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an imprint of **Prometheus Books**
Amherst, NY

Published 2009 by Pyr®, an imprint of Prometheus Books

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13 12 11 10 09 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Roberson, Chris.

End of the century / Chris Roberson.

p. cm.

ISBN 978-1-59102-697-6 (pbk. : acid-free paper)

1. London (England)—Fiction. 2. Time travel—Fiction. I. Title.

PS3618.O3165E63 2009

813'.6—dc22

2008046961

Printed in the United States on acid-free paper

for

Michael Moorcock,

Alan Moore,

and Kim Newman

Acknowledgments

IN THE CREATION OF THIS BOOK I am deeply indebted to Alan Beatts, for providing the crucial suggestion that brought the skyblades into focus; to Benito Cereno, for much needed Latin assistance; to Paul Cornell, whose excellent *British Summertime* helped suggest the structure of the present volume; to Lou Anders, for commissioning this monster when it was only a few bare paragraphs of synopsis and for accepting the final draft when it came in far more lengthy than estimated; and to my wife, Allison Baker, and our daughter, Georgia, for putting up with me during the months and years in which this story occupied so much of my attention.



CHAPTER ONE

Twilight

498 Anno Domini

IT WAS LATE MORNING when Galaad first caught sight of the city, looming in the east. The trip from Glevum should have taken six days, but with the winter's cold, it had taken him nearer ten. Ten days of icy bridges over sluggish streams, the ground hard and cold beneath his thin woolen blanket at night even when he went to the trouble of clearing away the snow, freezing rain sometimes falling from the unforgiving gray skies, and harsh winds blowing when it didn't. Had he ridden, he'd have made the journey in a fraction of the time, but he'd not been on a horse since the accident, and couldn't conscience doing so now.

Many of the hobnails from the soles of his *caligae* marching boots were missing, knocked loose and left along the roadside as signs of his passing, and those areas of his feet's skin not already thickened with calluses were now blistered, bloody, and tender. His left knee was swollen and sore from a fall two days before on an icy patch of road, but while the joint did not have a complete range of motion, it could support his full weight, though lances of pain shot up and down his leg when he did, so that he was able to continue, albeit with a pronounced limp.

The bundle on his back was lighter, if nothing else, now that he'd eaten nearly all the supplies of food he'd brought with him from his home in

Powys, though of course that meant that had he not reached his destination soon he'd have begun slowly to starve. But it was a point not worth dwelling upon, so Galaad pushed it from his thoughts.

Galaad had never before been this far from home. He'd been born in the municipality of Glevum in the kingdom of Powys, twenty-one years before, and had seldom strayed far from the banks of the river Sabrina. The western kingdoms had been largely spared the ravages of the Saeson invasion of Britannia, so that throughout most of his childhood, Galaad had known peace. By the time he was a full adult with a child of his own, the rest of the island knew peace as well, and had one man to thank for it. But the more Galaad's steps had brought him east, the more he saw upon the land the scars of the Saeson occupation.

In much of the west, the old order of the Romans had remained. The towns still survived, though their populations had diminished, tenants paid landlords, community farmlands were tended. But as Galaad had walked through regions where the war with the Saeson had been close at hand, it was clear that the public authority had collapsed. Towns stood abandoned, farms gone to seed and houses left to the elements. The remaining Roman nobility had fled across the channel to Gaul, ahead of the advancing Saeson hordes, while the peasantry had retreated to the rural areas of the west, watched over by former town magistrates who now styled themselves as landholders and kings.

But one man was bringing order back to the island, restoring authority and the rule of law. This was the same man who had driven the Saeson back to their huddled enclaves in the south and east, and established his court in the former Roman capital that lay between to hold the two groups of Saeson apart and to act as a bulwark against them for the rest of the island.

If any would know the meaning of Galaad's strange visions, the young man was convinced, it would be he. Perhaps then the phantom that haunted him could be laid to rest.

Limping, his feet blistered and bloody, his legs and back aching, Galaad approached the high city walls with a prayer in his heart. At the end of a long journey, he had finally reached *Caer Llundain*, home of the Count of Britannia and victor of Badon, the High King Artor.

Galaad, for his sins, did not know that his journey was only beginning.



Galaad's paternal grandfather had been to *Caer Llundain*, then still called *Londinium*, before the *Saeson* revolt and the migrations of the nobility to Gaul, when the city was still crowded with Roman citizens from all over the empire. Ships had sailed up and down the river *Tamesa*, bringing trade and traders from Gaul, *Hibernia*, and the *Middle Sea*, importing wine and textiles, exporting tin and silver. The capital's streets bustled not simply with Romans and Britons, but were painted in the many hues of the Roman empire—Germanics, Arabians, Syrians, Parthians, Africans, and more. Even with the formal secession of *Britannia* from the empire more than a generation before, when the emperor *Honorius* had instructed the nation to look after its own defense, some relations with Rome had been maintained, church envoys sent to the island on rare occasion to root out the *Pelagian* and *Arian* heresies, reports of the *Vandals'* sack of Rome carried back by traders. *Londinium's* brightest hours might have been behind it, its future uncertain, but in those days the city still thrived.

But that had been in the time of the grandfathers. Galaad had grown up hearing stories about the capital in the east, and had dreamt of seeing it at the height of its powers, but that day was long past, the sun that had risen over *Londinium* long since set. The city was now known as *Caer Llundain*, no longer a Roman city, but a *Brittonic* one. And the empire to which it had once been the furthest outpost was also no more, the last emperor *Romulus Augustus* deposed by the *Goths* the year before Galaad was born. By the time he had taken his first breath, the empire was only a memory.

Galaad was not sure what lay beyond the city walls that loomed before him, but he knew it would not be the cosmopolitan metropolis of his grandfather's stories. For a young man from a relatively small municipality like *Glevum*, though, the sheer scale of *Caer Llundain* was still intimidating. The wall before him stood some eighteen feet high and ran right around the city, constructed of gray ragstone hauled miles inland from *Cantium*. The bridge he had to cross just to reach the western gatehouse spanned a ditch some six feet deep and nine feet wide. And if the wall itself was not imposing enough,

then the foreboding bastions placed at intervals along the wall were sure to do the job. The bastions themselves, finally, looked like a child's playthings next to the gatehouse. Almost one hundred feet wide, side to side, the western gate was flanked on either side by square towers of gray stone, their red-tiled roofs towering far overhead, two or three times the height of the wall itself.

Londinium had never fallen to the Saeson, in all the long decades of the war, and looking at the city wall now, Galaad was sure that he understood why.

Two arches opened through the thick city walls, one for traffic leading into the city, one for traffic leading out, and a gatekeeper stood in each, leaning on long-bladed javelins, ridged helmets upon their heads. As the sun climbed to its zenith and the hour neared midday, Galaad stepped off the footbridge and onto the threshold of the gatehouse.

"Who approaches?" The gatekeeper's tone was bored, almost sleepy, his words slurred and near inaudible. It took Galaad a moment to parse the strangely accented Brittonnic speech, and then he hastened to answer.

"Galaad." He paused, not sure what other information was needed. "From Glevum," he went on in Brittonnic. "That's in Powys, in the west."

The two gatekeepers exchanged a look, and one rolled his eyes while the other returned his attention to Galaad. "And what's your business here, Galaad of Powys?"

"I come to see the High King Artor, Count of Britannia," Galaad said, in a rush. "You see, I am plagued with visions, and I'm sure that if I were able to relate them to the high king, then he might be able to . . ."

The gatekeeper who had spoken raised his hand, motioning Galaad to silence. "Do you bring craftwork to trade?" He spoke as if by rote, without emotion or passion.

Galaad considered this for a moment, and shook his head.

"Do you bear arms?"

Galaad began to shake his head, then thought better of it. He raised a finger, begging patience, and slung his bundle from his back. Slipping loose the knotted thong that held the bundle together, he pulled out a blade sheathed in cracked and greasy hide. "I have a sword," he said, proffering it.

The other gatekeeper stepped forward, and holding his javelin in one hand took Galaad's sword in his other. Then, his javelin resting against the crook of his elbow, he tried to pull the blade from the scabbard, but only with repeated attempts and considerable effort would the blade come free. It was an ancient leaf-blade sword, the dulled blade black with rust, the leather wrapping of the hilt pulled and cracked with age.

"It belonged to my grandfather's grandfather," Galaad explained, helpfully.

"You must be so proud," the gatekeeper said, his tone affectless, and ramming the blade back into the scabbard, he returned it to Galaad, then nodded over his shoulder at his companion.

"Um, yes," Galaad agreed, somewhat confused. He tucked the sword back into his bundle and began retying the thongs.

"You are free to enter the city," the first gatekeeper said, returning to his script. "Know that the law of the High King is supreme here, as it is everywhere his rule extends, and that any infractions against his authority will be severely handled."

Galaad stood, slinging the bundle back on his back. "I understand," he said quickly.

The gatekeeper stepped aside, with a quick glance to his fellow, and then fixed Galaad with an amused stare. "In that case, welcome to Caer Llundain, man of Powys. And good fortune to you."

Galaad smiled and nodded.

"You're going to need it," the other gatekeeper added with a rough laugh, his voice low.

Galaad's smile froze on his face, but instead of answering he scurried ahead, entering the momentary darkness of the tunnel through the nine-foot-thick wall. A handful of limping steps later, he walked back out into the cold winter light, and found himself in the city of Caer Llundain, home of King Artor.

