

ANNA ELLIOTT

Elliott brings the Arthurian world
to rich life...

—*Publishers Weekly*
on *Dark Moon of Avalon*



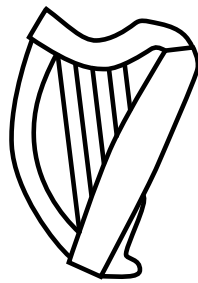
A Prequel to TWILIGHT OF AVALON

DAWN OF AVALON

Morgan & Merlin—The Beginning

DAWN OF AVALON

A story of MORGAN AND MERLIN from the
TWILIGHT OF AVALON universe



ANNA ELLIOTT

author of

Twilight of Avalon

Dark Moon of Avalon

Sunrise of Avalon

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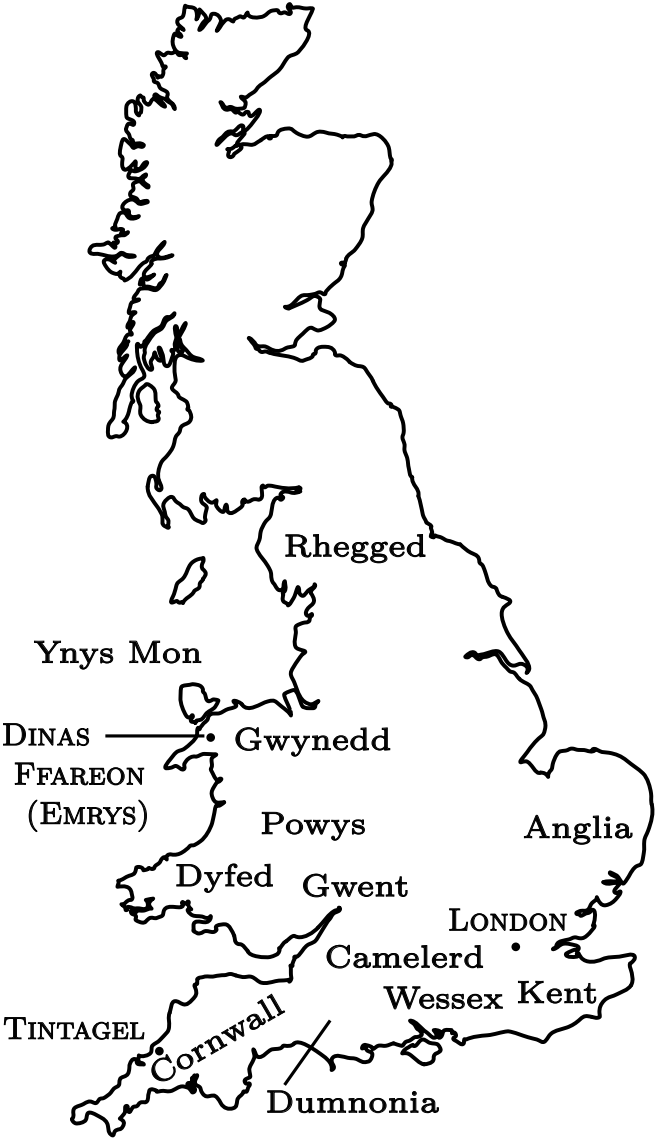
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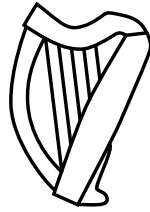
This project was made possible by the selfless contributions of many parties. Type was set using the free \LaTeX system and the free fonts Uncial and Rustic by Peter Wilson. The free software packages Inkscape and GIMP (GNU Image Manipulation Program) were used in the graphical design process. The map of Britain is based on raw data courtesy of the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency. The cover design is based on *La Belle Dame Sans Merci* by John William Waterhouse. The harp vignette is loosely based on the *Queen Mary* harp in the National Museum of Scotland, Edinburgh.

BRITAIN

6TH CENTURY



AUTHOR'S NOTE



ONE OF MY FAVORITE characters in my *Twilight of Avalon* trilogy is Isolde's grandmother, Morgan. (Or Morgan le Fay, as she is commonly known in later versions of the Arthur legends). Morgan's aging voice came to me very clearly as the narrator for the prologues of all three books. And after I'd finished writing the trilogy, she still haunted me. Myrddin (or Merlin), the famous enchanter of King Arthur's court, rather haunted me as well, and I couldn't stop wondering what Morgan and Merlin might have shared when they were young, before Morgan's brother Arthur ever famously became King of Britain.

So here is *Dawn of Avalon*, the first part of their story and a prequel to my *Twilight of Avalon* trilogy. In Arthurian legend, Merlin is famous for 'having lived time backward' and being able to See the future as clearly as the past. In the earliest versions of the legend of the dragons at Dinas Emrys, Ambrosius Aurelianus, a famous war leader, digs up the dragons at King Vortigern's command. Geoffrey of Monmouth, whose version of the King Arthur legends I loosely follow, changed Ambrosius Aurelianus to a mysterious enchanter Merlin, giving me the inspiration for the Merlin of *Dawn of Avalon*.

I hope you'll enjoy reading Morgan and Merlin's story. It was a pure joy to write, and I find now that I'm not quite so haunted by them anymore. I think (I hope) they're happy with the prequel that I gave them, happy that they had the chance to live out their one perfect day.

Although the vast majority of my research comes from books, there are a couple of websites I can recommend to anyone curious to learn a bit more:

For more on the legends associated with Dinas Emrys (called Dinas Ffareon until renamed after Merlin), see:

www.celtnet.org.uk/legends/dinas_emrys.html.

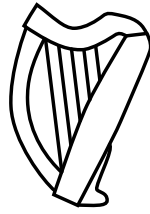
For more on the etymology of Merlin's name, see:

medievalscotland.org/problem/names/myrddin.shtml.

To learn more, visit me on the web at www.annaelliottbooks.com.
Happy reading!

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Anna Elliott". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

PROLOGUE



PAIN. He was awash in a black sea of it, and each wave gnawed at his every muscle and nerve.

“I said, what is your name?”

The voice made the blood pound blackly behind the pain that had centered itself in his skull.

“Are you one of Uther’s scabby whore-son cowards? Answer me!”

The prisoner’s eyes were still closed, but he could see the other man against the blackness of his lids: a long, flat, gray-skinned face, like a slab of stone marking some ancient warrior’s grave.

By rights, Vortigern ought to have moss-grown spirals tattooed across his forehead.

Dirty straw rustled as Vortigern took a step forward, and the prisoner forced his eyes open, tensing his muscles and clenching his teeth against another blow.

But the boy stood, blocked Vortigern’s way. The scrawny, dark-haired boy the prisoner could remember coming every day with food and salves.

“No.” The lad had a pale, soft-looking face. He might be—fourteen? Fifteen? His eyes looked older than that, but his cheeks were still smooth as a girl’s. “You’ll only drive him unconscious, and then he’ll tell you nothing at all.”

The aging druid who had stood beside Vortigern opened his mouth as though to speak at that, then glanced at the boy and shut it again. He was a stoop-shouldered

old man with gnarled hands and a whipcord frame beneath the white druid's robe and bull's-hide cloak. His face looked like something carved in wood: rigid and weathered, one eye blinded by the scar that ran down from under his hair nearly to the corner of his mouth.

The prisoner remembered him coming in daily, as well. At least for as long as he could recall.

Vortigern's eyes darted, snake-like, from the druid to the prisoner and back again. "Are you sure the boy knows his craft?"

"Know his craft? Oh, aye, I think—" The druid stopped, drew in his breath and said, in a flatter tone, "The . . . boy knows the healing arts well enough."

"Good." Vortigern's eyes were stone-cold, floating empty in the narrow face. "I would not want him to die. At least, not until he has given me the answers I require of him."

The boy had started to spread some sort of vile ointment on the throbbing, crusted burns on the prisoner's arms. He glanced down to where the boy was working, feeling the vague surprise he felt every time he looked down at the length of his body. Lean and hard-muscled beneath shirt and breeches that were little more than rags.

The boy was telling a story. Something about dragons beneath the soil. He remembered him telling stories before, as well.

The prisoner let his mind drift above the pain, the black pounding in his skull, the fiery stab of his ribs.

This time, though, something reared up, hungry and dark on the edge of his mind, blotting out the words of the tale.

Swords clash. My hand slips on the hilt of my sword. Men choke and die. I must—I must—

The prisoner clenched his teeth. Raised himself on one elbow and looked up at Vortigern. "I hope you enjoy failure, then."

Vortigern's kick took him in the gut, jarring what felt like cracked ribs. The many-toothed wave of pain swelled to claim him again as the prisoner's stomach spasmed, trying to wring out every last drop of the cup of water they'd allowed him today.

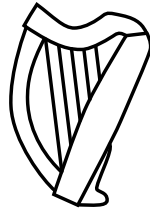
Whether he actually was—or had been—a man to hold up to torture, he had no idea. It didn't matter now. His world had narrowed down to three truths, three hard lumps of certainty here in this filthy prison cell:

He was a prisoner in this place.

He had to ensure he died here.

And Vortigern himself would be dead before the moon had waxed and waned another eight times.

1



THE RAYS OF THE RISING SUN stained the heaps of broken building stones to crimson orange. As though Lugh, the sun god, cried rusty tears, or the earth of Britain itself leaked blood from a hundred wounds.

Gnarled and bent in his bull's-hide cloak and white robe, the old druid raised his hands towards the fiery horizon. The sun glinted in his sightless eye. "Britain lies besieged on all sides. The Picts to the north, the Irish sea raiders from the west. Now you, my lord, are betrayed by your Saxon allies, who gobble our lands in the east like a horde of rabid wolves and leave a trail of broken bodies and blood-soaked fields in their wake.

"You seek refuge in these hills, this stronghold of the Old Ones. But I say to you that your tower walls will never stand until they are watered by the blood of a fatherless child."

If this were a fire tale, I might begin it that way. And mayhap it did happen just as I have imagined it, I do not know.

The harpers who sing of Glass Isles and faerie-forged swords would say that the weaving of this tale began when the Roman legions had trampled over Britain's holy springs and sacred groves, driving our gods from the land.

They would speak of a great darkness sweeping like a flock of ravens over Britain's kingdoms. And say the days in which we now lived were just the lightest feathered tip of the first bird's wings.

Mayhap Bron did give the prophesy to Vortigern just as I've told, against the fiery backdrop of the rising sun; he had to utter it somehow and somewhere and in a way that would sway Vortigern and his warriors into believing the words.

But I never saw.

My part in the story began afterwards, helping a wounded and captive man vomit onto the straw covered floor.

"The shriek you hear is caused by the clash of two fighting dragons," I whispered through clenched teeth. "And every eve of Beltaine, they scream in pain and hurt."

There are those who claim me naught but a king's by-blow gotten on a whore; many more who say it is from thence my bad blood springs. But I may tell you that my mother was of the blood royal in her own land, and wedded to my father by earth, fire, and air before he had her killed.

Even Gamma, who took me in and taught me from the time I was four, was wont to say that I had a temper like a storm in summer. But I promise you that before that day, I had never had to clench my teeth to keep from smashing something when telling the story of *Lludd* and *Llefelys* and how they captured the two warring dragons who plagued Britain.

The prisoner heaved and retched again. I tightened my hand on the fold of rag I held, watching the knuckles whiten beneath the skin, even as I braced his shoulders with my free arm.

He was a young man, perhaps twenty, but surely no more, with a fall of di-sheveled, wheat-colored hair that reached to his broad shoulders.

And he had three ribs cracked, at least. Any of them might pierce a lung if he heaved too violently or curled himself forward too hard.

When he had stopped retching, I wiped his face with a fold of the rag, and he let out an involuntary sigh. But he didn't move, and he rolled onto his back, his eyes fixed on Vortigern.

Are you sure the boy knows his craft? Vortigern had just asked of Bron.

I scarcely heard Bron's answer, either, beyond vague awareness that his voice was stiff without the usual west-country lilt.

"You must dig a large pit, and in that pit, place a large cauldron brim-full of mead." I shaped the words almost soundlessly with my lips. Dipped the rag into a cup of water to wipe the prisoner's face again. "The dragons will be seen fighting in the sky, but in their exhaustion they will fall and become drunk on the mead. Then may you imprison them in a stone chamber deep beneath the ground."

A tale is a lie, and yet not a lie. And a man who hears it may be in pain, and yet not in pain, when caught up in a story where the past breathes and time is an endless curve.

And if my spirit was in those days somewhat soured on the romance of those tales harpers sing, I told them still when working over a man like the one before me now.

Three days ago, Vortigern's men had caught him on the edge of the fortress defenses and dragged him in, beaten and captive. Likely a warrior to one of the petty chieftains of Gwynedd, who had opposed Vortigern's bid for the throne. There surely was no shortage of those.

And Vortigern had crushed them all, before his Saxon allies rose up in revolt.

Now Vortigern demanded that I keep the prisoner alive long enough that he could be forced into revealing whose man he was, which of the chieftains dared still oppose Vortigern's reign.

"None so bad."

The prisoner was still breathing unsteadily from Vortigern's kick, and his mouth was torn from a backhanded blow of Vortigern's fist. A trickle of blood dripped down his chin.

He was not handsome. Even beneath the mottled bruising and the dirt, his features were too sharply-angled and high-browed. But his eyes were beautiful, surely, thickly lashed, and a deep-blue in color, blue as the sea.

Now the sea-blue eyes were implacable and hard and fixed on Vortigern.

"None so bad. Though you could use work on the follow-through after a blow. From the shoulder, if you mind what I told you before. But well done, for a king who must seldom dirty his own—"

The words ended in a grunt as Vortigern drove another savage kick into the already cracked ribs.

Even the half-built walls of Vortigern's hill fortress seemed to press in around me. Walls of any kind were as yet passing strange to me still, and all the time Bron and I had been here I had felt as though the mere knowledge of the fort's defensive bounds was enough to peel my nerves raw.

Now my skin felt as though it would split open and the edges of my vision shivered red. Though I managed—just—to keep myself from turning to face Vortigern again.

I had seen hard sights before, the Goddess knew. On the journey here, to Vortigern's refuge, I had seen a settlement, burned and raided by one of the Saxon war parties that savaged our countryside. My father's people, or they once had

been. Now men, women, and children—even babies—were broken rag dolls, lying in mud.

I had Seen the future Gamma had shown me in the scrying waters before she died.

Still, it took every last reserve of will to remain where I was, kneeling on the prison cell's floor. A thin, dark-haired boy of fourteen or fifteen—I could pass for as young as that, dressed as I was.

I had given up on the story, but I spoke those other words silently over in my mind, again and again, like one of Gamma's charms: a thin, dark-haired, scrawny boy. No threat to any king, however tenuous or unstable his grip on the throne.

Even without turning, I could imagine the flare of Vortigern's nostrils, the curling and uncurling of his thick-fingered hands. "You know," he said, "A man can live a considerable time with most of his skin gone. I for one would take great pleasure in peeling off his scabby hide and nailing it to the wall of my fire hall. Who are you? Did Uther send you?"

Vortigern asked that of the prisoner at every turn; I could hear the name now without either flinching or feeling a familiar slow burn of fury.

Uther, called the Pendragon by his warriors. He it was who had driven the usurper of Britain's high kingship back into this last refuge, high in the hills of Gwynedd. Uther Pendragon, who besieged Vortigern's forces now and kept him penned like a wounded bear in a cage, within the stronghold he struggled to build on this ancient hill fort of Dinas Ffareon.

I had sat this way, in this same filthy prison cell, through seven interrogation sessions, now. Had watched as Vortigern kicked the prisoner savagely, or burned him with a glowing brand. The prisoner's response never varied: he would give Vortigern a blank-faced, dead-eyed look from those sea-blue eyes and spill out answers that were merely a goad. Gadfly bites at Vortigern's wrath. As though he were trying to provoke Vortigern into hurting him more.

Only towards the very end of the sessions, when he was hurt nearly to unconsciousness, would the nameless prisoner gasp out an exhausted, *I don't remember. I don't know.*

Now: "All right." The prisoner still fought to draw breath, but the expression in his eyes hadn't changed. "I will tell you. I am oath-sworn to the boy, here." He jerked his head at me. "He is the one whose coming the druids have prophesied. Son of Uther the Pendragon, who shall come from the West, bearing the faerie-forged sword. I am sorry, lad."—he turned to look at me with an exaggerated, sorrowful leer—"I gave it my best try, but I—"

I did not for a moment imagine that he had intended Vortigern to believe his

claim. He had over-acted the speech so badly that even a two-year-old child would have seen through the lie. It was merely another goad, another lash to Vortigern's fury.

But this was Vortigern, who had ceded great swaths of the eastern shore to the Saxon brothers Horsa and Hengist in exchange for the pledge of their swords. Then had seen his Saxon allies turn on him like rabid dogs and drive him back and back again into the Gwynedd hills where he struggled to build this fortress now. Only to find that his tower walls crumbled every time they rose past the height of a man. As though even the land itself were refusing to support his claim to Britain's throne.

And Vortigern faced now, too, the rumblings of dissent from his own men, not pleased to serve a king who made over whole kingdoms to the Saxon hordes. Or who could not win at battles with Uther, but fell back and back again.

I had heard the sullen mutters and seen the angry sidelong looks as the warriors worked to drag building stones from where they'd fallen in a tumbled heap. And I had treated many foot soldiers, these last weeks, who came to me with mysterious aches or pains and begged leave to return home to their families for the harvest time.

I swathed them in bandages and declared them unfit for duty whenever I could. They were brave men, and good ones, many of them, and it was not their fault if their oath-sworn lords had chosen in turn to give their oaths to Vortigern.

Gamma said, always, that when the Roman legions fouled our sacred wells and burned the holy groves, a wedge had been driven between Britain's gods and the land. She had said that any power of the Sight she taught me was but a faint, wavering reflection of the heights to which the druid-born had once soared.

Still, now, as I knelt there on the dirty cell floor, I could feel Vortigern's gaze swivel towards me, could hear the thoughts clashing together like knives behind the serpent cold gaze.

He had no particular reason to trust me. He had known me a scant few weeks, after all. And if Bron was a one of the druid-taught, he was a strange—

I could not—Goddess, could not—let that thin thread of suspicion pull taut. I could not let Vortigern finish the thought that echoed for me clearly as though he had indeed spoken the words aloud into the dank airless space of the prison cell. My hand was on one of the crusted burns on the prisoner's muscled forearm, close to the floor and hidden by my body so that Vortigern could not see.

I tightened my fingers. Dug in my nails, hard enough that the fair-haired man broke off with a sharp huff of breath in mid-word.

In a tale, I would have felt something in that instant when my hand closed

over the prisoner's wound. A beat of Sight, maybe, like a second pulse, showing me the memory of Gamma's silent nemetons, the sacred groves where I had lived until last spring.

Or mayhap the red, wrinkled face of the infant who would be Britain's ruin and downfall one day.

But as I turned and met Vortigern's gaze, I felt nothing. And if I reached towards the prisoner in my mind, it was only to promise him that I would pull out his tongue and beat him with it if he tried saying one single word more to undermine our purpose here.

"He is the One." My hands had gone cold, but the words came out quite steady as I looked first at Vortigern, then at Bron. "This man is the one you have sought, my lord: a man born of no earthly father. I Saw it as I tended his wounds just now."

MAYHAP MY TEMPERAMENT—for good or ill—does spring from my mother's folk, who were of Erin, land of gnarled thorn trees and mists and hidden springs. But she died when I was four, before I could know her more.

Since spring, when I had returned to my father's court—and been welcomed by him, I must grant him that much—I had told many tales, but never my own. Neither of my birth, nor of what was to come—my own life unfolding, glimpsed in the swirling blood Gamma had paid to the scrying waters before she died.

Now I could—almost—imagine Gamma standing before me, pursing her lips and telling me that for a healer, compassion comes before all.

Because the prisoner's body showed scars on battle scars, marks of old sword wounds faded to thin white lines and newer ones still puckered and red. Even apart from the most recent marks, gift from Vortigern and his men. And I had to force myself to consider either scars or wounds as I demanded of him, "Have you utterly lost your wits?"

The prisoner looked at me, eyes hard in his dirt-smearred face.

We were alone in the underground cell's cramped, rank-smelling space; Bron had given me a long look, and then had muttered something about consulting the auguries to see if what I said were true and gone, drawing Vortigern with him.

There was an energy, a quick, nervous hum beneath the still-muscled control that kept the prisoner prone on the floor, where Vortigern's final kick had sent him. That was part of what had made me mark him for a fighting man, even more

than the battle scars. For the past three days, that energy had been turned towards flicking Vortigern's temper on the raw. Now the part he had played was—at least partly—fallen away, leaving him free to regard me with a keen-edged, intense focus behind his gaze.

All he said, though—and so flatly that his voice sounded almost indifferent—was: “I might ask you the same thing.”

Truly, one does need patience above all else when treating with men made ill-humored by the pain of their wounds. And to any who think me over-quick, let me say that I had many times before that day had injured warriors heave pots of their own waste at me—and never once had I let my temper slip.

I had not even intended to lose my temper with this man, now. But I was so tired that my eyes felt as though they had been salted like meat for the winter. And there was as well that future, glimpsed in the scrying waters months before.

If that vision was *will be*, and not merely a shifting *may be*, I had only this brief window of time to choose for myself how I might serve Britain's honor now. Before I was caught in the web of what harpers would one day turn to story and song.

The knowledge made me snap back through gritted teeth, “I apologize. Were you enjoying Vortigern's attentions? I could call him in here again. He might be willing to break another two or three of your ribs while you play the babbling fool. Though if you had half a grain of sense, you would at least pretend to be knocked unconscious when he gets to work on you. Men like Vortigern want those they hurt to be able to feel the pain.”

The prisoner looked down at the length of linen I had bound tightly about his cracked ribs to keep their jagged edges from shifting and piercing a lung. Something hard crossed his face, like a cloud across the sun. And then his hand shot out, so swiftly that I had no time to react before he was dragging me forward, close enough that I could smell the blood and sweat on his tattered clothes. “Maybe I want it to hurt. Did you ever think of that?”

His hand had wrapped itself around my throat in a grip like a vise. My chest burned and my vision blurred. His breath was hot on my face. “You realize all I'd have to do would be to squeeze, and—”

I did know how to defend myself, Bron and Gamma between them had seen to that. But I had no chance. Behind me, the door to the cell banged open. And then the prisoner was all at once jerked backwards, landing with a dull thud on the dirty, straw-strewn floor. Bron straddled him—braided hair, white druid's robe and all—and held a knife to his throat.

The prisoner fought, and of a certainty he fought well, with a fierce, concen-

trated economy of movement. Once he did land a blow on Bron's jaw, hard enough to snap Bron's head back and make him spit a mouthful of blood.

But the nameless prisoner was weak, feverish after a week of imprisonment and starvation and interrogation at Vortigern's hands. And for all Bron had passed sixty winters a season or two back, he knew more wrestling holds than most men learn in a lifetime or more.

When the brief, snarling scuffle ended, the younger man still lay flat, panting and winded, with Bron pinning him flat to the ground.

The prisoner was staring, eyes narrowed. "If you're a druid, I'm—"

Bron grunted and shifted his grip on the hilt of the blade. "Right now I'd say all you should be caring about is that I'm the man with a knife at your throat. And that it stays there until you agree to show the lady a bit o' respect."

The prisoner's eyes flared wide. His jaw went slack, and then his head turned—slowly. "Lady."

I ordered myself to draw a slow breath, despite the hollow sliver of fear pressing up under my ribcage. I could not, in conscience, be angry with Bron. I knew it even before the prisoner spat out the word. Bron was oath-sworn to protect me, to guard my life with his own, and had volunteered for this mission without even being asked. Volunteered though it meant walking a knife's edge, where one slip might mean both our lives.

And I could see in his face, the tight set of his gray-stubbed jaw, that he was mortally afraid he might have made such a slip now.

Vortigern would not leave us alone here long, of that I had no doubt. If he did not come himself, he would certainly send a guard. Which meant that, of a surety and for good or ill, I had now no choice but to win this wounded, half-crazed prisoner's trust.

"You were right, in a way," I said, and met the prisoner's gaze. "I am of Uther Pendragon's line. I am Morgan. His daughter. And this"—I tilted my head—"Is Bron. My bodyguard." I drew a breath. "Will you tell me your name? Whose war band you belonged to?"

Something—just for a moment—flickered across the prisoner's angular face.

But then he moved, ran a hand across his face as though he were peeling the show of feeling from his skin and flinging it from him.

"Why should you think I ever belonged to anyone's war band?"

Bron grunted at that, rubbing the reddened mark on his jaw where the nameless prisoner's blow had landed. "Think we can rule out 'bard' or 'scholar' for what you might ha' been before this, anyway."

I watched the younger man, searching his gaze. But he did not move, not even by a fraction of a muscle. No expression on his face, nothing in the blue eyes.

And time was slipping away. I could feel each precious moment I had here dripping away, like water through clenched hands. A bare handful of moments in which I might persuade the prisoner not to blurt out the truth of who I was the moment Vortigern or one of his guards stepped into the room.

I let out a breath. “You’ve opened the leg wound again.” I gestured to the bandages I had used on the prisoner’s upper thigh. That wound he had already carried when he had first been captured and dragged into Vortigern’s prison cell: a deep cut made by a long dagger or sword, and already some days old when I had seen it on that first day.

But he jerked back and even tried to rise when I moved to unfasten the pin I had used to hold the bandage in place. “A lady shouldn’t—”

“So when you thought me a boy, it was all right to try to kill me. But now that you know me for a girl, I’m suddenly too delicate to dress a bloodied sword cut?”

I did manage to keep my touch gentle, though, as I pushed the prisoner back onto the straw. To my surprise, he did not resist. Perhaps he was only too much exhausted from the fight with Bron. I added, more quietly, “Lie still. Please. And let me help you.”

For a moment, visions of burned settlements, broken bodies and homes danced like sparks before my eyes. Our harpers are full of laments for a warrior slain in battle, but murdered mothers and babies lie in silent graves. “I only wish this were the worst thing I’d seen.”

The prisoner had torn out three stitches that would need to be reset. I threaded a needle and could feel Bron’s eyes on me. I had known him as long as I had known Gamma, since I was four years old. He had taught me to draw a bow and arrow, to throw a knife and spar with a wooden staff.

And now, even without the Sight, I could have read the silent look he gave: a silent apology for bringing us to this moment with his slip of the tongue, mingled with a dubious, *Good luck to you, lass. I hope you know what you’re about.*

I began. “When the Roman legions marched away and abandoned Britain, the land was left prey to barbarians on all sides. Constantine, Prince of Brittany, crossed the channel to Britain with an army two thousand strong, and defended the land, became Constantine *Waredwr*—Britain’s deliverer and High King.

“But then Constantine was killed. Murdered by Pictish assassins. His throne was seized by Gwrtheyrn Gwrtheneu, he who calls himself Vortigern now. Only Constantine’s nephew, Uther Pendragon, was left to oppose Vortigern’s claim to

the High Kingship of Britain.”

I stopped and did risk a glance upward, then, holding the prisoner’s gaze even as my mouth twisted just slightly, “My father, whatever he may think of me or I of him, does love Britain. He has struck at Vortigern’s forces again and again. He would be here, now, storming the fortress—setting you free—were it not that any open attack on a hill as steep as this one would mean certain death.”

I waited two, then three beats of my own heart; three, then four of the prisoner’s harshly-drawn breaths.

I was used to anger from wounded men. When a man has nought else but his pride, he guards it at all costs. And a man rendered infant-helpless by a battle wound has little left to him but his pride.

I was used, too, to the youngest of the wounded men—little more than boys, really, cut down as they struggled to wield too-heavy swords—looking at me with pleading in their eyes. A look that said, plain as speaking, *Tell me you can make me whole again. Tell me I’m not going to die.*

This man, though—I had heard my father’s Saxon slaves tell fire tales of monstrous beings who claw their way back from the grave, unable to die or feel pain. It might have been one of those creatures I spoke to now.

I laid a hand—just lightly—across the newly stitched wound.

The Sight, Gamma had called the power she had taught me. Once it flowed like the first thaw of spring, a bounty from Britain’s earth, a song as many-voiced and bright-colored as the throb of the ocean or the cry of the wind.

Now men looked on the earth as naught but a slave, to be fought over and stripped of its spoils. And the Sight was a tide that sometimes ebbed, sometimes swelled, that would not come on command and did not always show true.

Still, I had found, sometimes, that I could catch a memory from a warrior’s pain—See the battle or the sword fight where the wounded man had taken his injury, sometimes hear a quick echo of the man’s thoughts at the time he got the wound. Fear and pain, often. Surprise, always. A warrior ever imagines the Morrigan’s raven wings will pass him by, however many of his companions fall.

Now, though—

I heard the prisoner’s indrawn breath, a sharp gasp as of anguish or fear. But the prison walls, the prisoner himself, even, were gone, blotted out by the wash of red-tinted vision that filled my gaze.

I saw stone towers shaking, crumbling to the ground. I saw . . . myself. Wearing a dress of apple green, while all about me warriors drank and shouted victory and clapped my brother Arthur on the back.

I nearly gasped at that, for this vision I had Seen already, in Gamma’s scrying

waters, and I knew the ending of it all too well. But then, even as I bit my lip and tasted blood, the image was gone in a wash of darkness, and another took its place: Vortigern, screaming aloud in agony and beating at flames that licked his fur-trimmed robes as all about him a timbered building burned.

And then there was nothing, nothing but the dirty straw and the whitewashed earthen walls of the prison cell—and the nameless prisoner, staring at me with his eyes dilated almost to black, his lean features set and utterly blank, blank as a carving in stone.

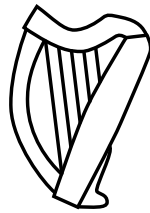
I felt sick, still, and cold almost to my bones, and I had another of those moments when I could—almost—imagine Gamma standing beside me and asking why I did not simply take the prisoner by the shoulders and shake him and demand that he take me at my word.

But I had no time to speak, truly I had none, even had I recovered my breath the instant the vision had gone.

The cell door flew open with a crash that make my heart jerk again inside my chest, and two of Vortigern's guards burst into the room. Burly, mustached men, both of them, in helmets and leather armor, both carrying swords

I realized, in that instant, that it was not only in the vision I had shared with the prisoner that the earth had shook as building stones crashed to the ground. Outside, Vortigern's part-completed tower had fallen once more. And already the two guards were hauling the prisoner up between them, shouldering me aside to drag him to his feet.

“You say he's the one whose blood will allow the towers to stand.” That was the older guard, a broad-shouldered man with fingers like blood sausages and a face scarred by some childhood pox. “Vortigern says he dies now. Today.”



I WOULD BEAR my brother Arthur a son, who would ride with him into battle and fight beside him, for a time. Would, with Arthur, succeed in turning back the Saxon tide. But then one day, our son would turn traitor, whether for greed or anger or love I did not yet know. But the son I would one day bear would one day turn on his father, and bring ruin on Arthur's reign.

That was my future, the one Gamma had shown me in the scrying waters before she died. A destiny written in my blood and Arthur's stars, a fate lying both within me and without, as all fate does.

But if my path forward lay in darkness, I had still this night, now.

On either side of me, a leather-armored guard lay snoring, slumped on the floor. Dana, great Goddess Mother, I prayed through gritted teeth, let them sleep on. Let the draught I had added to their evening ale keep them witless and unconscious at least until dawn.

I could not be caught, nor seen. I wore my boy's garb of rough tunic and breeches. But I had a dark traveling cloak thrown over my shoulders. And beneath the cloak, I carried a traveler's pack of my healer's kit, a change of clothes, and enough bread and dried venison to last at least two days. I had, too, the bow and linen arrow-bag that I had trained on with Bron.

None of these could be explained away if I were seen by one of Vortigern's guardsmen.

I had already lifted the heavy crossbar from across the door. Now as I pushed, the age-blackened panel swung open with a shriek that sounded like the scream

of Llud's warring dragons. I froze, fear a wash of cold edged with grit over my skin. But the guards on either side of the door slept on.

Swiftly, then, my heart pounding hard in my ears, I slipped inside the darkened room where Vortigern's prisoner now lay. Not the cramped and filthy prison cell where he had been kept these last days; that had been deemed by Bron—and accepted grudgingly by Vortigern—as no fit place for a man to sojourn before gifting the gods with his life's blood.

Bron had, and I thanked the Goddess for it, kept his head when Vortigern's men would have dragged the prisoner out and slit his throat without delay. He had declared that the prisoner's spirit was to be chained as guardian of the fortress here. And that therefore the prisoner must be bathed and purified, as the druid princes who made the Great Gift had been of old.

He must, Bron said, be painted with the warriors' marks, and fed the last meal of oat cakes charred by an open flame.

Where a crabbed and rough-tongued warrior of sixty-odd had heard of the ancient rituals attending a Prince of the Land, I had no idea; the triple death was one of those practices leeches of their power by the legions of Rome. Perhaps Gamma had told Bron stories. I had sometimes suspected he had been more to her than my trusted bodyguard. Though that Bron had known the rites—and that Vortigern believed in them—was all I could find it in me to care of, then or now.

After the flare of torchlight in the hallway outside, my eyes took a moment to adjust to the darkness of the room within. I was alone; Bron's part was to attend the ceremony of wine and ale sharing in Vortigern's half-completed fire hall.

The prisoner had been housed in the roughly built timbered dwelling where Vortigern and the chiefs of his warriors slept. The room was windowless, the only light the rays of torchlight slanting in through the open doorway behind me. I could only just make out the shadowy shapes of the room's furnishings: a table, a crudely made wooden chair, a few skins flung down for rugs on the floor and an equally crude bed.

Vortigern had been fleeing for his life when he had come here, to this remote hill fort in the Gwynedd hills; his wealth, his fine furnishings, his chased silver drinking cups and cushioned chairs, all these he had been forced to leave behind. And as I stepped inside, I did not know, truly, whether the prisoner would trample over me in a wild bid for freedom or try once again to strangle me on sight.

But he did neither. The prisoner lay on the bed, his body a long, lean shadow edged with gold where the light struck. Naked, as befitted a Prince of the Land, save for an arm band of fox's fur.

They had bound him. Vortigern might bow to the rites of the old ones, but

neither was he a fool; the prisoner's wrists and ankles were tied to the four posts of the bed's frame. Though there was, at least, enough slack in the ropes for him to turn on his side if he chose, and the loops of rope about his wrists were padded so as not to chafe overmuch at his bare skin.

And he was asleep. Utterly, deeply so, I could hear it in the steady rhythm of his breathing, see the slow, shallow rise and fall of his chest.

Any may doubt me who like, but it was not until I had crossed the room as quickly and silently as I could did I realize that I had made no plan for what I would say to the man before me when he woke.

All this long day since I had first spoken to the prisoner in his cramped, airless cell, I had been strung up with the tension of planning out the *how* of our escape: drugging the guards, Bron's keeping Vortigern occupied and out of the way. If I had considered the prisoner at all, it was only with a quick, hot flash of anger that he had carelessly included me in his lying answers to Vortigern, had shattered the tenuous tolerance—if not trust—it had taken me weeks to build in Vortigern's mind.

And now I simply stood and stared down at the man before me.

My one true, clear memory of my mother is of her saying fiercely to someone—to Gamma, I think it was—*Women have no honor. We have those we love, and those we hate, and that is all.*

Perhaps it is true. I had chosen to be here, for Britain's honor, for the salvation of Britain's throne. And yet it was now a taste bitter as bile on my tongue that the cost of so doing had been to sit idly by while this man was beaten and lashed and burned with a red-hot brand again and again.

That I had had to grit my teeth or bite my lips until blood came to do it was scarcely recompense to the prisoner now. Still less a likely way of persuading him to put his fate in my hands and accompany me into the night.

I could have left him. Even if he woke, he could do nothing to prevent my simply turning and walking from the room.

But I had brought this man here, to this bed where he lay bound hand and foot and awaiting death. Vortigern would have killed him eventually in any case, of that I had no doubt. But if he died like this, it lay on my hands, not Vortigern's. And I knew I could not walk away now, not unless I woke him and attempted to persuade him—somehow—to make his bid for freedom along with mine.

The prisoner's head turned restlessly, a spasm crossed his face, as of pain, and he muttered something too low and indistinct for me to make out the words. And without thinking, I laid a hand across his forehead, as I would have done with any other wounded man in my care.

Both blessing and curse, I have heard the Sight called, and surely it had been so to me before that night. But just then, at that moment, I was willing to count it blessing entire. The moment I touched the prisoner's brow, a feeling, huge and powerful raced through me, as though something inside me were falling, falling into a space where I heard the echoing heartbeat of the earth itself.

The captive man was fevered, still; his skin was hot against my palm.

And for a moment, I Saw only the memory of how he had lain here, hour upon hour, before sleep had claimed him: I saw the rigid, still-muscled control in the taut line of his shoulders, felt how he had been galled almost past endurance by being tied here thus, naked and helpless in the dark. And yet had held himself absolutely, utterly immobile, because if he allowed himself even a moment's slackening of control he would fall to struggling like a wild, frantic bird beating against the bars of a cage.

I should perhaps have been cautious of reaching out with the Sight, after what had happened before in the prison cell. But the liquid fire feeling was still racing through me, echoed by the a circling current, a deep chiming voice that seemed to say, *Yes. Go on.*

And then . . . then, as I reached towards him along the lines of the Sight, I felt it: a swelling, a blossoming of that jagged inner darkness I had sensed before.

His whole body went rigid, and his eyes went wide and blind, though along that echoing channel that had opened between us I could catch snatches of what he Saw: swords clashing, horses screaming, wounded men crying as they crawled through churned earth and leaked their life's blood from a dozen and more wounds.

He would not be as like to call this a blessing. But it meant that after the first moment of breathless shock, I was able to draw the bone-handled knife I had brought and cut the ropes that bound him. And through all, he lay mute, rigid, and staring blindly at whatever ghosts I had conjured with the moment's touch.

I thought at first I would not be able to shift him, even after I had cut him free. But I tugged and pulled at his arms, and finally, after a furiously hissed order from me he did lurch upright, and even allowed me to propel him in a kind of jerky, stumbling rush out the door, past the two guards who still slept the sleep of the profoundly drunk and drugged.

THE PRISONER RELIVED in dream the days before his capture and imprisonment here, of that I was almost sure. I caught occasional flashes from him, enough to

know that he had been plunged into a waking version of the same nightmare he'd been trapped in before I came. A dream memory of a battle's fearful aftermath, of fighting his way through a field of the dead and dying. Buzzing flies, ravens pecking at dead, staring eyes, and the awful, throat-clogging reek of blood.

I closed my mind to it as much as I could as we made our way across Vortigern's camp, weaving a path through the pitched tents of the warriors, past the reeking pens where the livestock were corralled.

Vortigern's warriors had not, you may be sure, foregone to carry their slave girls and army harlots along to this remote place. Vortigern allowed it, since without it many of them would not have stayed, might even have turned on him to overthrow his rule. He had even, in the last weeks, taken to doling out measures of his own expensive wine. On nights after the tower walls had fallen yet again, I had watched his warriors drink themselves into an angry, sullen stupor—or drag their slave girls off and use them hard enough to make them scream.

Most of the men were content to be serviced in a shadowed corner of the fire hall, or outside, since the winter's chill had held off so long. But I could not be certain—not entirely—that one of the older of Vortigern's chiefs might not prefer the comfort of his own tent with whatever woman he chose for tonight.

The night was dark, with only the faintest limpid crescent of a moon to light our way; that was an added blessing to count in our favor. But still my back felt as exposed as though I, and not the prisoner, had been stripped to the skin; with every step we took, I expected to hear a shout of alarm from behind, or the pounding of feet running after us in angry pursuit.

Once as I guided him along a tumbled cairn of moss grown stones—part of the ancient hill fort that had once stood here—he himself gave a half-shout. His eyes had a blind, agonized cast in the pale moonlight, and he jerked his arm up as though to fend off a blow.

The sound was naught but a rough, wordless gasp of air, really, but it sounded in my ears loud as a warrior's battle cry and set my heart thumping. Still, I calmed him as best I could, spoke soft, soothing words as I would have done to a frightened child. Perhaps it helped, perhaps in some way he heard and was eased, I had no way of knowing for certain. The nameless man seemed no more aware of me than he was of the tents and heaps of raw building stones we passed. But at least he made no other sound. And he did not fight me off, but let me keep hold of his arm and guide his steps as I navigated what felt an agonizingly slow path towards the encampment's edge.

It was ill chance, pure and simple, that we were caught.

Vortigern had not forces enough to maintain a constant and effective guard

around the perimeter of his fort. He trusted in the rocky terrain, the steepness of the slopes on which Dinas Ffareon stood, the lack of tree cover, which would mean any attacking army would be slaughtered in a hail of arrows and spears before ever they gained the summit.

That, indeed, was the reason entire that Bron and I had come here at all.

Vortigern had concentrated most of his guard on the fortress's southern side, where steep mountain paths led down to the River Glaslyn. He must needs maintain control of the routes by which he could resupply his fortress with fish and grain and ale if he hoped to survive there long.

And so I had led the prisoner to the northern perimeter of the camp, where the hill face dropped away in an almost sheer wall of rock. Surely Vortigern would not have troubled to post a sentry there.

But he had.

He stood in the shadow of the fortress's rough wooden palisade, which ran along the boundary of the ancient hill fort and was as yet a half-completed effort, like so much else at Dinas Ffareon. My skin had long since grown clammy beneath the dark woolen cloak I had thrown over my head and shoulders, and I might have cannoned straight into the sentry had the moonlight not glinted on the hilt of the sword he wore at his belt.

I froze, one hand clenched tight on the arm of the prisoner beside me, willing him into immobility, as well. And for a moment, I thought we might be able to withdraw unseen. But it would seem whatever luck had carried us this far unhindered had run out, for the next instant the guard stiffened and straightened, then called out, "Who's that?"

He was not expecting trouble, not coming from within his own encampment. That was the only advantage we had, the only reason he did not at once draw his sword. Still, the knowledge thudded through me like the beat of a war drum that I could not hope to bluff my way out of this. Let him come close enough to recognize either the prisoner's or my face and he would have us impaled on his sword point in less time than it would take him to spit on our dead bodies afterward. And Bron's death would immediately follow, of that I had no doubt.

Even as the thought flashed through my mind, my hands were already on the bow and arrow-bag strapped to my back, already plucking an arrow out and laying it on the bow's stave, drawing the hemp cord back along my cheek.

The man must have seen it, dark as it was, or at least sensed danger, in the way men do who are trained for war. He did draw his sword, and took a step forward, head turning as he strained to see in the dark.

My arrow took him in the throat.

In that moment, everything seemed unnaturally razor keen and clear; even the faint stars above grew sharp as ice slivers, bright enough to hurt my eyes. I saw the man stagger backwards, hands scrabbling frantically at the bolt in his neck, saw the hot welling of blood around the wound.

I had already before that night seen men in their death-throes many, many times. Too many to count; any healer will say the same. But never had I had to stand by and watch a man die of a wound I had given him. Never had I seen a man wounded and in pain and done nothing to give him ease.

The breath rattled in the dying man's throat.

It was a horrible sound, horrible, and it seemed to go on an eternity while I stood there, too sick and frozen to move. I felt my muscles shaking, as with fever. Once the guard cried out, a low, choked cry of pain, and at the sound the prisoner beside me tensed and instantly thrust me behind him, one arm flung out to form form a barrier of protection across my body.

His eyes were wide and still blind in the moonlight. The protective gesture nothing to do with me, only part of the nightmare memory into which he'd been plunged. Still, it was an anchor to cling to, the warmth of his body against mine, the solid strength of the muscles of his arm.

Finally the guard stopped thrashing on the ground and lay still. And somehow I made myself move, forced myself to stumble past his body, drawing the prisoner with me beyond the fortresses defenses.

Rocks rolling beneath my feet, tree branches that scraped at my face and caught like claws at my hair and clothes: I felt as though I had joined the prisoner in the depths of waking nightmare, and in truth I remember little of the descent from the summit of Dinas Ffareon.

When I came to myself, we were, I suppose, perhaps halfway down, though well into the thick screen of trees that grew beneath the rockiest stretch of the slope. I was retching up the contents of my stomach into the carpet of scrub and dried leaves underfoot. Though—lest he do aught that would give away our position—I somehow managed to keep one hand holding tightly to the prisoner's arm.

A strange sort of inverse, I thought distantly, of the way the prisoner and I had begun this in Vortigern's prison cell on the morning before.

And then the prisoner woke.

I felt the arm I held quiver and jerk under my fingers, heard him give a choking gasp, like a swimmer breaking the water's surface for air. And then he launched himself sideways at me, throwing me to the ground and pinning me fast, one forearm braced against my throat while his other hand held my arms down.

I could scarce feel shock for that, or blame him; the last he had known he had been stripped and bound and awaiting certain death; he had no idea what had happened or how we had come here, to this dark and deserted spot. But I felt still as though echoes of the dying guardsman's last rattling breaths were being pounded into my ears like spikes. And I would never have killed him, would never have been here at all tonight if not for this man.

I brought my knee up, driving it hard against the prisoner's cracked ribs. He cried out, a choked, raw cry that brought back echoes of the dying guard and made bile rise in my own throat all over again. But he rolled off me and lay half-curved on the ground, eyes closed, muscles shaking, jaw tight as though he were trying to hold back another groan or cry. The faint, silver light of moon and stars that filtered through the branches above showed a sheen of sweat on his brow.

I have said, and it is true, that he could not have stopped me leaving him lying bound in Vortigern's chambers. I could have left him just as easily now.

He was fevered, weak, wounded, still disoriented and dazed. If I ran—and a faint voice in my mind shouted at my muscles to do it—he would never be able to follow.

And yet I stayed.

There are those who imagine the healer's path one for the tender-hearted. To them, let me say this: you are wrong. I have been a healer all my life. And anyone over-kind or soft of heart would shred themselves to pieces grieving for the pain a healer must willingly see and cause.

I had, even before that night, sawed through muscle and sinew and bone to take off warriors' legs or arms that had gone green and swollen with poisoned wounds. I had heard them scream, and yet gone on, because if the poison were allowed to spread beyond the affected limb, the men would die.

To a healer, compassion is neither gentle nor tender, but hard and keen as a blade.

But yet it was my healer's vow that held me fast and kept me now from turning away. That, and the memory of Vortigern's guard, clutching the arrow in his throat with lifeless hands. Once already tonight I had broken faith with my vows in denying comfort to him, a wounded man, albeit one wounded by my own hand. Now here was another man lying sick and hurting on the ground before me. And almost before I knew I had decided, I was dropping to my knees beside him on the ground.

"I'm sorry. I'm so truly sorry." I smoothed the wheat-blond hair back from his brow, made my voice a soothing murmur, counterpoint to all the soft, rustling sounds of the night forest all about.

I had also lied to many a wounded man if the lie would give him a moment's peace. But I spoke true now: I was sorry that I had lost my temper even for that brief moment. Now that I touched him again, I could feel along the thrumming channel still opened between us a glimmer of what he himself felt. Pain, of course, raw and stomach-churning from his many wounds. The lingering scum of nightmare, sticky as grease over his skin.

But beyond that—

Goddess Mother, I had felt nothing like it before, never, not even when Gamma unwound both past and future from the ancient spirals etched in the scrying bowl.

A constant assault beat at the nameless prisoner like a cloud of stinging insects, and I felt it as I touched him now.

He looked out into the shadowed forest and saw each leaf on every tree turning brittle and brown and falling to the ground; saw the sap cooling and turning sluggish as winter came on, then quickening with the spring. He heard the harsh cry of a night bird, and saw how before night's end it would swoop low to snatch up a meadow vole in its claws. Saw how, three days hence, the night bird itself would die, thrashing on the point of a hunter's arrow.

He saw the vast, shadowed shape of the hill fort looming above us, and knew that before the moon had waxed and waned, the earth beneath its half-built walls would be soaked with blood and—

Before I could see any more, he jerked away from me, gasping, his eyes wide and leached of all color in the pale moonlight. Though there was, for the first time that night, a flicker of true awareness in their gaze.

“Gods, you're the one”—the words came out in short bursts of air—“who told Vortigern I was the fatherless child he wanted. Uther's girl-child.”

Compassion or no, I was not fool enough to think him no longer a threat. I held my muscles tensed, ready to spring back in an instant if he made a move towards me. And yet despite the lean warrior's build, the muscles that bunched and tightened under his bruised skin, there was something lost about the look in his eyes, a kind of utter, weary fearlessness in the face of despair. It took little effort to make my voice gentle, soft as before.

“Morgan, yes.”

I saw a muscle jump into relief in the side of his jaw. “And what is Uther's daughter and high seeress doing in Vortigern's pay? Did your father send you here? Or have you decided to turn your allegiance and support Vortigern's claim to the throne?”

My fingers twitched, but I forced my hands not to clench. This man, whoever he was, had a body that bespoke a lifetime of battle, fear and pain. And now he

had spent days in a cramped and airless cell, lashed and burned by Vortigern.

“My father knows I am here, though he didn’t send me, not quite.” I heard my voice harden as I spoke the words. “Snow will fall on the midsummer fires of Beltaine before Uther Pendragon believes any but my brother Arthur can aid in Vortigern’s fall. But when a mission arises, he is still perfectly willing for his unwanted girl-child to take the part that promises almost inevitable death.”

This was, all of it, the story I never told. But I could see some tiny measure of tension ease out of the prisoner’s frame as I spoke. And I could feel, still, that humming presence from somewhere in the earth itself. A chiming cadence like the most ancient of tales, whispering that I must give this man before me the truth, that there could be no half measures here.

“My father Uther loved my mother, I think. Or he did once. But he wanted a son—a son she had not given him, not in ten years of marriage. And, once he had seen her, he wanted Ygraine of Cornwall. And what my father wants, he takes. I do not think he even intends to be cruel. Though whether that makes him a worse man or a better one, I don’t know. But he wanted a son, and he wanted Ygraine. So he accused my mother of lying with his guardsmen when he was away on campaign. Mayhap he even believed the charge. He wanted the charge to be true—and in his mind, so it was.”

I felt my hands tighten. “She was burned at the stake, when I was four years old. I was taken in by a wise woman, guardian of the nemetons at Llyn y Fan Fach. Gamma. She told my father she had dreamed my coming to her.” From somewhere deep in the forest, and owl called, a single low, mournful cry, and I swallowed. “And my father scarcely cared where I went, or with whom. Though he did send Bron with me, as bodyguard. Bron taught me to shoot a bow and arrow and throw a knife. And Gamma taught me the healer’s craft. She was a healer, as well as a seer. She died this past spring.”

For all the grief was months old, I felt my eyes stinging as I spoke the words. “I wanted to stay there, in the forest where she raised me. But she made me swear to return to my father’s court when she was gone.”

Uther my father had professed himself more than glad to see me. And I even thought he spoke true. For the half-moment or two he looked at me before he was away with his warriors, planning their next campaign. But he had not even tried to barter me away in marriage for the sake of some strategic alliance, as many fathers would have done. I must—did, I suppose—grant him that much.

Still, I felt my mouth twist again. “I found, when I returned, that my father had indeed married Ygraine of Cornwall. And paid his druids to prophesy that their son was the promised one, he who would turn back the Saxon tide. I’m sorry for

my brother Arthur, in a way. I had never seen him before last spring. I scarcely know him now. But I imagine it's been a heavy load for a boy of thirteen to carry, to have been promised such a destiny from birth."

For a moment, the swirling blood and water in Gamma's scrying bowl stood before my gaze. I shut my eyes to clear them. "Yet I think, from what I have seen of him, that he carries the burden well. So well, indeed, that the prophecies may even prove true. He may be Britain's savior from the Saxon hordes. If"—a shiver danced across my skin—"if he lives through the battles he and my father now fight. Lives long enough to grow to a man."

I stopped again for breath, then said, still meeting the prisoner's eyes, "A band of my father's warriors has dug a tunnel, beneath this hill." The owl called again as I gestured to the forested slope above and around. "Beneath Vortigern's fortress. That is the true reason Vortigern's walls will not stand. My father is, whatever else, a great warrior. He saw this place and knew he had no hope of mounting an open attack. Too many men would die before the summit of Dinas Ffareon could be gained. And so he set his builders to devising a tunnel, to carrying away the soil and bracing the tunnels walls. They have worked in secret these last weeks, night after night. Covering the mouth of the tunnel with branches and dry brush every morning at dawn. Though, truly, it has not been so hard to hide. Vortigern has not men enough to spare to send many out beyond the fortress on patrol. My part—my part and Bron's—was to gain entrance in Bron's guise of wandering druid, mine of his serving boy. To give Vortigern a false prophesy about the blood of a fatherless child, so that he would look no further for the reason his tower walls fell."

I drew another breath, then said to the prisoner, my voice quiet in the larger hush of night, "You forced my hand when you nearly made Vortigern doubt me, doubt Bron. I told the first lie I could think of to make you stop, and to win back Vortigern's trust. But I could not have let you to pay for the lie with your life."

The prisoner ran a hand down his face. There was just light enough that I could read his expression: dazed confusion as he struggled to block out the visions long enough that he might take in the meaning of what I had told him. That, mixed with wary disbelief. Then both were gone, replaced by something hard and dully angry at the back of his gaze. "This wasn't how it was supposed to be. I was supposed to die. That was all I wanted. Death. Is that so goddamned much to ask? For Vortigern to kill me and put an end to this—"

He made a quick, angry gesture and I saw a shudder twist through him as his gaze traveled around the night-dark forest. The shudder was instantly controlled, though; whoever he was, the force of discipline was deep in him and strong.

He stilled and looked back at me, the dead-eyed, stony look back in place. “I’m sorry if I hurt you, Morgan, Daughter of Uther. But you should go. Go to your father’s men and carry out your mission, if you will. But leave me here to finish mine.”

“No.” I was sick, still, and filled with a chill shaking that felt as though my bones had been turned to ice. I spoke almost before I knew—but if I am honest, in that moment, I could not have said whether I refused because some larger purpose spoke through me or whether I simply could not face the thought of going off into the night alone.

Above us, Vortigern’s fortress still loomed like a great, hulking beast ready to strike. But the woods here, the forest quiet, was at least a little like the forest of oaks where I had been raised. No walls, here, nor anything to keep the night breeze from stirring my hair, lifting the fear from my skin and blowing it free like dandelion seed.

I put my hand on the prisoner’s arm, not a gentle touch, this time, but a hard grip that made his head come up sharply and his muscles tense.

“A god rides your brow, whoever you are. And that is not an easy nor a comfortable gift. Believe me, I have cause to know. But I can’t let you stay here and get yourself recaptured and killed. There’s too much at stake.” I drew in another breath, still gripping his arm. “I need you to come with me now. And if anything happens to me, if Vortigern’s men find us, and I’m the one captured, I need you to swear to me that you’ll run—as fast as you can—to where my father’s men are. I’ll draw you a map on the ground here, now. And you must swear to me that if anything happens to me, you’ll get to my father’s men and deliver the message that they must make ready to attack.”

I saw him start to shake his head, saw him open his mouth to refuse again. I tightened my grasp. “You must! Would you have Vortigern remain king thanks to you? The man who gave you these?” I touched the raw lash marks on his back. “Would you let your choice tonight keep that man on Britain’s throne?”

I could see the fine tremor of a muscle on the side of his jaw, and realized just how on edge his nerves were, how close to the point of breaking.

The moment lengthened, stretched out, the night silence grew and swelled between us, broken only by the harsh bark of a fox from somewhere not far distant, the creak of the branches above as they swayed in the night breeze.

Then, finally, the prisoner jerked his head in a wordless nod. He grimaced as the movement jarred his injuries, but spread his hand out, palm up.

“Go. I’ll follow. I swear to it. As you asked.”

MY FATHER'S MEN were gone.

They should have been hard at work, clearing earth from the tunnel they had made on the eastern side of Dinas Ffareon. But the forest was utterly deserted, and the black mouth of the tunnel, when we reached it, yawned silent and empty as a tomb.

I drew the prisoner inside, rearranged the cover of brush and branches over the opening as best I could. In truth, what else could I do? The prisoner had kept pace with me as best he might—and truly, better than I could have hoped—as we had made our way through the chill, dark night, skirting the thick forest along the base of the hill.

But the walk had tired him. He was pale and sweating, muscles shivering as though he fought at every moment a grim battle to stay on his feet. And dawn was breaking, pale-gray light beginning to spill like a cascade down the hillside. We could not risk remaining out in the open much longer; Vortigern's patrols might be rare in the usual way, but he would surely send out searchers when he woke from the night's drinking and found his proposed sacrifice to the gods gone.

“Sit.”

The prisoner didn't resist, but sank down as I bade him onto the ground, though still with an echo of that spare, focused economy of movement I had seen in him before. A warrior's training, too, had been carved deep into his muscle and bone.

I had given him my cloak to cover himself, and a pair of Bron's breeches that rode low on his hips and ended well above his ankles.

But apart from that, I had had no boots nor other clothing to offer him. I could see, now, in the faint light of dawn that filtered through the branches, that his feet were pale with cold and bleeding from a dozen and more scratches, as were his hands and arms. He braced his forearms on his knees and lowered his head, and I heard the harsh rasp as he fought to control his breathing.

The opening of the tunnel had been braced with split timbers to hold back the weight of earth above and around. I sat down opposite him, leaning against one of the wooden beams. The prisoner's eyes, bleak and gray in the pale half-light, met mine.

“What now?”

I gave him the answer I had already decided on, the only answer I could find just now. “We wait. What else can we do? Vortigern's guardsmen will be out

and combing the forest for you soon.”

He nodded once, moving as though the effort were almost too great, but then rubbed a hand across his face as though he were trying to keep alert.

“Your father’s men?”

“I don’t know.” Now that we had stopped moving, I was realizing how utterly exhausted I was, as well. I heard a quiver in my voice, and gritted my teeth to stop the words shaking any more. “I don’t know what’s happened to them. They should be here.”

All the *might-be*’s seemed to flash in an instant through my mind: my father’s warriors lying dead somewhere out there in the brooding forest, staring up at the lightening sky with sightless eyes. Vortigern’s men tearing aside the branches that concealed our refuge, here, and dragging us out and back inside the fortress walls.

I pressed my eyes closed, then looked at the man opposite me. “You See the future. Don’t you?”

“Is it the future?” I had the impression he spoke without conscious control, as though the words had wrenched themselves free to hang between us in the dim stillness. He ran a hand down his face again and went on. “I don’t know. I don’t know whether what I See actually comes to pass. I don’t—”

He had regained control now; he stopped, gritting his teeth as though biting off any further words, then looked down at the ground and said, in a different tone, “The ground here—it’s wet. We should make sure it’s safe to stay before we do anything else.”

I followed his gesture and saw he was right, the tunnel’s earthen floor was muddied, the footmarks my father’s men had left filled with little pools of dirtied water. At least it showed they had been here, and not long ago.

“Do you have flint?” the prisoner asked.

I dug in the pack I had brought and found flint and tinder both, wrapped in a scrap of oilskin to keep dry. A branch from the covering at the tunnel’s mouth and a torn length of my cloak made a makeshift torch. When he had it lighted, the prisoner led the way along the muddied ground, deeper into the center of the hill.

The torch’s flame cast wild, dancing shadows on the earthen walls, and my heart quickened, all weariness forgotten, for truly I did not know what we would find. My father’s men worked slowly, bracing the walls as they went, and knew what they were about. But there are ever dangers in work of this kind, and a sudden cave-in could have buried them.

The air grew danker and chill as we made our way along, my companion

holding the torch aloft. And then he stopped, so abruptly that I bumped against his back.

“This must be why they stopped work—why they’re not here now.”

I looked past him, and saw that the tunnel ended, not in the cave-in I had feared, but in a wall of solid gray rock, glistening and dripping with moisture in the fire’s dancing orange light. I should perhaps have been frightened. We were deep underground, and there was always the danger that the seeping water would cause the tunnel walls to collapse.

But there was a strange, austere . . . beauty, I suppose, in the scene before us. As anything ancient and immovable must be called beautiful, in its way. The torchlight glinted off the rock’s smooth, rippling face, sparking the drops and running rivulets of water to glowing jewels.

It was like a strange, earth-weighted sanctuary, or a shrine to some god of roots and rock and earth. And I felt, standing there, as though we did indeed stand in the singing presence of one of the Old Ones, who had passed from flesh into spirit to dwell forever in hollow hills like this one.

Perhaps my companion felt it, as well. Or perhaps he was only too exhausted for words. But we neither of us spoke, not until we had made our way back along the tunnel, back to the sunlight that poured through the entrance like some age-old answer to whatever lay buried deep within the soil.

I forced my lips apart to ask, “Is it safe for us to be here?”

“I think so.” He was squinting as though the bright sunlight hurt his eyes, and sat down again, tipping his head back against one of the bracing beams. “If we stay here, near the entrance, we’ll have time to get out if there’s a collapse. And it’s a better hiding place than any other, just now.”

He rubbed his eyes, and I had the feeling he was reaching towards some bleak reserve of strength. Then he looked up at me. “Tell me what happened last night. Tell me how we came to get away from Vortigern.”

I had meant to ask him if he could see aught of our future, now. But I could feel the shivers of the nightmare darkness still twisting beneath the surface of his control. Or perhaps I only saw it in the tautness of his neck and shoulders, the white lines about the corners of his mouth; a healer learns to read bodies as well as minds.

Instead I drew out my healer’s kit. “Let me tend your injuries and I’ll tell you the whole.”

He had opened the leg wound again. I could see the stain of fresh blood through the breeches I had given him, nearly black in the shadows of the tunnel. But it was in truth for myself as much as for him that I had offered to see to

his wounds. Changing bandages, checking stitches and applying salves to the multitude of cuts and scrapes on his skin: these were all familiar, anchoring and steadying me as I spoke.

I gave him the story of our escape from Vortigern's fort. And I thought that I managed well enough at holding my voice steady, at keeping the lingering sliver of ice under my breastbone from entering my tone. But when I came to letting loose my arrow at Vortigern's guard, the prisoner shocked me by putting a hand over mine.

"You had no other choice." He spoke quietly, the blue eyes steady on mine, and all his energy and intensity of focus audible in the words. "No other choice but to stand there and die. You can't blame yourself for choosing life."

And then he drew back, took his hand from mine and looked away, as though shocked in his turn by the current of energy that had leapt between us at the touch. Or perhaps it was only I that had been caught by surprise; even after he had withdrawn the touch I felt the heat of his skin on mine. I was conscious, all at once, of how alone here we were.

I bent to take out the food I had brought. Handed him a slab of bread, which he tore into at once with ferocious, concentrated appetite.

"Have you—" I stopped. "Whether your visions show the true future or no, have you always been able to See as you do now?"

I thought for a moment he would not answer, or would choose to misunderstand. For a long moment he simply looked at me, muscles flickering along the grim line of his jaw. But then: "Always?" He gave a short, harsh bark of a laugh, eyes still bleak and hard. "I don't know that, either. I've had this—this"—he sketched a brief, angry gesture in the air with one hand, finishing by spreading his palm out as though unable to find the word. "I've had this—whatever this is—since I woke in Vortigern's prison cell three days ago. But before that, I don't know. Before that, I don't know anything at all."

He glanced down at his own body, at the bruises that marked him, mottled purple and yellow across his chest and rib cage like lichens on one of the standing stones to the old gods. He laughed shortly again. "Vortigern could have peeled my skin off, inch by slow inch, and I still wouldn't have been able to tell him what he wanted to know."

He spoke more rapidly, now, as though he had tapped some inner welling of poison that must now gush until it ran dry. "I might as well have been born in Vortigern's god-cursed fort. I've no memories from before. Not even my own name. I didn't even recognize my own face when I saw it in the water you brought me to wash in on one of these past days."

It was—oddly—hard to make myself touch him now. But I reached out and touched his head, running my fingers up beneath the fair hair. He hissed through his teeth when I found a place, just above and behind his ear: a hard knot of swelling, where he must have taken a fearsome blow, hard enough to crack the bone. But it had not bled, and he'd had so many other injuries besides this one that I had never found it before.

"I've heard of it happening." My voice sounded as a whisper. "That a man may take a wound to the head and lose all memory of what he has been. Though not... not the other. That I've never heard of before." His hair was smooth and fine beneath my fingers. I let my hand fall away. "Can you remember any family? Father or brothers? Or a wife?"

He shook his head. His eyes looked almost Sight-blinded as he stared at the braced earth that formed the opposite wall. But then his gaze cleared as he smoothed the hair back from his temples with both hands. "No." He braced one hand against the space between his eyes. "I feel as though... as though I've been on my own, alone, a long time." He gave another harsh laugh. "Though how do I know for certain? But I've no"—he raised one hand and let it fall, his gaze darkening as though he searched for the right word. "No memory of love or family, nor any feeling that I've left anyone behind, waiting and watching for my return. There's only—"

He stopped, and was silent so long I thought he meant to stop speaking altogether. But then he said, muscles jumping again in his jaw, fingers curling as though he fought to keep from striking at something, "There's only this nightmare that comes every time I shut my eyes. It's all I remember of this past night. Walking through the dead and dying on a field of battle. And knowing that all of it—all the death and spilled guts and the stink of rotting bodies—is my doing. My fault. Knowing that I ought to be one of those lying dead in the mud. That I ought not be—"

"I know." I remembered the nightmare vision I had shared during our escape. Grief and blood-soaked guilt, and no memory of anything besides. A warrior, a leader perhaps, who had stood against Vortigern and seen his war band crushed? There was, of a surety, no shortage of those. Though usually the gods had at least granted them a swift death with their men.

"It might be just that, though. A dream."

"Just a dream." His voice was rough. "I hope you lie better than that if Vortigern ever catches up with us. Still—" his voice changed, and his mouth twisted in a brief, wry smile. "Thank you for trying." His hands clenched and he looked up at me. "I do mean that. Thank you. For that and for... what you did

tonight. It was—” he stopped again, and I saw white dents appear at the corners of his mouth. “It was an act of courage. Even if I have no right to my life, you have saved it for me. But we both know that whatever else that vision is, it’s more than only a dream.”

“I—” I stopped and looked down at my own hands, Seeing for a brief instant myself in pale green and my brother Arthur, face flushed with drink. The tunnel walls seemed to press in closer; even the weight of my boy’s clothes seemed too much to bear on my skin.

I looked up at the prisoner again. “There must be a reason, though. A reason you’re still alive.”

A flash of something hard and bitter crossed his gaze. But then his eyes searched mine and he said, “You believe that?”

“I have to.”

He was silent a moment, eyes still on mine. Then he nodded once and looked away, gaze fixed on the opposite wall. “Maybe. Maybe it’s a punishment, then. What I See, now, instead of my own past. Maybe that’s why I was not allowed to die at Vortigern’s hand. It’s as though . . . as though I’m living time backwards. In the place where memory should be, I see instead . . . visions. Flashes. Call them whatever you like. But they’re always changing. Nothing is fixed. I look at Vortigern, and I see him screaming as he dies by fire.” The edges of his lips compressed. “Not that I’m likely to grieve over-much if that particular vision comes true. But”—he made the quick gesture of frustration again, raising one clenched hand and letting it fall. “But other times, I see him sitting on a throne, a bent old man, or dying at peace in a tapestried bed. I look at Vortigern’s guards, and I see them gulping ale and getting their miserable, starved looking slave girls with child—and sometimes I see the infants dying before they’re alive a full turning of the moon. Sometimes they live. But it all flows and shifts and changes like . . . like quicksand. I’ve no notion which visions are true. If any are.”

I watched him a moment, then said, my voice soft, “Do you see . . . have you seen any of your own future? Our future, after this?”

The muscles in his throat contracted as he swallowed, and he avoided my gaze. “Sometimes. Sometimes I see myself. Dying, by the sword, with these warrior’s marks still on me.” He gestured to the swirling spirals that covered his shoulders and chest. “Other times I’ve seen myself a white-haired old man with a harp, standing beside a king’s throne. But—” He stopped. Still, he didn’t look at me. “I look at you, and—I didn’t see it, at first. Not until you’d told me who you were, and then—”

He was staring at the tunnel's earthen wall, and there was the same lost look about his gaze, fearless and yet exhausted beyond measure, as well. My fate, and yet now this man, too, had to bear the slithering premonition of it.

To hear me tell of it, it must sound as though I had Seen my own future in Gamma's scrying bowl and decided I could do naught but sit like a terror-frozen hare, waiting for the jaws of destiny to close in. But that is not true.

It was not merely one future I had seen, but many, branching like veins in a dried autumn leaf. I had seen myself running away, crossing the sea to Brittany on a leaking fishing vessel tossed by the storms. And my brother Arthur was wounded in battle. And without me, without a healer to tend him, he took fever and died. The petty kings and chieftains who had united under my father squabbled away what ground they had gained. And Britain fell to the Saxons, who ravaged and slaughtered their way across the land to the western sea.

I had seen myself locked away in a house of holy women. I had even seen myself murder the unborn son I was to bear Arthur with a purge of hemlock. In that future, I died, as well, bleeding my own life out along with the child. And without our child—the boy I would call Modred—to fight beside him, Arthur fell in battle and died, choking on mud and blood.

Future after future, but the tangled threads always unraveled to the same end: Without me, without our son, Arthur would die. Without Arthur, Britain would be utterly destroyed. One path, one future, I could chose, in which Arthur won a peace that lasted at least the span of a man's life. In which Britain was battered, yet unbroken in the end.

Hate it as I might, I could not make it untrue.

And whatever else, I knew at least that the future was no fault of this man's, save that he was forced to stare down its maw whenever he looked into my face.

I put my hand across his mouth and said, my voice soft, "I know. It's all right. I know that, too."

His lips were dry, his breath hot against the palm of my hand. But this time I scarcely felt the touch. I felt as though my own blood pulsed along the quivering lines of the Sight. The throb of something deep inside me was echoed a moment later by those same chiming currents I had heard before. Ancient as the oldest tale, or the presence I had felt within the rock at the end of the tunnel. Like a heartbeat of the earth itself, a voice that seemed to breath, *Yes. Go on. This day is yours.*

A part—a small part—of me stood back, astonished at what I did. But if I let this chance pass me by, when might another come? I had perhaps only this day, this one day to make mine. And after that, a road to walk that grew narrower with

each passing turn of the moon.

And so I didn't let myself hesitate, nor even think over-long. I took my hand away and leaned forward, touching my lips to his.

It was sweet, sweet as a mother's lullaby or the first drenching rain of spring. For the first time since Gamma had died, I felt real warmth flood through me, and something hard and clenched inside my chest seemed to ease.

After the first moment, though, the prisoner drew back, hands firm but gentle on my shoulders to hold me away. "I'm not—" The dawn was truly breaking outside our shelter; I could see him more plainly now. His breath came quick and unsteady, but he gave another quick, wry twist of what was almost a smile. "At least I *hope* I am not the man to take advantage of a girl left without protection and on her own. I don't—"

But I stopped him, laying a hand across his lips again. The circling currents seemed to brush, light as birds wings, against my skin. "Please." I held his gaze. "You say you've been alone a long time—perhaps all your life. But here, right now, you don't have to be."

His jaw was stubbled with several days' growth of beard, rough and prickling against my skin. He exhaled, just a brief burst of air. "You don't know me. *I* don't know me. But I know I'm not—"

But I stopped him again. I felt as though I had crossed a bridge over a fast-moving current. Or been lifted up and set down, and not in quite the same place I had been before.

I lifted one finger and traced the angular line of his brow, his jaw. "I know that you are not evil, whatever you may have done. I know that you have courage to face whatever comes. I know that you should not have to bear the burdens you now carry all on your own."

He looked younger, now, seen as close as this, close enough that I could see tiny flecks of gold in the sea-blue of his eyes. He might perhaps be eighteen or nineteen, but no more, and no more than a few years older than I.

I swallowed to keep my voice from wavering. "You've seen yourself what the future holds for me. Please let me have this. Let me choose for myself now, with you."

EVER SINCE GAMMA had shown me her vision in the scrying waters, I had felt, like the throb of open wounds, how much would have been different had I been the boy my father so craved, the boy I had now spent weeks pretending to be.

My mother would have lived and been hailed as queen. My brother Arthur would never have been born, and perhaps all the prophecies spoken of him would have been made over my cradle, instead. Who can know such things of a certainty? But betimes Arianrhod, mistress of fate and the silver wheel of the stars, seems a cruel goddess indeed.

And yet, that daybreak, I knew that I would never have traded places nor wished to be any other than I was. For in so doing I would have lost the wonder of that morning.

There is an old tale—I heard Gamma tell it once—of a maid of the Fair Folk, who fell in love with a human man and carried him away on a snow-white mare to live with her in the Otherworld. The Summerland, where there is no weariness, nor pain, nor sorrow, nor toil, but only day after day, perfect and unblemished as an endless strand of pearls.

And yet the maid's human love sickened and pined there, for his old life in the human world. And in pity, she allowed him to return to his own home, his own kind. She rode back with him on the snow-white mare, and left him to a human life and human love. But as she turned back towards the veil between the Otherworld and this, she wept, and her tears fell onto the rocks and grass and soil where she rode.

And it was said that any who touched the earth where one of her tears fell would be granted the gift of living a day from the Otherworld, one whole and utterly perfect day.

An old tale, and perhaps never meant to be believed, even when first told. But I could believe it that morning.

We ate of the food I had brought, and slept, and moved together in shadowed, earth-scented half-light. I was aware of the lightening of the tunnel as the day broke outside, of the movement of the patches of sunlight that dappled the earthen floor. But only in so far as they showed me my companion's face more clearly, let me see the look in his eyes: a kind of earnest, astonished wonder that made my heart ache with a pain so fierce it was sweet as that first meeting of our lips had been.

Other women had spoken in my hearing of pain, but truly I felt none. Another gift of the Goddess, maybe. For if the weavings of our lives are spun of both joy and sorrow, the fabric of that morning seemed destined to be cast from threads of joy alone.

"Thank you," I whispered as I clung to him, my face buried against his shoulder. "Thank you."

"I think—" His voice, too, sounded younger. Husky, and with a break in it,

like a youth's caught in the change from boy to man. "I think that's supposed to be what I say to you."

AFTERWARDS, AS I LAY DROWSING with my head on his shoulder and the warmth of his breath a soft tickle against my hair, he stirred all at once and said, "Merlin."

"Merlin?" I raised myself on one elbow and looked down at him. "A hawk?"

His hair was rumpled, and he must have been asleep, as well, because he squinted a little at the shafts of sunlight that filtered through the branches at the tunnel's entrance. He shook his head, one hand rubbing the space between his eyes. "No . . . my name."

I must have given a start of surprise, because his hand came up to brush my hair, just lightly, even as his gaze clouded and his brow furrowed in an effort of remembrance. "I was lying here, listening to the birds outside, and I heard one—a merlin, I thought. And then it seemed as though . . . as though I'd heard the word before. As though it belonged to me. Or perhaps not 'merlin' quite, but something like it. It felt *right*, just for a moment, as though I could remember being called that, sometime before now. But—" He stopped and let out a breath of frustration, shaking his head again. "But it's gone now. Now I'm just . . . remembering that I remembered it. It's not a real memory any more."

I could hear the bird calls from the forest outside, soft chirps and twitters and the high, wild cry of the hawk he must have heard.

"I'm sorry." I could see the lost, shadowed look had crept back into his eyes, and I touched his cheek. "I wish I could give you back your true name, whoever you were before."

He drew his knees up, resting his chin on his crossed hands and staring at the opposite wall. The Sight-blinded look was gone from his eyes, but his look was distant, all the same, as though he listened to a voice from far off.

"I was a warrior." His fingers clenched and unclenched themselves. "I must have been, my body remembers it, even if it's wiped clean from my mind. But I—when I fought with Bron, I knew what to do even without thinking. I wished for a knife. And I knew already how it would feel in my hand, what it would be like to slide the blade between his ribs. As though I'd done it a hundred times before. I could almost feel the blood, hear the little grunt of pain he'd give when the knife found his heart."

I must have made some movement, some small sound because he turned and looked at me, eyes stricken. He shook his head. "I'm sorry. I don't know whose warrior I was, or for whose cause I fought, who I supported in what you tell me of the war for Britain's throne." A brief, wry smile pulled at the edges of his mouth. "Save that it was not Vortigern. But I don't—"

And then he stopped, frowning as though searching for the right words. "I don't know what I was before I woke in Vortigern's prison cell. I don't know what these hands of mine may have done. I think in truth"—the shadow crossed his face again—"that I would rather *not* know, though that may be the coward's choice."

He held out his hands, the pale golden sunlight dappling his skin. "But since my past is gone, I have nothing else to give but this body, these hands. You saved my life this day and gave me . . . gave me far more than I deserve. Just in seeing myself reflected in your eyes. A man I might not be ashamed to be. Merlin—"

He stopped, and then he smiled just a little as he spoke the word. "Merlin, whoever he may prove to be, is yours, then. And besides—" he drew my mouth back to his and kissed me with the same earnest, heart-stopping wonder of before. I felt him smile against my lips. A truer smile, this time. "I think you'd always have had the power to make me forget my own name."

VORTIGERN'S MEN FOUND US at sunset.

We were asleep, both of us, curled together on the floor of the tunnel, my head still on his shoulder, my palm spread flat on his chest. I could hear, even through the hazy sweetness of whatever I dreamed, the steady beat of his heart, feel the solid warmth of his arms fitted around me.

I had not even realized how much time had passed until he started up, waking me as well, and I saw how the patterns of sunlight had faded to faint, pale streaks of orange.

Dusk's shadows blurred the air, but there was yet light enough for me to see my companion's face. Merlin. Even as my heart stumbled in my chest and quickened, the name came with strange, natural ease. As though he truly had been named and reborn in this place that might have been some secret, close-protected womb of the earth itself.

But protected no more; he was alert, now every muscle taut, poised. And as I sat up, he put a hand across my mouth, warning me to silence.

I heard it a moment later, the noise that must have awakened him: men's voices, low and angry, though the words were indistinct, and a crunch of dry bracken under heavy booted feet.

Just for a moment, in the heart-pounding stillness of the tunnel, I let myself hope that it might be my father's men, at last returned. But in the next heart-beat I heard one of the men's voices, louder than the rest: "Spread out and start searching. He can't have got far."

Vortigern's men. I felt as though a giant hand was clenched round my chest, wringing the air from my lungs. Vortigern's men, searching for the man beside me.

And they would find him. The knowledge pulsed in my stomach like sickness. The branches covering the mouth of the tunnel might be enough to deceive an ordinary patrol, weary of the duty and eager to return to the warmth of the ale hall. But searchers, sent out to comb the hillside methodically for any trace of the fugitive man—we could have only a bare handful of moments before they discovered the tunnel's entrance.

I was looking up at Merlin's face, and saw the same knowledge reflected in his eyes, in the set of his shoulders and tight line of his mouth. But there was no fear, nor even hesitation. So much so, indeed, that until he put me gently aside and stepped towards the mouth of the tunnel, I did not even realize what he intended to do.

"You can't!" My voice was a whisper, a breath of sound, no more, but I caught hold of his arm and held him tightly, trying to pull him back. "You can't go out there. They'll kill you!"

"And if I wait any longer, we'll both die." His voice was the same soundless murmur, but his face was as focused with grim intent as ever I had seen it, even during the days he'd spent in Vortigern's cell. "If they find us both here, they'll know it was you helped me escape. They'll kill you, too." His mouth twisted. "And that's the least they'll do once they discover you're not a boy."

I could feel hot tears scalding my eyes, threatening to spill over. I shook my head, unable to trust myself to speak, and he said, his face softening, "Please. I made you a vow. My hands—my self—pledged to your service and protection." He framed my face, brushed my cheek with his thumb. "Please, don't make me betray that vow already. I've small enough time to make Merlin into a man I'm not ashamed to live—or die—as."

And then I saw it, swift as a lightning flash, and knife-edged in its intensity: the visions came more keenly now across the channel between us. I saw him, Merlin, fighting for his life amidst a group of Vortigern's warriors. He had—

from somewhere—gotten a sword, and he moved like a serpent striking, swinging the blade in a fierce, terrible blur. But he was outnumbered, twenty or more against one. His mouth was torn and bleeding freely, and a crimson stain spread on his side. One of his eyes was so bruised it was swollen near shut, but the other eye looked at his attackers with flat, exhausted calm: the look of a man who sees death approach on razored wings.

He kissed me again, just the briefest, gentlest touch of his lips to mine, before the vision had even faded from my sight. And then he took my hand and pressed his mouth against my wrist, resting his forehead a long moment against my arm.

And then before I could move, before I could speak, he was gone, smashing through the branches at the tunnel entrance in one step and sweep of his arm. I heard him shout out a challenge to the warrior's outside, heard him running hard up the hill, leading them away from where I still hid.

Still, I heard Vortigern's men fall on him, the volley of kicks and punches that drove him to the ground, before one of Vortigern's guards—the leader, he must be—snarled an angry reminder that they were to bring back the prisoner alive. And then I heard them coming back, closer to where I hid. I pressed myself back against the earthen wall, heart pounding, feeling as though the air I breathed had thickened and been edged with grit.

He had given me this chance, this one chance, I could not fail him by letting them capture me, as well. That much pierced the numb, icy feeling that had enclosed me like sea fog.

In the end, the warriors passed by the tunnel all unseeing; they were too flushed with bloodlust and triumph to search the hillside more. I felt as though I were encased behind a solid wall of ice, as though my chest had been locked with iron bonds. And I wished—the Goddess knew how hard—that I could have been cowardly enough to close my eyes. But I saw them, just a glimpse as they marched past, dragging their captive back up towards the summit of the hill and the fort.

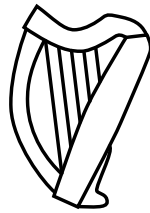
His head lolled on one shoulder and his arms looked dragged from their sockets by the ropes they had used to bind his wrists. And his face was blood-smeared. I saw that much, through the gathering shadows of night, before they passed by and were gone.

I let myself sink, boneless, to the ground, let myself bury my face against my raised knees. But only for a moment. I dragged in one breath, then another, and another after that. Pressed the heels of my hands fiercely against my eyes.

And then I found my clothes and yanked them on with shaking hands. Boy's tunic, boy's ragged breeches. By the time I had dealt with the laces on my boots, I had forced my hands to steadiness and my breathing to slow.

I had let him go, had not stopped him as he saved me from discovery and bartered his life in exchange for mine. But I had made no promise that I would cower here, weeping in the dark, while he went out to meet the death we had both Seen.

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“WE CAN’T GO BACK, LASS.” Bron’s voice was gruff with regret, but his mouth was set in a hard, flat line. “I’m not going to be the one to explain to your father why I helped you get yourself killed.”

We stood at the entrance to the tunnel, silvered, now, by the light of the moon that had risen an hour before.

Bron had left the fortress with Vortigern’s warriors, offering his own supposedly Sight-gifted instincts in searching for the escaped prisoner whose blood would water Vortigern’s tower walls. That had always been our plan, that he would join the searchers and slip away if and when he was able. We had sketched out our intent the previous night, before Bron had gone to Vortigern’s drinking hall and I had walked past the guards to get the prisoner free.

Goddess, that seemed a lifetime and more ago, now.

And it had taken him until nightfall before the approaching dark had given him a chance. But he had gotten free of Vortigern’s men and made his way here, to where he had found me.

If I had felt no pain before, I did feel it now. My skin felt gritty with dirt from the tunnel’s floor, besides, and my every muscle was tight as a bowstring, quivering with the need for haste. But I clenched my hands and said, “You know where my father and his men should be camped.”

“Yes, but—”

“I told you, they struck a wall of stone—maybe a hidden spring—under the hill. That’s why they weren’t here. They must have realized the tunnel would

have to be re-dug if they were to make an entrance into the fortress. So they'll have gone back to camp. They must be there now."

Bron grunted. "All right, maybe so. But that doesn't mean—"

"How many men has my father with him?"

He shrugged. "A hundred spears? Maybe two dozen or more swordsmen. But the numbers don't matter." The moonlight turned his craggy face to a dour mask, but I saw his remaining eye soften. "I'm sorry for the lad as you are. He's a brave lad, and stood up to Vortigern's handling as well as any man I've seen. But he's one man, and we've got a hundred and more of our men's lives to weigh against his. Your father and brother and all the rest would be slaughtered in an open attack. You know that. That's why we started tunneling. But without a way into the fort—"

"It wouldn't be an open attack." It was an effort to make myself speak slowly, not to let the words pour in a tumbled rush past the tightness in my throat. "Not as you mean. Do you think Vortigern will not make a spectacle of his prisoner's death? Not summon all his men to watch as he ensures that the fortress walls will finally stand fast? You know he will—he can't afford not to. Not with his warriors' confidence in his rule at such an ebb. He'll gather them together—and they'll be distracted long enough for our men to swarm the walls and strike."

"Right." Bron huffed an exasperated breath. He had thrown a dark cloak over his druid's robe, but his grizzled hair was still fixed in the dozens of tiny braids. "That's if they knew there was a chance to strike. But for that to work, one of us would have to go and—"

He stopped, remaining eye narrowing in his grim, moonlit face. "Oh, no. Don't even think it, lass. Look you, Vortigern's not going to sacrifice the lad without me there. Doesn't make for near the spectacle if he's not got his tame druid there to kill him by the triple death, like the men were all promised. He's not even going to get the men gathered together, not until I come back. Which I can't, because his men will have got back to the fort by now, and they'll have told him that I... well—"

Bron rubbed his nose with the back of his thumb, and I saw—with a cold lurch that pulled tight in my chest—his tight lips and downcast eyes. "Bron." I gripped his arm. "That you what? What haven't you told me? What did you do?"

"That I had to knock two of his guardsmen on the head to get free of them." Bron's voice was a mutter. Then he looked up, single eye gleaming rheumy blue and hard in the pale light. "I was a fair way worried about you, lass. Not being able to get away from them like we'd planned. Vortigern had set a pair of his fool guards to watch over me—make sure the doddering old druid didn't turn an ankle

or break a leg out wandering the hillside. Their orders were to stick to me like burrs and see I got back to the fortress safe to perform the ceremony when the lad was recaptured.”

From somewhere deep in the forest, came another cry of an owl, low and mournful like a wailing for the dead that would never return.

Bron shrugged, mouth still tightened to a grim slash. “So I told them I was having a vision of where the prisoner was. Off to the east, far away from where everyone else was searching.” Just for a moment, a ghost of a smile touched his face. “Followed me like sheep, the pair of them, both thinking they were going to get the glory of dragging Vortigern’s captive back. And then when we were off at a distance, I knocked them both over their fool heads and made off. Didn’t kill ‘em, though.” He grimaced. “No honor in killing a man just for doing his duty and when he’s made no threat to you. And when you reach my age you start to have more of a care for your soul than you did at twenty-odd. Didn’t think it would matter. Thought I’d find you and the lad here, and all the rest of your father’s men. But there’s no going back to the fort. Not when those two guards will have woken up with the devil’s own headaches and gone back to Vortigern, spitting mad and swearing vengeance on the druid who fights like a swordsman.”

Fate can be a freeing thing. If my future were immovable, fixed as one of the wayfarer’s stars, I could not be killed now, tonight. And if I were killed, I would escape the future Gamma had Seen, the one the harpers would one day sing. More than once since that day I had thought that I had now my choice whether to fear everything or nothing at all. And—

I found my fingers had moved almost of their own accord, to cup my wrist where Merlin’s lips had pressed, as if I could hold the warmth of the touch there even a moment more.

If I were to die, tonight was no bad time. Few, of a surety, are allowed to live their one perfect day, much less keep it always as their final memory of this world.

A night breeze had sprung up, whipping my hair back and rustling the branches above. I drew a breath. “You said it yourself, Bron. One of us must go and bring my father and his warriors, tell them that if they are to attack it must be now. And it must be you, since you can’t go back to Vortigern. I will go back to Vortigern’s fort. I’m the one who claimed to have Seen that Mer—that the prisoner was a fatherless child. I can tell him that I know the rituals as well as you, that it’s more fitting I should conduct the rites.”

Bron’s brows drew together. “Are you out of your pig-swiving—” he clenched his teeth over the words. “Are you out of your mind? When you were a chattering little magpie of a four-year-old girl, I drank Uther Pendragon’s ale and kissed his

sword and cut the palm of my hand to swear an oath as your guard. If you think I'm going to break that vow—”

Twice, now, tonight, I had heard men speak of vows to guard my life with their own. I had asked for neither, and now, facing Bron in the moonlight, my temper broke.

“You would rather it all be for nothing? The weeks spent digging this tunnel? *Our* weeks of fawning on Vortigern and standing by doing nothing while he tortured an innocent man? You would rather see it all go to waste? You would rather see Vortigern squatting on Britain's throne while the Saxons rape our lands and burn our fields?” I stopped for breath. “Look me in the eyes, Bron. Look at me and tell me you believe in your heart that my father would not want me to do this—that he would ever chose my life over Britain's throne.”

For a single brief eternity, we stared at each other, my heart beating hard, while all around the branches swayed and creaked in the night wind. Then, finally, Bron's gaze fell. “I must be out of my rutting mind,” I heard him mutter.

I let out the long, slow breath I had not known until that moment I held. “Tell my father to come from the north—that's where the defenses are weakest, the walls are only half-built. Or through the gate, if I can find a way for it to be left without a guard. But—” I stopped myself, trying to force back the cold that now rushed in, biting to the bone. “You know that as well as I do. Just . . . take care. And”—I swallowed—“thank you, Bron.”

Bron stood a moment, staring at the ground. But then his head lifted, and his remaining eye looked into my own, steady and—I thought—misted over if only for a moment. “Your father might choose the throne. But certain sure I would not.” One gnarled hand came up to my shoulder and squeezed. “You keep yourself safe, lass. Don't try anything daft.”

I saw his throat muscles bob up and down as he swallowed. And then he turned and was gone, vanishing amongst the deeper shadows of the surrounding trees.

THERE ARE TALES of travelers who wander into the crystal caves of the Otherworld and have their wits stolen by the Fair Folk so that they may never speak of what they have seen. I thought, after leaving Bron, that whatever gods dwelt beneath Dinas Ffareon might have taken my capacity for fear. All capacity for feeling, really, for in truth I felt nothing, neither fear nor any other emotion besides.

Only perhaps impatience and a grim intensity of purpose when I must needs freeze into immobility at a sound—a snap of a twig or a rustle of branches—among the trees.

I had no notion whether the news of the prisoner's recapture had yet worked its way through the night to recall the men Vortigern had sent to hunt. Stray searchers could still be out, and I could not risk falling into their hands. Not when I had no idea, either, whether word had yet spread of Bron's attack on his guards.

But the body is a strange thing, as any healer has cause to know. Dying men of a sudden rise from their beds and get well; hale men sicken and wither, and from no cause but despair. And now, as I came within sight of the main gates of Vortigern's fortress, my mind might still be as though frozen, fixed on a single intent. But the blood thudded in my ears like ocean waves, and my palms were clammy with sweat even so.

Moonlight spilled like silver rain onto the rock and timbered fortress walls. Wind whipped the torches set over the fortress's main gate to tattered banners of flame. I had stopped in the deepest part of the shadows of scraggy trees that grew from the stony soil, and for a moment, I closed my eyes. Rested my forehead against the trunk of a spindly ash and willed the beat of my heart to slow.

Then I straightened and looked up again, towards the massive gates.

I could see, beneath the burning torches, the men posted at the fortress gates as sentries; the light picked out with merciless clarity their leather helmets, the blades of their spears and swords. I stood in the deepest part of the shadow on the edge of the trail. They had not seen me yet, nor heard anything amiss.

But I had no hope of getting by them unseen; the instant I stepped out onto the path, I would be challenged, hailed down.

If time had not been so short, I might have tried working my way back around to the northern side of the fort, finding a way up the rocky slope to where Vortigern's defenses were weakest. That might be safer. Would be, not *might be*. I acknowledged it to whatever fates were governing this night.

But climbing the nearly sheer rock, alone and in the dark, would be harder, far harder a feat than the sliding, slithering descent had been. My muscles were already shaky with exhaustion, and it had taken me far too long already to make my way here from where I had parted with Bron.

I could feel each moment now like a bowstring, pulling ever tighter and tighter in my chest.

I found myself arguing it to the fates. Or perhaps the image of Bron I had carried away with me, to the gruff echo of his voice telling me not to take foolish

risks.

Every time I shut my eyes, the remembered vision flickered against the lingering dazzle of torchlight: a man with wheat-colored hair and sea-blue eyes, slashing with his sword and facing his own death with flat, exhausted calm.

I focused on the helmeted guards, willing all cracks in the grim, icy numbness away. I wore my boy's tunic and breeches; my face was dirt-streaked and my cropped hair tangled with twigs and flecks of dry leaves. If the guards had not yet learned that Bron was not what he seemed, I might be able to lie my way past, as Bron's serving boy. Or—

The gate swung open, and a third man stepped through. Another guardsman, wearing the same leather helm. He spoke to the sentries; I caught just the low murmur of their voices, though the night wind snatched away the words. Their gestures were quick, though, jerky and excited.

And then the sentries turned and followed the third man inside the fort at a run, leaving the gate without its guard.

How long I stood there I have no idea. It might have been the briefest of instants, or considerably longer; time seemed to have frozen along with my body as I stared at the unguarded gate, my heart beating a sickening rhythm in my ears.

And then I ran as the sentries had, all exhaustion fallen away in a moment, up the steep path to the fortress walls.

What I would have done had they barred the gate from the inside—I have no idea of that, either, truly none. I had no time for plans or even for thought, beyond those of concentrated purpose. But the massive wooden doors were unbarred. One of the doors even hung a little open, still shivering with the guardsmen's push.

I HAVE THOUGHT, and often, on how easy it is—too easy by far—to forget the suffering at the heart of so many harpers' tales. To forget that real men and women once earned the telling of those stories, in grief and pain and tears.

And yet this I will say: that I wish I had a harper's words to tell of the scene that met my eyes within the fortress walls.

I had glimpsed, in vision, Merlin fighting twenty and more of Vortigern's guards with a stolen sword. I had relived the memory of it with every beat of my heart on the journey here. And yet no vision could have matched up to the reality before me as I pushed open the gate with all my strength and stepped inside.

He wore still the ragged breeches, but fought bare chested, like some blood and flesh vision sprung from the old warriors' tales. Bron's swirling blue whorls and spirals still marked his skin.

He fought on the open square of churned and muddied ground where Vortigern's warriors daily sparred with spears and swords. The light of surrounding torches turned his loosened hair to a gleam of gold amongst the leather helms of Vortigern's men, showed the patch of sticky scarlet from a gash in his side.

And I can say that he wielded the sword like harnessed lightning. Or that he fought like a striking eagle, screaming out of the sky. But no words—perhaps not even a harper's—can match up to the reality of how he spun and slashed and beat back attack after attack from the surrounding men, all the while with his own death plain in his gaze.

All around him were littered the bodies of those who had fallen to his blade, leaking their blood out onto the soil, some crying and dragging their own spilled guts behind as they tried to crawl away; that is one part of battle the harpers do not often sing.

Vortigern stood back and to one side, hurling curses at his own men, urging them onward, to attack, to kill the prisoner where he stood that the walls might stand. And they tried, the Goddess knew they tried, tripping over the bodies of the fallen, slipping and sliding in spilled blood.

One man here or there would get close enough to strike a blow, to open another gash in Merlin's arm or his side. But then Merlin's blade would spin and lash out, deadly-swift as a biting snake, and another of Vortigern's warriors would fall.

His death was inevitable, of that there could be no mistake. For every man he killed, another pressed forward to take the fallen man's place, and sooner or later he would be too slow to strike away one of their blows. But he would take twenty and more with him into Annwn, the Lord of the Dead's, great feasting hall.

I made no sound; I would swear to it. I made no sound, nor even moved from where I stood, pressed against the fortress's outer wall. And yet Merlin's head came up, and his eyes looked straight into mine.

Only for an instant, no more than a split heartbeat of time.

And yet it was too much. Or enough. Enough to make him falter and lose the rhythm of parry and thrust with his sword, enough to form a crack in his guard.

A hard swing from an attacker's blade made him stagger, momentarily off balance, and I saw another of Vortigern's men close in, like a wolf scenting the kill, his sword upraised.

What had I planned when I left Bron? Scarcely anything, really. Nothing of use, now.

I had expected to find Merlin bound and in chains, awaiting the triple death of drowning, strangling, and the knife. And I had thought, in Bron's absence, that I might come forward myself and claim knowledge of the rites. Then stall and spin out the performance until—the Goddess willing—Bron could lead my father's men over the unguarded walls.

Now, in the instant Merlin faced his death—a death I had brought him for the second time, I had no time for plans, nor even for thought.

I screamed, long and piercing and loud, loud enough to be heard even above the roar and shouts of the warriors.

A dozen and more heads turned to me. Several more of the warriors took a few steps towards me, faces angry, blades drawn.

But the killing blow aimed at Merlin never fell. And I would have screamed again, and gone on until the entire crowd's attention was drawn to me, if it bought Merlin a few precious seconds more.

I had no chance.

As though my thought had in that instant crackled between us, Merlin leapt forward, straight into the crowd of his attackers. I heard a voice cry out, and realized only a moment later that it had been my own. My vision shivered at the edges, and I expected at every moment to see him fall under strikes from a dozen and more swords.

But he never did. He moved like a bright jet of flame, like a burning brand through the sea of Vortigern's warriors, ducking, weaving, striking out and parrying blows with his sword, spinning and weaving under their guard. My teeth were clenched to keep from screaming again. But he fought in a blur of movement, and with such swift savagery that I would scarce have had time to draw breath before he had carved out a path to the other side of the crowd where Vortigern stood.

I believe it was shock, as much as anything, that made Vortigern's men stand back for another frozen heartbeat of time. Only a moment, but time enough for Merlin to seize hold of Vortigern and drag him backwards, the blade of his sword at Vortigern's throat.

“Stop!” The shouted command rose above the roar of the crowd. “Stop or he dies!”

Vortigern's hands had come up, reflexively, to grasp at the still-dripping blade that bit into his neck. Merlin must have tightened his hold enough to pierce the skin, though, for a fresh trickle of red slid down to stain the fur-trimmed collar of Vortigern's cloak. Vortigern went still, eyes contracting, lips drawing back over his teeth in the snarl of a wolf at bay.

“Do as he says!”

The warriors might have rushed him, even still, and even at the cost of Vortigern's life. Merlin was but one man, and had shamed and slain their comrades. And many of those assembled had small love for Vortigern after his last few months of rule.

But in the moment's hesitation, the moment's stillness that Vortigern's order had won, Merlin leapt backwards, onto the platform of an upturned and half-rotted frame of a wagon that had stood behind him at the edge of the practice yard.

It was an astonishing feat; I measured it afterwards and found the wagon to be more than half the height of a well-grown man, and Merlin was dragging Vortigern's weight up with him, besides. And yet he kept his footing, kept his hold on Vortigern and the hilt of his stolen sword.

"Keep back!" Merlin's face glistened in the flickering torchlight with sweat and spatters of blood. His unbruised eye looked bleak and shadowed, and his mouth was set in a hard, grim line. That look I had seen before, many times, on the faces of those in my care: the look of a man suffering almost unbearable pain. And I wondered of a sudden what he saw when he looked at the field of the dead and dying: children growing up fatherless, wives weeping for the men he had just killed?

Still, his voice rang out again, a furious shout, biting as steel. "Any man comes a step nearer, and your king's head rolls at your feet!"

One or two of the warriors had taken a step nearer, but stilled at that, hovering undecided a handful of paces from the wagon's rim, blades upraised.

The battle hunger of the crowd was almost palpable, a buzzing, crackling presence that made itself known in eager faces and clenched hands, in uneasily shifting feet and warm, panting breath. A thousand tiny signs that in an instant, Merlin's hold on the warriors could snap and they could close in for the kill.

"Listen!" His voice sounded hoarse with shouting, but his balance on the unstable platform of the wagon bed never faltered, no more than his grip on the sword at Vortigern's throat. "Listen to me! Your druids have claimed that my blood will make the building stones of this place stand. But I tell you now, that is a lie!"

A hiss, a sullen, angry mutter went round the crowd at that, and one or two more of the warriors shifted from foot to foot where they stood. Merlin's voice cut off the murmur of sound.

"Where is he? Where is the druid now, who claimed the soil here must needs be sprinkled with the blood of a fatherless child?"

Another stir of voices and shifting movement went round the crowd of fighting men—but a different one, this time. From where I stood, pressed back in the

shadows of the fort's outer wall, I thought that for the first moment a thread of doubt, fine as a hair, might have wound its way through the furious lust for blood.

In the glow of torches, Merlin's eyes gleamed almost red, and the smokey firelight gilded his face like the hammered metal face guard of some warrior of old, made an aureole of his wheat-colored hair. "Vortigern's druid is not here. But I am! And I will tell you why these towers fall time and time again! Dig!" He made a violent stab with his free hand towards the ground where the fighting men stood. "Dig, I tell you! Dig down into the soil if you would know the reason no building walls will stand. Dig. Or"—he tightened his hold on Vortigern—"Or your king dies now!"

There was a moment, another heartbeat of time where the armed and helmeted warriors, the very currents of air that whipped the torches and blew back Merlin's hair seemed to still, waiting. And then, slowly, doubtfully, and with more than one sullen, wary glance, the men-at-arms started to dig. With their sword blades—for they had nothing else at first—they stabbed and scabbled at the soil.

A few of the men stumped off, after a short while of this, to drag out proper shovels and picks, and began shifting and hauling the dirt away with those. Merlin stood throughout on the upturned wagon, stance sure, gaze unfaltering; Vortigern, still pinned in his grasp, was as one turned to stone, his breaths coming in short, panting huffs.

And I stood frozen as well, the outer wall of the fortress solid and rough at my back, strangely grateful for the pain of a dozen and more scratches and bruises from the journey here that now made themselves felt. The pain gave me an anchor, a hard core of glowing ember that kept the fury in my chest from burning away to powdered ash.

All the time I had labored, this last day and more, trying to win Merlin's trust, and it had not occurred to me—not even once—that he might not be worthy of mine.

I had Seen, as he did, the soil of the fortress stained red with blood. But it might as easily be my father's men bleeding their lives away into Dinas Ffareon's muddied ground. Would be, when Vortigern's warriors found the beams and bracing of the tunnel beneath their feet, and were forewarned and ready when my father's men attacked with Bron.

Merlin's head came up with a jerk and turned, as though the thought had been an arrow strike, tugging his gaze to my patch of shadow. For an endless instant, his eyes looked into mine, twin pools of gleaming torchlight in the copper and gold mask of his bruised face.

And then he turned back to the laboring men. "Look down!" His voice rang

out again, a hoarse war cry over their grunts and the scrape and thud of shovels biting into the earth. “Look down into the pit you’ve dug. You will find a pool. A pool of water beneath the soil here.”

The crowd stirred again, and then a voice came out of the deepening pit in the ground, “He’s right.” And then—a second voice, this time: “He’s right! There’s water here!”

The muscles of Merlin’s throat contracted as he swallowed. Both throat and chest were streaked with tracks of drying sweat, silver, as though the gold warrior’s face guard had begun to melt and run. “A pool lies deep within that soil!” he shouted. “And beneath and within that pool lie two dragons. One white, the other red. You—you have all heard the tales. You know I speak true. Llud of the Silver Hand buried two dragons, beneath the ground, in the days before the rocks themselves began keeping time. I tell you these dragons—these two warring dragons—lie here, beneath Dinas Ffareon! It is they who cause the tower walls to fall with their eternal struggles. One white dragon, for the Saxon hordes. One red dragon, the dragon of Uther, Britain’s rightful king. And I tell you now, dig up these dragons, let them crawl from the soil and have their final battle here, before our eyes! I swear to you, the red dragon—Uther Pendragon’s dragon—will triumph in the end!”

I do not know, of a truth, whether they would have believed him or no. One thing to tell a harper’s tale to a man when he lies wounded in the depths of fear and pain. Another to ask him to believe the story true, and on the words of a man who has battled and slaughtered his comrades.

And yet Merlin had struck among them like a thunder storm, battled single-handed and slain a dozen and more of Vortigern’s finest warriors. If anyone could talk of wonders and be believed, it was surely he, backlit by the glow of torchlight, body bruised and bloodied and yet still painted with the blue woad that had guarded warriors from days long passed into story.

Vortigern’s men held back, uncertain, looking wildly from one to the other, faces awed and suspicious and angry by turns in the patched shadows of moon and torchlight.

From the stables at the far side of the fortress, one of the horses whickered, low and nervous. And then, as the very air seemed to thicken and press in all around, my father’s men erupted from all sides: screaming through the unguarded gate, boiling over the half-completed northern wall. A tide of armed and shouting men waving spears and axes and swords.

FIGHTING MEN ARE FULL of the glories of war, of their own deeds of courage, of enemies hacked down and stripped for their wealth in arms or gold. This I know, though: only a fool could stand in the thick of battle and be entirely without fear.

I remember the noise most of all, the roaring war cries of the men, the clang and clash of blades, the terrified screams and pounding hooves of the horses in the stables.

And yet . . . and yet I could, that day, begin to see just a little of what the harpers had sung. Vortigern's men were utterly unprepared, off balance and weakened already by the fight with Merlin. My father's men tore into them like wolves savaging sheep. Many fell, bleeding, to the ground, many more fled into the night, through the open gate or over the unfinished wall.

And there was a fierce, terrible beauty to it all. I stood shivering, sickened, fear a metallic taste in my mouth. And yet I could not tear my gaze away.

I had lost sight of Merlin; strain as I might, I could not see his wheat-blond hair among the crowd of fighting men, nor the darker head of Vortigern. But I saw Bron amongst the throng of heaving, grunting bodies. He was wielding a sword with slashing blows, his face fixed in the grin of battle, remaining eye alight. More than one man fell to his blade.

I saw my father, his war cloak streaming behind him, the scarlet dragon blazoned on his shield. And I saw my brother. Arthur, the brother I scarcely knew, wielding a sword that looked too heavy by far for a boy of fourteen. And yet he used it well, and his square-cut face was grim but fearless as he hacked and slashed at a warrior twice his size.

I had frozen, watching Arthur, and the scene had gone distant. Almost as though I watched the battle in Gamma's scrying bowl. And then, swift as an adder's bite, one of Vortigern's men reared up before me, huge and powerful, sword upraised to deliver a killing blow.

What does one think, in that moment of facing death? In a tale, I might have seen Gamma's face, or even my mother, standing before me. Or at least seen glimpses from my life pass like visions before my eyes.

I felt nothing, though; my mind was too blank even for fear.

And then, before I had even gathered breath enough to cry out, the bloodied point of a sword ripped through the man's belly, and he fell instead at my feet.

Merlin tore his blade free, stepped over the body, and caught hold of my arm, dragging me back from the worst of the fighting, shielding my body with his.

If I had been too numb for fear before, the numbness was shattered now. My whole body started to shake, and I clung to him, slippery with blood and sweat as he was, before I could push him away.

“Go!” I had to shout to be heard over the noise. “Go, I’m all right. Go back to where the men have need of you!”

Merlin shook his head, still gripping my arms. “It’s over.”

He was right.

Vortigern’s men were dead, or running for their lives, or kneeling captive on the ground, at the point of my father’s men’s swords.

I felt something wet on my face, and when I wiped it with the back of my hand, it came away sticky red. Spattered blood from the man Merlin had killed; he had been that close to me, as close as that to ending my life with his sword.

I looked up at him. “Vortigern?”

“Gone. I had him,” Merlin said. “And then I saw the man come towards you—about to strike, and—I let Vortigern go. If I’d taken the time even to kill him I’d not have gotten to you in time.”

I saw Merlin swallow and put my hand up to stop him saying any more. Though, truly, I do not know what I would have said.

I had no chance, though, no chance in any case. My father, Uther the Pendragon, was there, huge in his mail armor and bloodied war cloak, snatching me up in an embrace hard enough to bruise my ribs.

“Well done, girl, well done!”

My father I scarcely knew, either, no more than my brother Arthur. Before the spring, I had not seen him since I was four years old. And it was strange, passing strange, to be caught now in his embrace, to smell the sweat and blood on his skin, and see the network of fine lines about the corners of his eyes.

He was a big man, and a handsome one. Very like Arthur, truth be told, with blue eyes set deep in a square, weathered face where age was just beginning to loosen the skin over the bold, prominent bones.

“You’re a daughter any man might be proud of, and no mistake!” Uther Pendragon swung me round in a circle. “Brave as a lad, that’s my girl. Got the devils on the run, now. Only thing is, looks like Vortigern got away. But he’ll not get far. We’ll soon hunt him down.” He looked from me to Merlin, still standing beside us, bruised and blood-spattered as my father. “And who is—”

And then he stopped. Stopped and set me down and strode across the fortress to where my brother Arthur was holding a fold of cloth pressed to the bloodied gash in his arm. “It’s nothing,” I heard Arthur say, and my father nodded and inspected the wound, then rewrapped it in a cleaner strip of cloth he tore from his own cloak.

I watched them.

And thought of the many, many threads of which fate was woven.

It should have angered me, perhaps. And yet, I stood and looked across the bloodied field of battle at my father's gray head bent to Arthur's golden fair one. And I could understand, at least a bit. A warrior of my father's ilk wanted a boy, a son to ride into battle at his side. The way of the world, the way Uther Pendragon was made, and it, too, I could hate or no without ever making it untrue.

"He does love you." Merlin stood beside me, still. Had followed my gaze to where Uther Pendragon stood with his son.

"He does," I said. "Perhaps he always did. But not quite enough."

And, oddly, there was in that a strange, backward sort of peace.

I moistened my lips and tasted blood. And realized that Merlin and I were alone, standing and facing each other beneath one of the flickering torches on the edge of the battle's aftermath.

I looked up at him. "I doubted you." My whole body was shaking, still, but the words forced themselves from my throat. "Just for one moment, no more than that. But when you told Vortigern's men to dig. Just for an instant, I thought you were going to betray us all."

"I know." Merlin's face looked the mirror of my own exhaustion, the eye that was not swollen shut hollow and rimmed with red. But then a quick, wry smile touched the edges of his mouth. "Did you think I would blame you for it? I asked myself whether I could expect a girl idiot enough to come back to Vortigern's fort to have wit enough to believe my sworn word. The answer came up: No, I could not."

I laughed. On the edge of that bloodstained field, I laughed, and felt the painful constriction in my chest start to ease a fraction of a bit. "I'm sorry for it, all the same."

Merlin reached down and lightly wiped a smear of blood from my cheek with his thumb. His face was grave once more. "I'm sorry, as well. Sorry you had to see that. Sorry I could not have spared you this."

Now, as the first waves of shock ebbed away, the sounds of the battle's aftermath began to filter in to my ears: moans from the dying, shouts from the victors, and the tramp of booted feet as the looting began. Vortigern's stores of grain and ale were dragged out from storage. And from somewhere I heard a woman's scream; my father's warriors must have found the slave girls in whatever bolt hole they had been hiding, as well.

I could see in Merlin's gaze a reflection of the morning we had spent together, in the tunnel beneath the hill where we stood now. So much had passed between us, and yet now the memory of it made me feel uncertain, almost, and strangely shy.

I looked down at the ground, then back up at him and said, “You’ll be known now as a great enchanter. One who calls forth dragons from the soil.”

He looked down at the sword still clenched tight in one hand, and the bleak look crossed his gaze once more and a shudder went through his frame. “My days as a warrior are at any rate done, for good and all.”

His face was shuttered, remote, as though he had stepped back behind a wall to a place I could not reach him. And I felt a hollowness spreading through me as it occurred to me that he might mean that for a goodbye.

But then our eyes met, and I realized that he looked as uncertain as I felt. “I would not—I would not wish to hold you to anything we may have said before. Any promises we made. I”—his eyes were grave—“it seems like a dream, now. I would not wish you to tie yourself—”

I stopped him. “What do you See”—my voice was fierce—“what do you See when you look at me? For tomorrow, I mean. Not days or years from now. If you truly now live time backward, what do you see for me—and for you—tonight, and tomorrow’s morning?”

Merlin let out a long, slow breath. And then he smiled, one sided. “If the past is gone, I suppose I can think of worse things for Merlin to be than ‘enchanter.’ Mayhap . . . your father has need of such a one?”

I felt myself smiling as well. “Mayhap he has.”

He looked back, then, back at the body of the man he had killed in my defense. He swallowed again. “I—I could not let him kill you.” His jaw clenched. “Gods, I could not. Even though it meant letting Vortigern go free. And yet if I had—”

If he had, I would have escaped the weight of the future that he had seen, that Gamma had shown me. The ever-narrowing path I must walk for Britain’s sake.

I shook my head. And then I reached out and traced the bruises on his face just lightly, with the very tips of my fingers. He closed his eyes at my touch, just for a moment, then took my wrist and held it to his lips, as before.

My fingers twined themselves, almost of their own accord, in the wheat-blond hair, flecked, now, with speckles of dried blood. “I’ve had today.” My voice was a whisper, scarce more. “I have today. And I have at least one morrow. Perhaps the promise of one tomorrow in the sunlight is all any of us can ask for or need.”

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About the Author



A longtime devotee of historical fiction and fantasy, Anna Elliott lives in the D.C. Metro area with her husband and two daughters. She is the author of the *Twilight of Avalon* Trilogy published by Simon & Schuster's Touchstone imprint. Visit her at www.annaelliottbooks.com. Look for other FREE stories from the *Twilight of Avalon* universe, including *The Witch Queen's Secret*!

Connect with Anna Online

E-mail: ae@annaelliottbooks.com

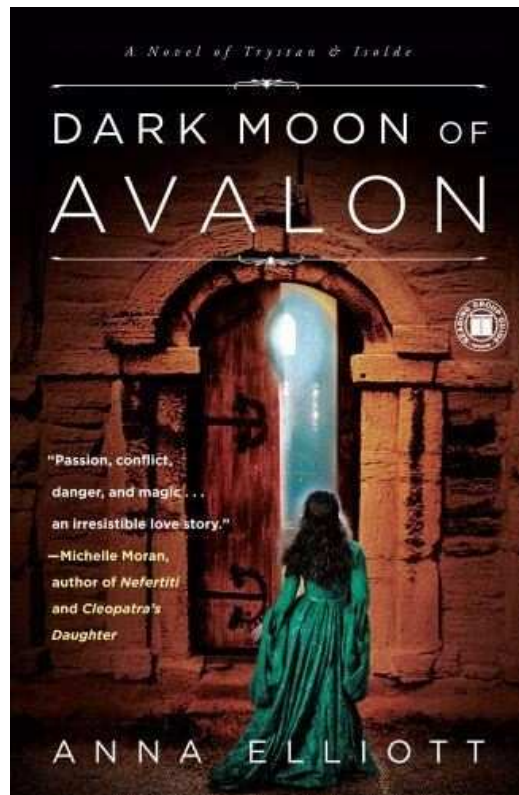
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