

Synopsis for “*Druidess*” by Michael Delving

As the film opens, we here a disembodied voice say, “I am Aulus Hirtius, and I am ... *a Roman!*”

These bitter words are spoken by one of Julius Caesar’s most trusted lieutenants, as he describes the scene at the fall of Alesia in 68 B.C., where Caesar broke the back of the Celts and captured their warrior-leader, Vercingetorix.

But when we first see Aulus, he is not in the command tent, but marching in the ranks with the other legionaries. It seems Caesar had appropriated Aulus’ written accounts of the years of battle as Caesar’s own works, so that their popularity can aid his political ambitions back in Rome. Caesar attempts reconciliation with Aulus, even offering him his own small command, but Aulus refuses. It’s not until Aulus witnesses an unsuccessful Roman attack across a marshy ravine, that he decides he wants to be a part of the action.

Soon after, his command is sent

We leave the unsatisfied Celt warriors, as the Romans begin to set out, under Caesar’s command, to counterattack, and to liberate Aulus if they come across him. Their forces are massive, well-organized and led with superior skill. They march up to a wide prairie, where the wild Celtic horde waits on the other side. It seems nothing would be able to stop the Romans, as they form up and begin to advance. Opposite them the Celts grow wilder, some of the warriors even breaking ranks to charge down singly or in twos and threes, the greater the glory when they die. Inexorably, the Romans advance, until the entire Celtic army charges, under the leadership of Bellatrix. Another great battle ensues, and the Celts come close to winning. But the cool generalship of Caesar and the training of the legions makes them victorious. The Celts retreat, losing many, and the Romans push on, leaving the area occupied but peaceful – for now.

During the battle, Aulus, still recovering, hallucinates about the previous battle. When he awakens, he finds Layessa tending to his wounds. They begin a series of deeply personal meetings, and he promises her he will not try to escape. She shows him the way of the Druids, her understanding of Nature, the healing of herbs, and all other mysteries of the woods. For so they appear to Aulus, magical, awe-striking, miraculous. In no time, he is able to walk, but he cannot leave, for angry Celt warriors stalk the outskirts of the Grove, waiting for a chance to slay him. He tries to explain to Layessa some of the benefits of Roman advancement, like buildings and iron, but she sees little in them. She knows of the millions that Rome has imprisoned as slaves, and the other millions of poor in Rome’s streets who exist only from the grain handouts provided by the State.

One bright misty morning, he finds her staring into a bowl of water. He asks, and she explains she is divining. She tells him what she sees: two enemies, both warriors from deeply religious lands (Suleman and Richard III), how they challenge each other with weapons, the Crusader sword that can cleave a metal mace, versus the Saracen scimitar that can slice through a pillow. She senses that one will try to heal the other.

“There is a place for mercy in warfare,” Aulus says spiritedly.

“How is your wound, then?” He grumbles a reply, and she laughs.

He asks about his own future. She declines to give it right then. “Too many variables obscure your future - your current situation, for example.” Instead, she foretells the future of Rome.

“Then you are doing me the favor I have already asked for, for Rome’s future is inescapably tied up with my own,” Aulus says.

“That is very close to the truth.” She describes the greatness of Rome, a crest soon to be reached, but soon after to wither and die. “You’ve made many enemies, from within and without. Yet, the greatest threat the Empire will ever face will come from a single man, whose impetus is not hate nor conquest, but love and compassion for others.” (meaning Jesus).

Through the coming days, as Roman soldiers attack relentlessly, they argue about each other’s warriors. “You think your legions are strong because they fight with perfect precision,” she asks, “because they will kill without thinking? I say our Celtic warriors are greater, because they will die for others, sacrifice themselves.”

“So they will die quicker,” he says softly.

“No. They will continue to fight until no one is left.”

He wants to understand her religion. “So you can use the information to your advantage, the more easily to defeat us?” Layessa asks.

“There are many within the reach of the Noble Tongue, who are not slaves, not imprisoned, and live better lives for our coming,” he replies. “What God do you serve? I see no image anywhere around.”

“Our goddess is the forest itself,” she replies.

After more days and more mysteries, Aulus asks her to come with him to fight those enemies of Rome. “You are the enemy,” she says at one point, and she refuses. “These people need me. I am teacher, healer, interposer between them and the Gods. I cannot leave them for –” “Even for the man you love?” “I am not in love with you. To love a man

that leads warriors to kill our townsfolk, the women and children of helpless villages? I could never love one such as you. Don't you care what will be said of you when you're gone?" "I will write my own history. They will read my words." "So foolish..." "Then you are destined to die with the rest of your savage race!" He storms off, angry, frustrated. We see her face in the dark, just as frustrated.

But still, he cannot leave her. Something is keeping him. After another terrible defeat, Bellatorix returns, now in hiding from the relentless Roman patrols (who somehow have never found this place, hidden by the Druids' magic). Aulus, for the love he carries for Layessa, explains to Bellatorix – only after an intense duel, where each could have killed the other – what the Celts are doing wrong in the war. He tries to teach them patience, and not to fight on the Roman's terms, but the Celts are a hard-headed lot. Eventually, they come around, and Layessa instructs them further, and promises them aid from the wind and weather.

More battles, short guerrilla actions where the Celts attack in small units and melt into the woods. One Roman overhears a Celt boasting around the fires, and reports to Caesar.

Caesar hears of the legend of a Druidess in the countryside, offering magic help and speaking with the Gods. The Romans are surprised that a female leads the Celts, but his personal Greek historian (a prisoner and virtual slave) tell them it is not the first time women have led them. "And even in the distant lands to the north, where the fierce Picts dwell, such female warrior-chieftains are not unheard of." But the soldiers see her as a devil, a demon. When the winter turns harsh and cruel, they blame it on her 'sorcery.' "I tell you, the weather is not controlled by some woman clad in rags, dancing in the middle of a forest!" Caesar shouts at them. "If it were, then all the priests and seers in all the temples of Rome would be completely useless - and that I cannot allow!"

They begin more pitched warfare. Certainly, the Celts have begun to learn how to fight. They no longer fall for Roman tricks like fake retreats, and are prepared when the Romans try to outflank them.

After one draw, Caesar offers a parlay, but he betrays them and has the leaders who arrive slain. Layessa suggests retaliation. The Celts then fight a rare pitched battle, and almost win but don't. Caesar again offers a parlay, but this time, in a circular glade surrounded by soaked leather hides strung on poles, she turns the table and has them attacked. Those that run through the hides suffer a burning contact poison, those that charge her, fall into pits.

Two are left, a Gaul auxiliary officer and a Roman centurion. "I must leave one of you alive, to take this warning back to Caesar. Which of you will it be?" The Gaul runs. "Well, I guess the choice is made." She points first at the Roman, bravely waiting, then at the Gaul, who is instantly cut down by hidden Celt bowmen. "Tell your General of war this: that he cannot win here in our land, because we will never stop fighting. And what is a country that never knows peace? Tell him he is in danger, not just here but in the streets of his own land. Tell him he has but five years left in his life. He should spend them in happier pursuits. Tell him that."

Aulus has watched all this, amazed at her courage and her insight. He whispers, "I know that man. Pateras Marcellus, a noble and honorable officer. You spared the right man." "You respect that man?" He nods his head. She looks at Aulus, oddly, then says slowly, "Seven years from now, you will be fighting a battle against other Romans. You will be leading a charge against a walled town, when you see that man fall. You will rush to save him, but you will be too late. For both of you..." She turns away and wanders off into the woods.

Caesar decides to change tactics. He begins to subdue the towns. Those that surrender, he leaves intact; those that oppose him, he ruthlessly burns to the ground. At this, Aulus finally breaks out and makes his way back to the Roman camp. He is welcomed as a returning hero ("Look, he even dressed like one to get away!"), but Caesar appraises him with a cautious eye. He is made to reaffirm his loyalty oath to Rome. Aulus watches grimly as Caesar plans more city attacks. He tries to talk the general out of it, but Caesar is firm. He shows a set of berries that will heal Caesar's constant back pain, and offers to eat two himself, to prove they are not poisoned.

The next day, Caesar is up and walking, but he attributes it to his prayers and a special offering to the Roman Gods. "For I have promised them a unique delicacy, dear Aulus – the head of the Druidess who opposes us."

The Roman assaults are constant, and they bring up more legions to put pressure on the Celts that remain. Even areas near the Sacred Grove come under attack, and the great Druid Amaigen falls trying to defend one of the giant burial mounds of their people (though his animals attacked and savagely wound many of the Romans before they too are cut down). Eventually, the Celts have only one option: they are told to surrender the Druidess and they will be spared. She agrees to sacrifice herself, and awaits them in the glade. In a calculated order to determine his friend's loyalty, Caesar sends Aulus to take her head. And he sends Croeteus to take Aulus' head if he disobeys.

The legionaries find her in the sacred woods, waiting patiently to be executed. At the last moment she sees it is Aulus who has come to have her killed, and the soldiers taunt her, saying they will take her head with them back to Rome. In horror, she runs around a large tree. When the soldiers catch up to her, her head is bowed, her face hidden from their eyes. Aulus cannot speak the words, but Croeteus orders them to throw. They hurl their javelins, piercing her, pinning her body violently to the tree. Croeteus takes off her head, wraps it in the top of her cloak – but the

bundle is taken away by Aulus. He glimpses down into the cloth – and sees Bellatrix! Aulus smiles and mumbles something about “...the greater warriors by far.”

The end of the story finds him offering the bloody bundle to Caesar, who cannot bear to look at it. Aulus tosses it into a nearby campfire. “She said you would not look upon her face,” Aulus lies, and Caesar winces from the accusation. “She will be right about the other predictions, too.” Caesar hangs his head in silent worry.

As with the beginning of the film, we see the Celtic village as we hear Aulus’ written words. “The provinces of Gaul are no longer the hotbed of revolt. The land is peaceful,” as the camera lingers over burned houses, abandoned fields, derelict carts. “Great Caesar,” he says with some hint of irony, “predicted only a few short seasons will pass until the land is fruitful and productive again. And so it will be, for was not Caesar right in all things?”

The image shifts to the empty Sacred Grove. “The forests are now merely a place where we Romans have yet to lay our roads and build our towns. We will do so, very soon. There are centuries of peaceful Roman rule to come, centuries of achievement ahead of us. Caesar has told me this personally.

“He also said that the religion of the Celts, the sorcerers called Druids, are no more. They have been eradicated from the earth, for our greater benefit. None are left. The forests are empty,” he says slowly, though the last image, the dancing Druidess in the shining glade, shows the truth that really lies in his heart.

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