happens, but he will chase, terrify, and kill all enemy in a way that will be very disturbing for his colleagues to behold. And this will cost him a point of C*ivitas*.

The participants may think of other ways to get by the guard post: that's fine, use your judgement as to how well they work. (But do let them through eventually, as otherwise the scenario will end here.) In general it should cost someone C*ivitas*, unless they're very clever. And if there's any fighting, then give them a few light wounds.

Scene 2 – The Mudbank

Continuing up the river, the trees thicken and darken, so that the later-afternoon sun is only occasionally visible. Alder, willow, poplar and elm: half in the water, half out – sticky, black, and mucky. The sound is different here – muffled and mysterious. Splashes can be heard from up and down the river. Bird calls sound distant and faint.

Whoever is at the front of the boat will be busy calling out directions, as they spot mudbanks under the surface. But eventually either they will miss one, or the rowers will turn too sharply or not sharply enough, or the current will twitch the boat – and it will stick on an underwater lump of sandy mud.

The boat can't be pushed off the mud using the oars – that will just get them stuck as well. If people get out of the boat so that it can lift in the water and float off the mud, then they will get stuck themselves, and will need rescuing.

The most practical way of freeing the boat (suggest this to Felix if required) is if everyone moves to the rear, so that the front tips upwards. This should result in at least one person falling into the river and swallowing some of it.

2A: first set of relationship changes

As the team look for somewhere to spend the night, it starts raining heavily. They can discuss how their mission is going, and any issues that have arisen.

Run a set of relationship changes, as described above. Then have the participants decide how these changes are going to happen between their characters. Perhaps someone saved someone from drowning; perhaps someone gave good advice; perhaps someone showed a dark side of their character; perhaps someone was insufficiently respectful; etc.

Scene 3 – The First Mooring

Felix can advise as to a suitable spot for camp: a part of the bank where it's easy to climb out, and where the boat can be moored safely. It will need to be covered with a cloth overnight, so it doesn't fill up with rainwater too much. (Yes, the rain will continue for most of the night.)

They can find a place to light a small fire that won't be visible from far away, and then use it for warmth and for cooking something from their supplies. They will want to set watches overnight – probably Senovara will not be expected to take a watch, unless Marcus has for some reason become very trusting of her.

During the night, each of them will have a dream: hand the player the appropriate handout describing it.

(Note – these dreams, and those in **Scene 6** below, don't have any secret meaning or anything – the characters may wish to spend time talking or thinking about what they experienced, but try to keep the participants from trying to decode the dreams or to put them together like a puzzle or something.)

Day 2 – Abyss

This part of the journey is about the trials of the forest. This terrible wild landscape will stretch and scratch at the intruders, and force them to confront truths about themselves – and about each other.

The purpose of these scenes is to pressure the characters into needing each other, for good or ill, in order to continue the mission.



(*Image by Robert Pastryk from Pixabay*)

Scene 4 – The Hunters

The rain has stopped at last, and as the team are preparing to strike camp, a Dobunni hunting party – a father and teenage son – stumble across them. This pair have come down to the river to catch fowl still on the nest, and are not expecting trouble.

If Felix is actively scouting the area around the camp, then he will hear the hunters coming, and the team can choose to pack quickly, take to the water, and avoid a confrontation. (Although they will still be spotted.)

Otherwise, the hunters and the team will discover each other at the same time, at close range. The hunters will be truculent at first ("Who are you, and what are you doing in our woods?"), but once they see what they're dealing with, they will seek to retreat peacefully, or to flee if not allowed to do that.

The team can easily kill the two if they wish. Or they can almost as easily capture them, for interrogation presumably. They are called Gove and Iolo. They are not cowards, and they recognize that these people are enemies: so to get them to give more than their names will probably be quite unpleasant and will cost a point of *Civitas*.

They can roughly describe the fortified camp, Dun Bagon, which is the Dobunni capital, although they have not been there often or recently: a good few hundred people live there, or around it. They have heard that there is a new king, who killed the old king, and who also killed the god Latis and took over his shrine, and is now ruling from there. The shrine is near the river bank above a waterfall that passes between two ancient oaks. It is very defensible, and maybe a couple of dozen men could be stationed there.

Senovara will know of Latis as the forest god, who the Dobunni hold particularly as their patron. What exactly it might mean for Curtius to have 'killed' him, she does not know: but it sounds deeply worrying.

4A: second set of relationship changes

There is a quiet section of river, winding between thick trees. It looks like good water for fishing. The characters may wish to reflect on what they've learned about Curtius, and on their dreams of the night.

Run another set of relationship changes. Then have the participants decide how these changes are going to happen between their characters.

Scene 5 – The Rapids

The river is considerably rougher and faster, by now, as the ground rises towards the hills. It thrashes noisily around rocks, and rowing is hard work.

Around the middle of the day, the team can see up ahead a set of rapids. It will not be possible to row through them, they are too steep and rocky. The boat will have to be taken to the bank and carried up and around, to the next stretch of calmer water.

This is a strenuous and laborious process, because the banks are thick with bushes. Swords can be used as machetes to clear a path. It takes three people to carry the boat safely while moving.

At just the least convenient moment, a large stag crashes out of a thicket. Its eyes are wild, and it's drenched in sweat. It will charge whoever is nearest, seeking to gore with its antlers, and to trample anyone who falls.

Senovara and Felix will know that this is not at all the right season for stags to be aggressive. And Senovara will know that the stag is the sacred animal of Latis.

The stag can be killed quite straightforwardly once the team are able to deploy weapons against it. But it should probably be able to cause some injuries while they are putting the boat down safely, etc. (Or if they just drop the boat, then it will be damaged, and will leak when it gets back in the river. Someone will need to keep baling it out.)

Scene 6 – The Second Mooring

Heavy rain returns, and as darkness descends, the team need to moor and camp for the night again. The trees are thicker here, and branches can be pulled together to make a rough shelter. It's hard work keeping the fire alight, with so much damp in the wood and in the air.

As last night, they are troubled by dreams. Give each participant the corresponding dream text.

6A: third set of relationship changes

In the morning it's still raining, but warm and sticky. Assuming Curtius is based at the former shrine of Latis, that should be only half a day away now. The team will probably take to the water with a mix of anticipation and dread.

Run another set of relationship changes. Then have the participants decide how these changes are going to happen between their characters.



(*image by user Angel*123 *on goodfon.com*)

Day 3 – Exaltation

The climax and resolution of the mission – the confrontation with Curtius. Have the characters still got the will and capability to carry out their task? Or have they, like him, succumbed to the lure of the forest?

The hope is that by the end, everyone has the resolution that they wish for their own character, and the story feels like it's complete.

Scene 7 – The Sinking

The morning is dull and dark grey, promising rain. The river here is faster and narrower, and rowing is harder work. If the trees and bushes weren't clustered so thickly and the ground so uneven, it would be quicker to walk.

The team are concentrating on shoving the boat through the water, while it passes through a cleft between two hillsides. They are not expecting a large rock

to come crashing down from above, smashing a hole clear through the bottom of the boat: but that is what happens.

Everyone is thrown into the turbulent water, and they have to struggle to save themselves and each other. The east bank is a sheer cliff, so they struggle their way to the west bank and haul themselves out of the river. They have their personal possessions, and their weapons. You can give them some injuries – maybe have one of them temporarily unconscious after banging their head on a rock – if you feel that will help with the drama.

As soon as they reach the bank, they are surrounded by Dobunni warriors – about twenty of them. It was they who dropped the rock from the clifftop, and now they are going to capture the team and take them to Curtius.

The team can try and fight, and they will kill several, but eventually they will be overwhelmed by sheer numbers.

They can try to flee, but they will be caught: the undergrowth is dense, and these people know it well.

They can try to persuade or bribe their way out of capture: this will not work. The leader of the Dobunni band, named Drust, a grizzled veteran warrior, is clearly deeply scared of Curtius. The others also show fear, mingled with reverence, when the Roman renegade is referred to. They talk of him as a chief, a king, even a god. All of them wear a totem that neither Senovara nor Felix nor the Romans recognize: the foot of a deer and an eagle's feather, bound together with what looks like a dried strip of intestine.

The team will have their hands tied and weapons confiscated, and they will be marched at swordpoint up the hillside, towards the (former) grove of Latis. By now the heavy clouds are turning brown, and distant muffled rumbles of thunder can be heard.

Scene 8 – The Horror

The path leads up alongside the waterfall. If any of the team try to break away from capture, this will not be successful.

The grove itself is a place of horror – perhaps especially to Senovara, who knows the usual tranquillity and power that Latis brings. Here there is still power, but of a very different kind.

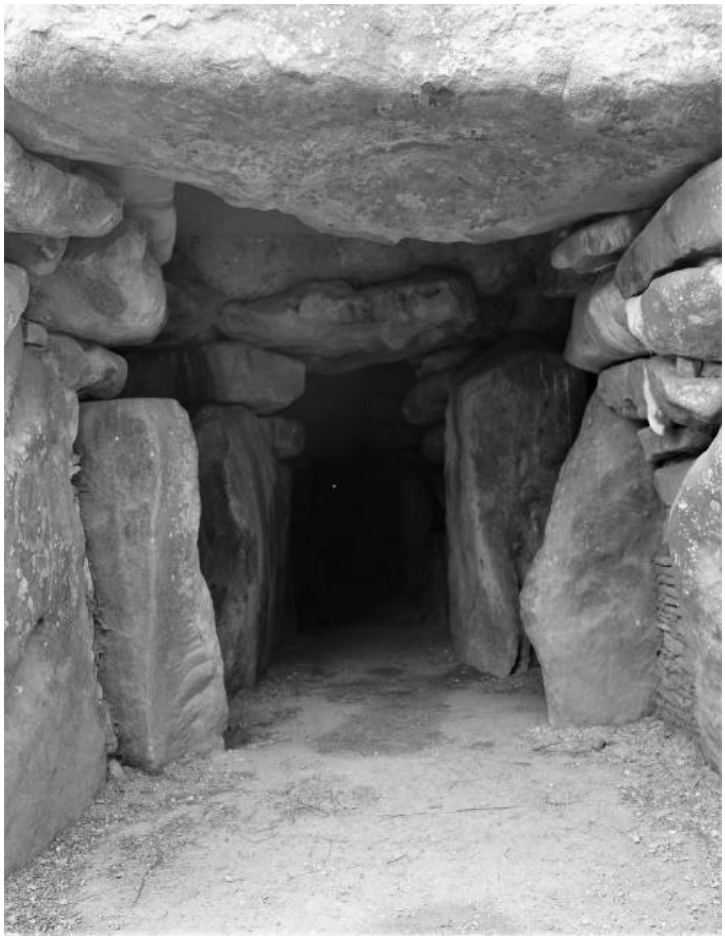
The stone altar to Latis, central in the cleared area between the trees, is drenched in black sticky blood, with thick clots and what look like internal

organs spread across and around it. The clearing is guarded by a ring of severed heads, each mounted on a tall pole sticking in the ground – their mouths have been sewn shut, and their eyeballs removed.

Off to one side, a man has been crucified – that traditional Roman method of execution. He hangs from the wooden crosspiece – still breathing, but looking like this will not be so for long.

(Feel free to add further gruesome and revolting details to the scene, if you think the participants will appreciate it.)

Behind the altar is a long barrow – a mound of earth, hollow inside, usually with a central rock-lined chamber. These structures are found across Britannia and elsewhere (although not in Germany) – they were left by the ancients, built thousands of years ago, before Rome's foundation even. They are places where gods are buried: and those who enter will suffer terrible curses, if they don't have the appropriate religious protection. The entrance to the barrow is screened with hanging cloths.



(*image by* D M Wilmot *on geography.org.uk*)

The team are tied up together, against the horrible altar. They are told that they must wait until Curtius wishes to see them. They are given water, and a little dried meat to eat. (They may be wary as to what kind of meat it is… but it's venison.)

The storm has fully brewed now, with lightning brilliantly piercing the blackened afternoon sky, and rain coming down in heavy lumps. The Dobunni warriors take cover under rough shelters built under the nearby trees, leaving the team at the mercy of the elements.

Up the hill a way, a tall tree is struck by lightning, and burns briefly. Taranis, god of the storm – known to the Romans as Zeus – is angry, as well he might be.

Eventually, via some unseen signal, Curtius shows his readiness. Drust and two others prod the team upright and towards the entrance to the barrow. They will laugh and ridicule any attempts to say prayers of protection, etc – "your gods cannot help you here!" – but it's clear that they are terrified themselves.

Inside, a short passage leads into near-darkness – it looks like a shaft in the roof of the inner chamber admits a certain amount of greyish light, but that's it. It takes a while for eyes to adjust.

Within is Junius Curtius, in deep shadow, at the back of the chamber, seated on what looks like a pile of skins. The team can just about see that he's a big and strong man, with a shaved head. Around his waist is a sword.

To Curtius's right, something gleams when the light catches it – it's a boar's skull, with thin gold plates fastened onto it, which somehow give it the impression of having human features. It is clearly a religious item of some sort.

Talking with Curtius

Curtius is quite mad (perhaps cursed by the gods he has offended), although this should not be apparent at first – he is lucid. He has two conflicting urges that will drive his conversation. The first urge is to persuade the team to join with him and work with him (as his assistants, naturally). He feels that a handful of smart and civilized people could very quickly take over this whole region, and live like gods. The start that he's made by himself, in just a couple of months, is impressive – imagine what they could do together.

This will mostly be aimed at his old comrade Marcus Constantinus, probably, unless he has shown himself to be hostile. But Curtius will make sure to make each of the others feel that they too would have a valued place in this rulership.

If it looks like this line of argument is working too well, though, then you can undercut it. Curtius's second urge when speaking is to make people fear him and his intelligence and strength and power – and this will come to appear megalomaniacal. It should be clear that agreeing to his offer means agreeing to his divine status.

Possible outcomes

The characters are free to choose their own ending – meeting Curtius is where the railroading stops. They should be guided by their current level of C*ivitas* – so for example if someone still has lots of C*ivitas* left, then it doesn't really make sense for them to stay and become a god. Or if they don't have any left and are now a de facto barbarian, then going back to London to complete the mission probably won't be appropriate. Hopefully their feeling about their character's motivation will have been developing as the scenario has progressed.

Here are some possibilities, although perhaps your participants may come up with something different again.

(It's important that if anyone wants their character to die during this climax, that should be possible – find a way to make it happen.)

Of course it is also possible that some may choose one option, and others a different one – that's entirely OK. They may fight each other to try and reach agreement, but Curtius will not get involved.

Accepting Curtius's offer – this will be celebrated with a grand feast. Everyone is happy, Curtius is annoyingly grandiose but tolerable, and all goes well. (Until next year, when the Romans will send a large army through here, devastating everything.)

If some of the team accept while others refuse, Curtius will order that the refusers be crucified, there and then. They can try and **escape** this fate, and will succeed in this if they pay a point of C*ivitas*. They will eventually make it back to London to report.

Trying to persuade Curtius to surrender – this will not succeed.

Fighting Curtius – it's important to do this within the chamber, as if it happens outside, the Dobunni will defend their god-king and the team will have no chance of success. A good plan, probably also involving a point of C*ivitas*, will find a way to get the hands of at least one of them untied. (For example, one

distracts Curtius by seducing him or by wanting to hear more of his theories about life, while another rubs their ropes upon an edge of stone.)

Curtius will resist being captured, and so if they try to do this, it will probably just end up in a fight, unless they have a very clever idea for incapacitating him.

In that case (or if they just attack him without any intention of capturing him) Curtius is a highly capable warrior, and driven hard by his madness. If the team are at full capacity, then they should be able to defeat him, although one of them may be killed in the process. If they are divided or weakened, then it might need a point of C*ivitas* to be spent.

After killing or capturing Curtius – the Dobunni will not try and interfere with the team, who have proven their divine status by defeating the former god. In fact, they will attempt to worship them, if the team allow it.

The team have the choice of taking Curtius (or his head) back to London, or staying here and being gods. Or heading off into the forest to find their own fate / live as hermits, etc. They can split, of course. A live captured Curtius will need at least two people to take him back to London successfully: his head only needs one person.

Scene 9 – The Aftermath

A brief wrapup for each character.

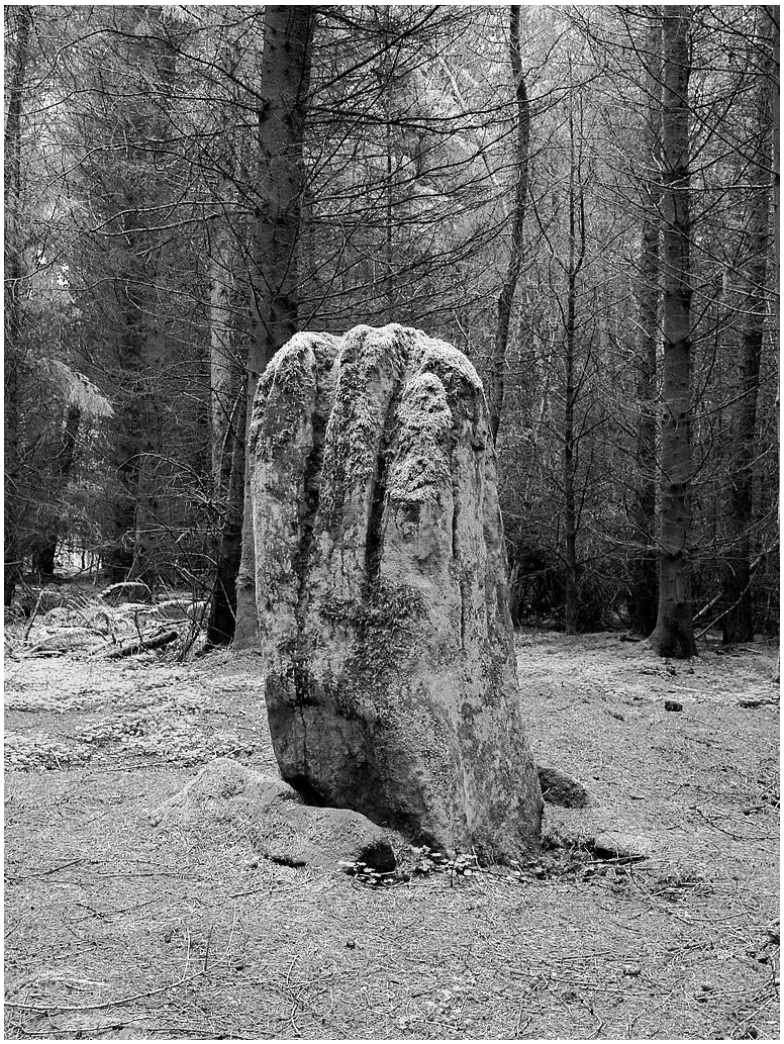
People who go back to London – the journey is relatively uneventful. Maybe they steal a Dobunni boat, and it's a lot easier going downriver than up. They will have the opportunity to recover or even gain C*ivitas*, here in the bustling Roman camp.

> **… if without Curtius** – they are seen as cowardly incompetents, but not punished.
>
> **… if with Curtius's head** – they are received as heroes. The soldiers are promoted, Senovara wins advantageous trading concessions for the Catuvellauni (although she herself will now be profoundly mistrusted by her tribespeople).
>
> **… if with Curtius as captive** – the same, and they get to watch Curtius being crucified.
>
> **… if with the boar's skull totem** – Senovara will gain great respect and admiration if she can restore this to the Catuvellauni priesthood. If not

she but one of the Romans has it, then their commander Aulus Plautius will take it as tribute to be shown in the victory parade when Claudius Caesar arrives later in the summer.

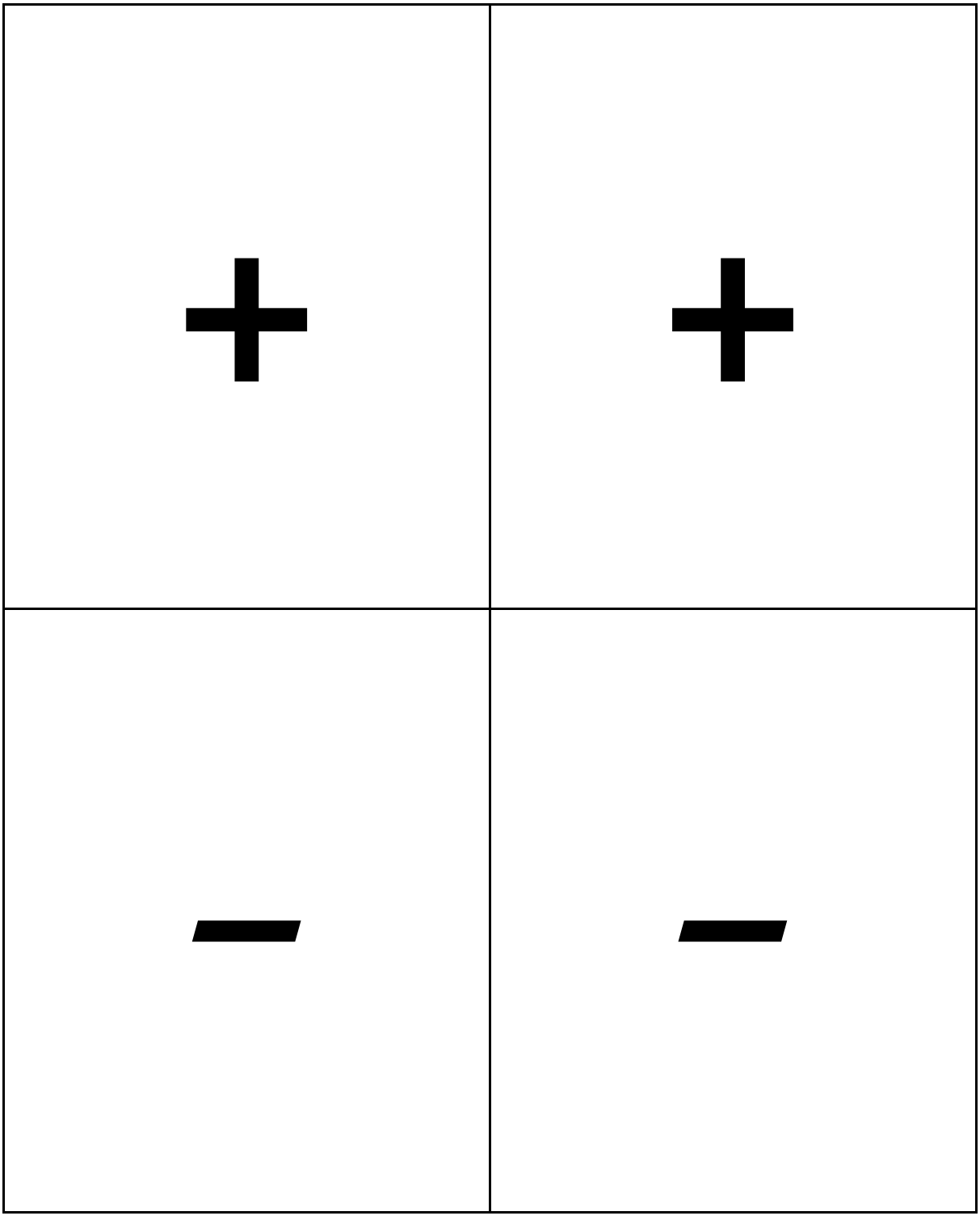
People who stay with Curtius as assistants – have what is probably a tremendously enjoyable time, apart from having to deal with Curtius's increasing insanity. Not just this Dobunni warband here at the shrine, but the whole tribe of a few thousand people, obey his every wish: it's a nice setup. These people will lose all traces of C*ivitas*, if they haven't already.

People who decide to live wild in the forest – you can decide together how successful you think this is going to be, and how long it might last. The characters don't know this, but it is only a matter of time before Roman armies sweep through this whole part of the island, and the only way to avoid them will be to flee to a remote region.



(*image by Andrew Curtis on geograph.org.uk*)

Relationship cards



Background for participants

Rome first invaded Britain in 55 BCE – before it was an empire. Julius Caesar, in the process of conquering Gaul, tried to subdue this wild northern island whose people were supporting his opponents. He achieved the submission of the southeastern corner, as far in as London; and installed a client king who paid regular tribute to Rome.

Our story takes place nearly a century later – in 43 CE, in the reign of the Emperor Claudius. A belligerent tribe from further inland, the Catuvellauni, had gained power over the Roman client tribes of the southeast. Valuable tribute was under threat – and something had to be done.

A large Roman army of four legions, supported by at least as many auxiliary troops, crossed the Channel in May 43 under the command of Aulus Plautius. They were met with fierce resistance, but pushed the British barbarians back, eventually achieving a decisive victory at the Battle of the Medway. The two Catuvellauni brother-kings – Togodumnus and Caratacus – were captured, and the Romans made London their base for what was expected to be further expansion. This time, the British would not be left as allies or clients: they would be conquered, and made into subjects or slaves.

We begin the scenario in London – a busy military encampment. It's July 43. Aulus Plautius expects to invite Emperor Claudius to visit, in September: at which point this will officially become the Roman province of Britannia. Before that happens, though, there is a little local awkwardness which should really be cleared up – before it becomes an embarrassment.

After the Battle of the Medway, Junius Curtius, a senior officer in the Legio II Augusta, deserted the army. He fled up the River Thames, into the wild and dark forests that house a tribe called the Dobunni. It is rumoured that Curtius has set himself up as a local god-king among these savage and credulous people. This cannot be allowed to persist.

The army is not yet ready to mount an attack on the Dobunni, or the other inland tribes: it needs recovery time. But the longer Curtius remains in his forest, lording it over his credulous barbarian subjects, the worse it looks for Rome. A special team of skilled persons has been assembled to travel up the river, and to confront Curtius. And to come back either with him as prisoner – or with his head.



(*image from the* H*ubbard Collection on picryl.com*)

The woods of the north spark fear and uncertainty in the hearts of even the bravest Romans. It's well known that the British tribes draw mystical strength from their damp, grey forests – that their holy people can call on powers that are horrifyingly alien to civilized folk.

Fortunately, a local priestess, a member of the Catuvellauni's surrender delegation, will be travelling with the team – to act as interpreter, and perhaps to also provide some spiritual protection. If she can be trusted, that is; of course.

Character summaries

Marcus Constantinus (*Civitas*: 3) is a veteran commander of auxiliary troops, who served under Curtius in Germany. From Parma in northern Italy, he is now a junior centurion in the Legio II Augusta. He is three months away from retirement.
His mission goals are: to persuade Curtius to surrender himself. To negotiate ways out of trouble along the journey.
He will suit a player who's happy to take the lead and make decisions.

Felix (*Civitas*: 2) is a German, an auxiliary soldier (ie. not a 'legionary'), who works as a scout around the advancing army: reconnoitring terrain, spying on enemy movements, etc. He is also expert with a slingshot.
His mission goals are: to use woodcraft and rivercraft to get the team in and out safely. To gather information about the Dobunni and their fighting qualities.
He will suit a player who wants to be inventive and to avoid responsibility.

Gellius Pulcher (*Civitas*: 4) is a legionary in the Legio II Augusta: a Roman citizen of humble birth. He is a superb physical specimen, and a hardened fighter. Occasionally he goes into terrifying battle-rages.
His mission goals are: to defend the team against attackers. To kill Curtius, if he refuses to return with them.
He will suit a player who doesn't mind doing awful things to fellow-humans.

Senovara (*Civitas*: 0, *but she has other cool stuff instead*) is British, a priestess of Sulevia, goddess of healing and also of cursing. She was part of the Catuvellauni surrender delegation, and has been assigned to this mission as a sign of their good faith as new allies of Rome.
Her mission goals are: to translate for the team and to act as intermediary with locals. And, secretly, to recover a Catuvellauni sacred item that Curtius stole.
She will suit a player who can embrace mysticism and magic.

Character briefing – Felix

You are a member of the Sicambri tribe, from the banks of the northern Rhine. Your grandfather was a blue-skinned barbarian warrior, fighting the Romans for his freedom – and being defeated by them. Your people are now a peaceful ally of Rome – a buffer against the wilder tribes further to the east – and many of the young men, like yourself, have signed up with the Roman army. You are about 30 years old. You speak your native Sicambri language and also Latin, both fluently.

The Romans consider your people to be still rather barbarous, and won't let you become legionaries – but you are very useful as auxiliary troops. You yourself are a skilled scout, specializing in reconnoitring enemy positions, studying terrain and weather advantages, and so on. You have more than earned your pay.

Up until this campaign, you'd only served in Germany – but at the start of the year, your unit was shipped over to Britain, together with four legions and a host of other auxiliaries, to suppress the rebellious Catuvellauni tribe and eventually create a regular Roman province here. You were excited – seeing the world was a big part of why you joined up. Southern Britain is not that much different from northern Germany… but that's good, because it means your woodcraft and rivercraft skills are still applicable. The dark, wet, dangerous forests here are much like those back at home.

You are also skilled with a slingshot – as a boy, you used to hunt birds with it. These days it comes in useful as a nearly-

silent way to kill or disable an enemy, while sneaking about. You suspect it will be needed, on this mission.

To have become accepted as a king by a wild tribe, this fellow Curtius must be quite formidable. He would have had to kill his way to the top, probably. And for sure he won't let go of the power he wields without a fight. And if the Dobunni are anything like the German tribes, then they will fight to the death for him – as long as they retain belief in his divine power.

You are a devotee of the goddess Sandraudiga, 'she who dyes the sand red': her dwelling is an ancient carved stone on the bank of the river near your home. She is a fierce force for justice, but also a loving mother. The Romans think that she is just a local name for Juno, the queen of the gods: but you know better.

Marcus Constantinus: seems like a typical grim old centurion. Probably has no sense of humour at all. But hopefully he's clever, at least.

Gellius Pulcher: a wonderfully handsome physical specimen. If all Romans looked like that, they would have conquered the world by now.

Senovara: as a priestess, you automatically respect her. The gods are strange, over here in Britain,so it's good to have someone with you who knows them.

Civitas: O O
[check off a circle each time you spend a point]

Character briefing – Gellius Pulcher

You were born a Roman citizen. Back in the glorious times of the Republic of Rome, the army was all made up of citizens, but these days they are quite unusual in its ranks: most Roman citizens live comfortably enough that a career of fighting and discipline is not appealing. You are different. Your strong shield-arm is valued by your comrades, and your swift blade even more so.

Your family are humble: your father was a builder, helping to construct the great monuments of the city, as well as the cramped apartment blocks where the real people live. But he fell from a high piece of scaffolding, and died, leaving your family living off the city's dole. Having become a legionary in the Legio II Augusta, you send money back, to help your mother and your young sister – you don't want them to have to wash clothes, or do needlework, or anything worse.

As a boy you were always the strongest and fastest among your friends, and when you got older, your looks were also frequently complemented. If you can stay fit and healthy, perhaps you'll be able to make a good marriage, after your army service is done – although that's a long way off yet. You are about 25 years old, and the only language you speak is Latin.

You first served in Germany, on the Rhine, which was rather peaceful and boring – but useful for training in the craft of combat. But coming to Britain this year has been wonderful! It's been fight after fight, finishing with the conclusive Battle of the Medway. You've repeatedly distinguished yourself for

bravery and skill. Sometimes, during a fight you feel as though you lose control – you rise above your body, somehow, and just watch as it continues its work of slashing and stabbing. You are a little afraid of this phenomenon. But for sure it's effective.

You have with you a pendant that your mother gave you, an old stone carving of your household god (who you just call 'Lar', and who has no gender). Although the god is mostly back in Rome looking after your family, it still protects you out here in the barbarian lands. You have more faith in Lar than you do in the grand gods (Jupiter, etc), who are unlikely to be very concerned about ordinary people like you.

Marcus Constantinus: a provincial Italian, but an experienced soldier. He has the reputation of being cautious. Maybe not as brave as a real Roman would be.

Felix: a sneaky German who will never be a real soldier. You suppose his kind are useful, but you're glad you don't have to spend too much time with them.

Senovara: a creepy barbarian priestess – she probably has all sorts of dark powers. You wonder if you might have killed some of her friends or relatives, in the big battle.

Civitas: O O O O
[check off a circle each time you spend a point]

Character briefing – Marcus Constantinus

You are Italian, but not Roman: you grew up on a farm near the city of Parma in the north of the peninsula. You had no wish to work as a farmer all your life, and the army provided a path to Roman citizenship: you just had to serve for twenty years, and you would retire as a citizen with a grant of land and a generous pension. Those twenty years, all spent with the Legio II Augusta, are nearly complete: the conquest of Britain is your last campaign. You are aged about 40. You speak Latin, and a few pieces of Germanic tongues (mainly swearwords)

Most of your career has been spent in defence of the Roman provinces of Germania Superior and Inferior – repelling German barbarian attacks from across the Rhine, and occasionally crossing it yourselves to punish particularly troublesome tribes. You've done well, without distinguishing yourself remarkably, and have risen to the rank of fourth centurion within the legion.

You've been assigned to this mission because you know Curtius, the rebel soldier. You were comrades – friends, even – once. He joined the legion a little after you, but seemed to get promoted rather faster, thanks perhaps to his greater willingness to say what the officers wanted to hear. At the time of his defection, he was serving as a tribune, one of the most senior officers advising the legion commander.

Curtius was always cynical about Rome's 'mission to civilize' – he felt that it was perfectly fine for strong nations to enrich themselves at the expense of weak ones, and there was no need to put a moralistic face upon it. He was brave, but no more so than was required: he was always first in his own priorities. But he was a good soldier, and good comrade. You can't understand why he would turn his back on Rome in this strange way.

You pay due reverence to all the Roman gods, especially Apollo, who brings light. But to tell the truth, you are not especially religious. It seems to you that people usually have to do most of the work themselves, rather than hoping the gods will sort things out for them.

Felix: he seems like a capable scout. As a German, he can't really be relied upon, though. He's not much better than these British barbarians.

Gellius Pulcher: his intensity worries you. You've known plenty of keen young soldiers like him, and most of them got killed.

Senovara: you understand why she is necessary, but you don't trust her for a moment. She'd probably stab you as soon as your back was turned.

Civitas: O O O
[check off a circle each time you spend a point]

Character briefing – Senovara

You are a middle-ranking and experienced priestess of Sulevia, one of the most important gods of the Catuvellauni (and the other local tribes). She mostly heals, but she is also responsible for curses upon those who deserve them: and the role of your priesthood in the community is pretty similar. You are about 35 years old, and if you were better at pleasing the tribal rulers, you might have become high priestess by now. As it is, you're being sent upon this rather dangerous mission.

The Catuvellauni are in disgrace and in chaos, after having been heavily defeated by the Romans at the Battle of the Medway. The two brother-kings, Caratacus and Togodumnus, are captives. As part of a programme of desperate sucking-up to your conquerors to avoid further punishment, the tribe have offered your services as translator for the journey up the Thames to retrieve the rogue Roman commander Curtius. (You have experience of trading with the Dobunni – the neighbouring tribe whose territory it is – and can speak their language, as well as your own tongue and Latin, all fluently.)

You have no husband or children – you live for the goddess. Hopefully these Romans will fear your status as a priestess, and not try to disrespect you. If they do, well: you know a way to make them regret it. You have a grindstone with you, which you use to grind flour each day. If you grind clockwise, it just makes normal flour: but if you grind anticlockwise and spill some blood onto the stone, that's what lets you call the goddess's curse. Your own blood: or, for a more powerful curse, someone else's.

You are also an experienced healer, of course, with Sulevia's divine help. Although, to call upon her while you bind the wounds of these Roman soldiers will feel strange… they are your people's conquerors and masters, but they are still the enemies of your land.

There is a secret reason, that the Romans don't know about, for you to be on this mission. Curtius stole an item sacred to Woden from your tribe when the kings were captured, after the big battle. A boar's skull totem, with gold plates that give it human facial features. If you can retrieve it, then perhaps your people will not remain subject to these invaders forever.

You are scared of this Curtius. The Dobunni are wild and savage; and he must be even more so, if he has quickly gained leadership among them. He has the Roman gods watching over him, and he has Woden's boar skull. You hope that these three soldiers have a good plan for dealing with him – otherwise, this will turn into a suicide mission.

Marcus Constantinus: the leader of the team, he seems calm and reasonable, at least. But will he listen to you? He will have to learn to do so, or you'll all be killed.

Felix: a tribesman, not so very different from your own people. He's Roman on the surface. But how German is he, underneath? When things get tough, you'll all find out.

Gellius Pulcher: he looks like an idealized Roman superman. And apparently is a vicious and bloodthirsty warrior. You'll need to be wary of him.

Civitas: [none]

Felix –
dream at the first mooring

You are swimming in your own river, the gentle Hurler, tributary of the mighty Rhine. The water is warm and clear. Fish swim around you, some with human-like faces. Through the water you can hear the muffled sounds of fighting, on the bank: but it is none of your concern. Those who must fight, will fight. She who dyes the sand red will have her tribute.

There is blood in the water, now: it swirls and glistens around you. You see that the fish are drinking it. You know that you must not do the same. You will have to leave the water, back out into the cold air. You don't want to – but then a hooked spear catches you in your side, and you are pulled painfully towards the surface. You wake suddenly, clutching yourself where the spear struck you.

Felix –
dream at the second mooring

You're scouting in the forest – it's wet and dark. There are noises all around you – dripping water, birds, insects. Nothing unusual. You can see there's a clearing ahead, which is lighter – you approach cautiously. There's a great upright stone in the middle, carved with shapes and designs that you don't recognize. You don't dare to enter the clearing. You should go back and report this to your commander, but you don't want to leave. The stone holds your gaze.

Your friend and comrade Sennus is with you – he who died during the first war against the Bructeri. His leg is missing, where that huge barbarian chopped it off. You offer him your shoulder to lean on. "This is all a *helinos*, isn't it, Felix?" he says. You agree, slightly nervously because you have never heard that word before and don't know what it means. But it seems rude to question a dead man. "It's yours if you want it, and so am I," Sennus adds, as he starts to crumble away into dust.

Gellius Pulcher –
dream at the first mooring

You are with friends, back in Rome, drinking and talking. You are edgy and anxious – it is nearly time to leave. You need to get back home, to make sure that you've packed everything that you will need. But your friends want to keep talking with you. You make an excuse and slip out of the bar.

The streets are like a maze. You go into your old school, where you were taught how to read and write by an ancient Greek slave called Paulides: it smells of dust and oil. Your mother and sister are here, and all your possessions are spread around the room. You scramble to get them into your backpack, but you keep finding more and more things, and time is running short. There's a dog, come in from the street, and it keeps getting under your feet. You try to avoid it, but you tread heavily on it, and it yelps piteously. Your sister starts to cry, and so do you.

Gellius Pulcher –
dream at the second mooring

There's someone standing right behind you. You can feel how terribly cold their body is, even through your armour. You don't dare to turn around, for fear that their face will be the same as yours.

You're at the games, where two terribly tired gladiators are battling. The netman is Felix. His trident is drenched and dripping blood, so that he can barely hold onto it. The other man wears a Corinthian helmet, covering his face. As he advances and raises his sword for the killing blow, you realize that his face is also yours. You are alone in the arena, with just crows around you, black-feathered and flapping. You are small, they are large.

Marcus Constantinus – dream at the first mooring

You are hunting, in the woodland near to your family's farm. You are young and strong. It's a hot, sunny day. You've been tracking a she-deer, following her trail between the tall trees. You come to a clearing, where the sunlight shines down brightly. The deer is there, waiting for you, her head turned expectantly. You throw your spear, and catch her cleanly in the throat: blood spurts out, as she sinks to the ground. Birds' wings rattle among the treetops.

You start to gut the deer, but realize to your horror that she was pregnant – and close to giving birth. This must be the wrong season for hunting she-deer. The infant is still squirming inside – you cut it out of her. You wipe it clean, as it tries to stagger to its feet. But surely it's too young to survive, with no mother.

Marcus Constantinus – dream at the second mooring

It's Germany, a barbarian incursion across the river. You are with your men, holding the line, shields locked together. Alongside you is Curtius – tall and strong. Wild-eyed blue-painted savages throw themselves against your line, and pile up dead at your feet. Curtius smiles at you, and turns and walks away. You follow him, and the fighting recedes behind you.

It's not Curtius you're following, it's your father. He's sitting under a poplar tree, with a skin of good wine. You brought in the harvest together. The wine is cool, and the shade is refreshing. Your father is an old man, older than you remember him. You look at the back of your hand, and see wrinkles and scars, your arm is thin and bony: you realize that you are old, too.

Senovara –
dream at the first mooring

You are herding sheep on a high hillside. The weather is cold and wet, and it's time to gather them together to go back down to the village. One of the sheep has gone into a dark cave – you can hear it bleating from within. You follow it. The path slopes steeply downwards. Somehow you can see, despite the darkness. Water is running down the walls – it is warm, when you touch your hand to it. You taste it – it is blood.

The sheep is now a tall, strong deer, one of the four stags that draw the chariot of Latis – a major god of this part of Britain. Its horns are golden and glowing. You are a small child, and you start crying, as the stag looks at you. There is a fire around you, but it does not burn you.

Senovara –
dream at the second mooring

You quite often dream of your initiation ordeal – the test that you had to undergo to become a priestess. But this time is different.

You're in the stone box full of water, with just your nose and mouth above the surface. It's cold, but not too cold. The night sky fills your view. You can smell the aromatic smoke of the herbs sacred to Sulevia. But something's wrong – the stars are circling across the sky, much too quickly. The moon zips from one side to the other. It's as though a month of nights is passing in one night.

You sit up, breaking the ritual. Now you will never be a priestess! Your mother's body is spread across the sky, the stars are dots on her skin. Her tears are the rain. You are flying up to be with her. The air is cold and choking – you wake suddenly, shivering uncontrollably.