

# 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

Many thanks to Asbjørn Olsen, Kol Ford, Simon James Pettit, René Toft, and Mátyás Harpgándi for early comments: and to Laura Wood and Karolina Soltys for later thoughts.

# 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 *Civitas*.

Any character can spend *Civitas* 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 *Civitas* score gets, somehow the easier it becomes.

The GM may also decide that a character must lose *Civitas*, 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 *Civitas* – 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 *Civitas*. 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 *Civitas* 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 *Civitas* 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 *Civitas*.

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 *Civitas*, 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 Angel123 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.

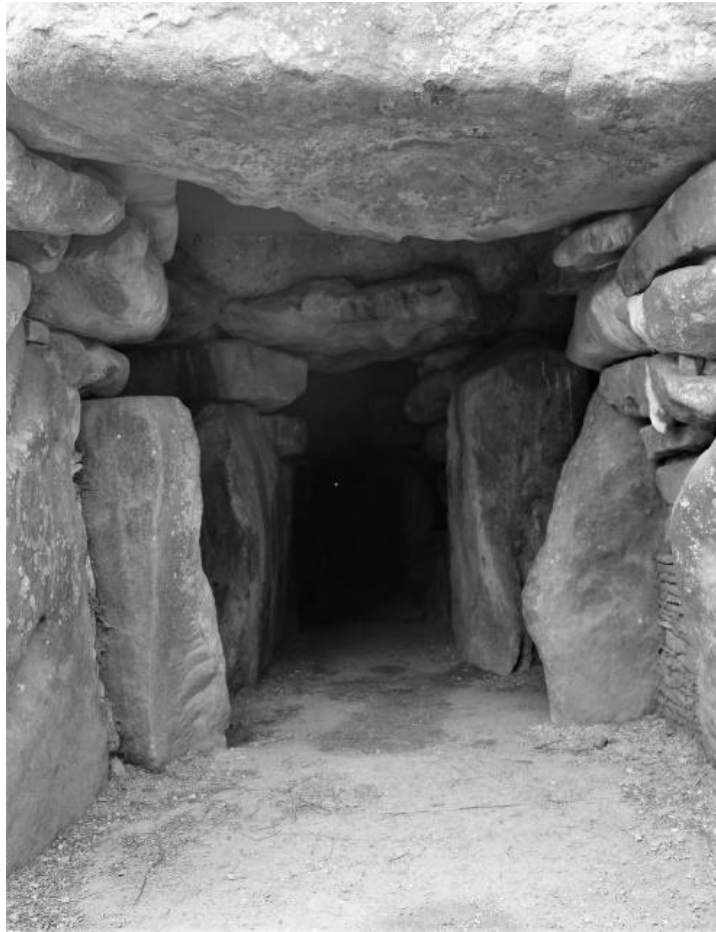
The stone altar to Latis, central in the cleared area between the trees, is drenched in black sticky blood, with thick clots and what look like internal

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](http://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 *Civitas* – so for example if someone still has lots of *Civitas* 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 *Civitas*. 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 *Civitas*, 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 *Civitas* 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 *Civitas*, 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).

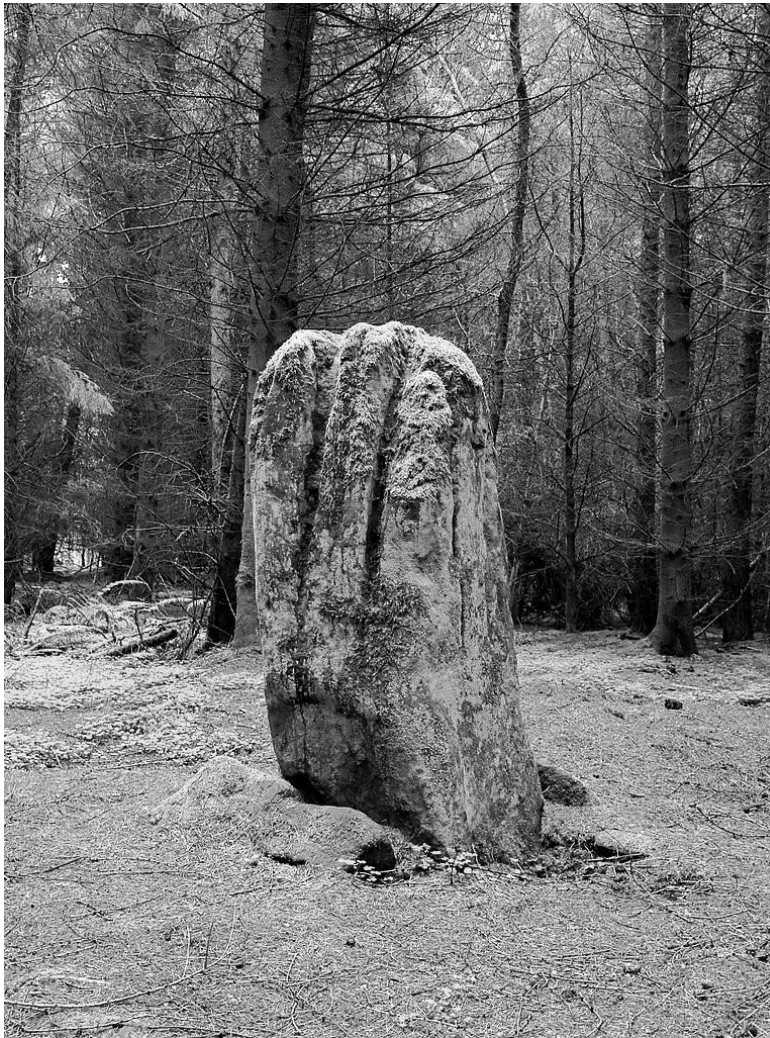
... **if with Curtius as captive** – the same, and they get to watch Curtius being crucified.

... **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 *Civitas*, 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](http://geograph.org.uk))*