In the bitter winter of AD 44, the Roman troops in Britain are impatiently awaiting the arrival of spring so that the campaign to conquer the island can be renewed. But the native Britons are growing more cunning in their resistance, constantly snapping at the heels of the mighty Roman forces.

When the most brutal of the native tribesmen, the Druids of the Dark Moon, capture the shipwrecked wife and children of General Plautius, quick action is called for. Two volunteers from the crack Second Legion must venture deep into hostile territory in a desperate attempt to rescue the prisoners.

Centurion Macro and his optio, Cato, find themselves slipping out of camp in the dead of night to reach the Generals family before they are sacrificed to the Druids dark gods. They know they are heading towards an almost certain death, and their only hope is that, with sheer courage and ingenuity, they can outwit the most ruthless foes theyve ever faced.

Scarrows third installment of Cato and Macro in `When the Eagle Hunts drops us into Camulodunum (after a quick account of the shipwreck of Valerius Maxientius with unknown female plus children in the Channel) where our familiar heroes are frequenting a seedy tavern as Macro continues his `courtship of the forthright Iceni warrior, Boudica. Given the previous two novels this unashamed and blatant use of another venerated historical figure comes as no surprise, even less so the parodied caricature of her as a lustful, forthright and general adventurer.
Still, with good humour we follow them into the tavern and then meet Boudicas mentor and husband-to-be, Prasutagas whose characterisation as a huge warrior with little intellectual capacity is entirely at odds with actual history. Scarrow introduces a minor love triangle with the usually dour Macro falling for the lively Boudica though he refuses to admit it. The action of the third novel takes off with the Augusta II being sent to Calleva (near the modern town of Silchester) in order to scout the Britons next move. Whilst down there the sixth cohort under Hortensius is ambushed in a town that has previously been raided by the Durotriges and they fight a rearguard action all the way back to the legion. It is at this point we learn of a shadowy order of Druids who have captured General Plautius wife, Pomponia, and children, Julia and Aelius, and are holding them to ransom in return for the legions own prisoners. Macro and Cato are sent undercover deep into the Durotriges territory to attempt a rescue of the prisoners. Their guides are Boudica and Prasutagas - neatly providing us with some amusing asides as each learns to live with the other. We move from farmhouse to secret villages as the four delve ever deeper into southern Britain until they finally catch up with them at a formidable hillfort. Cato attempts a risky rescue via the drains (having previously saved one of the children, Julia) after Macro is felled with a sword blow to the head and in the process of the legions storming the fort receives a near fatal wound from the sickle of the head Druid. However all ends well and finally Cato gets what he deserves - promotion to centurion and both he and Macro end up in their own personal sickward for a month to cap it all off.

Mr Cornwell doesn't have `too much to fear (as he professes on the front covers) but Scarrows books are an enormously refreshing in the historical genre. The purist can pick multiple holes in their historical accuracy and probably several characterisations that are more parodies, but it simply does not matter.

For Scarrow historical accuracy is not all-important. What is important and where he succeeds admirably is in providing a ripping yarn that has action, adventure, characters you can delight in, and plot lines that are gripping. I hope the adventures of Cato and Macro continue for a very long time and eagerly await the next installment.

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