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The Lame Dancer

A Novel of Arthurian Britain

PATRICK McCORMACK

Also by Patrick McCormack

Published by Constable & Robinson

ALBION: *The Last Companion* (1997)

ALBION: *The White Phantom* (2000).

ALBION

The Lame Dancer

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PREFACE

By Howard Wiseman
March 2008.

Patrick McCormack has suggested I write the brief story of how I came to be “publishing” his novel *The Lame Dancer* on my website. I cannot think of a better way to begin than to quote from the letter I was able to send (after an earlier failed attempt) to Patrick via his publisher, Constable & Robinson, in September 2007:

I am writing to you regarding your *Albion* trilogy of Arthurian and post-Arthurian Britain. I am a great fan of the first two novels. I have read a great deal of historical Arthurian fiction, and I think your books are unparalleled in their ability to capture the reality of 6th century Britain – the decaying economy, the complications of the politics and the relations between Britons and Saxons. You also have one of the freshest takes on the Arthurian legend. You have clearly put an enormous amount of research into these.

The reason I am writing is that I’ve been waiting, ever since *The White Phantom* came out, for the third book in the trilogy, *The Lame Dancer*. It was advertised to come out years ago, but never has. I now understand from your publisher, Constable and Robinson, that you have finished it, but that they may never release it. This is very disappointing for me, and, I’m sure, many other fans.

Is there any way you could make available your final novel for fans like me?

To my great pleasure, Patrick was happy to oblige by sending the electronic manuscript of his novel. Moreover, he confirmed with Constable & Robinson that, since they felt unable to continue with the third *Albion* volume, he was free to release it on the web. I am very grateful to Patrick for allowing me the honour of publishing it on my site. I hope that everyone who has read the first two novels will manage to find this final installment, and that it will be discovered by a new set of readers as well. I urge any of the latter to buy, beg, or borrow *The Last Companion* and *The White Phantom* and read them first.

DRAMATIS PERSONAE OF ALBION

Ambrosius	The Elder and the Younger. Father and son who opposed the policies of Gworthigern and refused to acknowledge his authority.
Angus	Onetime abbot of a monastery visited by Nai. In his younger days he served as a warrior with the High Lords of Dumnonia, and with Arthur's Companions at Eidin. Kin to Lleinawg and Eremon, married Custennin's sister.
Arthur	Emperor or Amherawdyr of Albion.
Bedwyr	One of Arthur's Companions. He and Cei were Arthur's oldest friends and chief Companions.
Bolanus	A deeply Christian inhabitant of Cunetio.
Budoc	Name used by Bedwyr after Camlann, while he was a monk in Brittany and a hermit in Dumnonia.
Cei	Called 'the Long Man' because of his great size. With Bedwyr, the chief of Arthur's Companions.
Celemon	Daughter of Cei and friend of Gwenhwyvar.
Ceolric	A young Saxon who aided Bedwyr and Nai in their struggle against Eremon.
Cerdic	King of the West Saxons or Gewisse. Son of Elesa.
Cynon	One of Arthur's Companions.
Custennin, or Constantine	High Lord of Dumnonia in succession to his father Cunomorus.
Dunnere	Follower of Elesa.
Echel	Grandson of Glewlwyd.

Elesa, or Eliseg	Saxon adventurer, from a family long settled in Britain. Father of Cerdic.
Eremon	Outlaw of Irish descent. Foster son of Gereint and kin to Lleminawg and Angus. Slain by Nai.
Eurgain	Girl from the village of Porthyle who aided Bedwyr and Nai in their struggle against Eremon, now living with Ceolric.
Gereint	Minor lord in Dumnonia, served by Nai. Also, common name in Dumnonia.
Glewlywd	Originally Gatekeeper to Gwenhwyvar's father. Later Gatekeeper to Arthur.
Gorthyn	Dumnonian warrior, member of Gereint's warband. Foster brother of Nai.
Guthlaf	Frisian living in Wermund's hall. As a young man he sailed with Elesa.
Gwenhwyvar	Wife to Arthur.
Gworthigern the Thin (Vortigern)	'The High King': Vitolinus, who first invited the Saxons under Hengist to Britain, to help fend off the attacks of the Picts and Scots.
Gwydawg	Son of Menestyr, killed Cei.
Hareth	Frisian. Kinsman of Guthlaf and father of Wermund's second wife.
Hengist	Leader of the original Saxon mercenaries invited to Britain by Gworthigern.
Hildeburh	Descendant of Hengist and first wife of Wermund.
Isag	Follower of Angus.
Isgofan	Follower of Angus killed by Bedwyr.
Lasrian	Follower of Angus.
Leodwald	Saxon, second to Wermund in the settlement west of Selwood.
Llacheu	Arthur's son, killed by Cei.
Lleminawg	The Dancer, one of Arthur's Companions, descended from Irish settlers along the River Oak in Dumnonia. Accompanied Arthur to the Iardomnan and did not return.

Llywri	Minor lord from the Summer Country. Follower of Melwas and Pabo.
Melwas	The Young Prince. Lord of the Summer Country, once betrothed to Gwenhwyvar. Father of Pabo.
Menestyr	The name of a clan of tattooed men from the far north, the Sons or Children of Menestyr, and of its leader: Pedrylaw Menestyr 'The Skilled Cupbearer'.
Moccus (1)	A god, the Lord of the Swine.
Moccus (2)	A lame wanderer.
Nai	Dumnonian warrior.
Ogrvran Gawr	Father of Gwenhwyvar.
Osríc	Follower of Elesa.
Otta	Follower of Elesa.
Pabo	Lord of the Summer Country. Son of Melwas.
Pedrylaw	See Menestyr.
Pryderi	Legendary hero who gave his name to Prydein.
Pwill	The Grey Man. Character from legend.
Racwant	Follower of Pabo.
Regin	Bard, son of Vortepor of Dyfed.
Ricola	Second wife of Wermund. Daughter of Hareth.
Seradwen	Horsebreeder, farmer and widow. An old friend of Nai.
Teleri	Bard and daughter of Pedrylaw Menestyr. Once loved by Bedwyr.
Vitolinus	See Gworthigern.
Vortepor	High Lord of Dyfed, father of Regin.
Vortigern	See Gworthigern.
Wermund	Ceolric's brother and leader of Saxon settlement west of Selwood.
Wethenoc	Follower of Angus.

To the memory of
James Tilly
1954 -2001

'Photographer and Gentleman'

PROLOGUE

He hobbled through the woods that ran parallel with the road a bowshot below, the pig at his heels like a faithful dog. Branches caught his ragged cloak, and he tugged the wool tighter about his thin body. The leaf mould was slippery underfoot. He moved cautiously, favouring his right hip. Every so often he paused to catch his breath.

It would be easier on the road, he knew, but experience had taught him the highway was dangerous, both for himself and for his companion. He was old and lame, the pig young and toothsome. The pair of them might as well have walked the road shouting ‘Here comes prey!’ at the tops of their voices.

Instead they kept to whatever cover they could find, using the road as a guide and drifting back into the trees whenever they heard the sound of other travellers. Fortunately there were not many at this time of year. The pig usually gave the warning, though sometimes he himself was the first to see an oncoming party from the brow of a hill. His long sight was not what it had been, but he was still better than his friend at recognizing shapes from a distance.

The pig grunted impatiently. With a sigh he pushed himself away from the tree and on up the steepening slope. His right leg dragged, so he left a trail behind him like that of the iron coulter of a plough, the newly turned dead leaves glistening in his wake.

These trees had been coppiced once, coppiced and cropped on a regular basis. He could tell from the way they grew, especially the smaller species, hazel, alder and birch, the many trunks sprouting from a single stool. Someone – he had forgotten who – had once told him that even a small estate in the Roman style had consumed a vast amount of fuel every day, and though he did not pretend to understand the calculation, he did understand what it meant – that much of what the present inhabitants thought of as a natural landscape, growing wild or by the will of the gods, was in fact nothing of the kind, but had been planned as carefully as any settlement.

The slope increased until he was almost crawling, using his hands to balance himself while his lame leg stuck out behind him like a rudder. He would have laughed had the pain in his hip not flowered as his foot jarred against a hidden stump. The pig, which had abandoned him to snuffle among the roots of another oak, came hurrying across at his squeal of distress and thrust its sandy head under his chest, demanding to have its ears rubbed, anything to distract him.

He grunted, and used the pig’s body to lever himself upright, feeling its solid form flow under his hands like water as it pulled away.

“Will you help or not?” he grumbled, wavering wildly before he gained his balance by clutching a sycamore.

He worked his way up the hill, watching the pig, which had stopped at the crest and was sniffing the air.

“Snow coming,” he said for the third or fourth time. One of the advantages of travelling with a pig for a companion was that it did not mind how often he repeated himself – in fact, the more often the better, since it was a creature of habit to which familiar things were best. The light had changed while he was climbing the hill, become clearer and harder. He felt a growing need to find shelter even though it was only about the middle of the day.

As he came closer to the pig he caught the scent of woodsmoke. He hesitated, then pulled himself up the last few paces to the summit, expecting to see a scattering of houses and barns.

The breath went out of him in a whoosh of surprise. He sat down suddenly on the cold ground, jarring his buttocks. For a moment he thought he was dreaming, or had perished in the cold and been transported to the Otherworld, but the sharp ache in his backside convinced him this was real.

The city sat in the valley below like a giant’s toy, paying no heed to the river or the hills around it, as if it had been dropped there by mistake. That was wonder enough, a collection of houses and red roofs with the smoke drifting above them. But the walls surrounding them were even more extraordinary, like something out an old tale.

They were showing signs of their age. The grey and yellow masonry was crumbling along the battlements, and the stones were streaked with water damage. The great towers still stood: semi-octagonal, thrusting forth from the line of the wall at regular intervals; powerful, massive beyond anything men were capable of building nowadays; a full third higher than the wall, which was itself more than high enough in these days when no one any longer practised siegecraft.

He rubbed his head and tried to remember. He had been here before, long ago, riding on a grey horse with a host of men at his back. The sun had been shining and the spear points had glittered in the evening light, and there had been a girl, a pretty dark haired maid who had smiled at him as he dismounted and brought him a greeting cup, while some greybeard (probably younger than he was now) had droned a speech of welcome of which he had heard not a word, lost in the brown pools of her eyes.

He turned to the pig. “I must go down,” he said.

The small eyes regarded him.

“My sandals are broken. See?” He raised a foot and showed the pig. The thongs had snapped once too often for repair, and the soles had worn through in several places.

“They were a kindly people when I knew them years ago,” he said hopefully. “There was a big market in the middle of the town, selling all kinds of pots, and those men who were not involved in the pottery trade worked for the local government. This was the administrative centre for a large district, an important place. That,” he added triumphantly, “is why they built the walls.”

The pig’s ears flickered.

“The town is named Cunetio.” He gazed down into the valley, at the haze of smoke hanging above the buildings, seeing again the invitation in the girl’s eyes, wondering whether anything had happened, unable to recall.

He shook his head and turned to the pig. “I too should have a name if I go among people. People like names.” He thought quickly. “Something simple. Perhaps I could borrow yours: Moch, swine. Or wait, the better born among them will use the Roman form, even if they no longer speak the tongue. Moccus. There was a god called Moccus once, Lord of the Swine, but he is long gone. I do not think he was ever a very powerful god.”

The pig rooted in the dirt, raised its snout and sniffed the wind.

“If I go down, what will you do?” Moccus frowned at the puzzle while the pig whiffled to itself. “Will you stay here? Or will you skirt the town and find a ford over the river? You cannot come with me.”

The pig snorted contemptuously and moved down the slope, angling away from the road.

“I shall see you later,” he called. “On the far side of the town.”

He slithered down the hill to the road, the broken sandals twisting treacherously on the mud and leaf mould. Traces of snow still loitered in the lee of the bushes where the sun had not reached, and the mud was cold and soft between his toes. Once safe on the hard surface of the road he paused, surveying the domineering towers and the great gates that stood open to the world beyond the wooden bridge.

People were gathered on the far bank of the river, by a broad pool some way downstream from the bridge. At this distance he could not make out their faces, but it seemed to him most of them were women, together with a few men carrying cudgels or long staves. The figures were moving, treading something he could not quite see down into the margins of the water. While he watched a pale shape rose billowing on the waves and was forced back below the surface. Voices came to him, thin and clear as the wailing of gulls, and he realized the women were moving in time to a lament for a fallen hero, so that the whole had the appearance of a ritual dance: slow, stately and irrevocable.

Moccus wavered, suddenly shy. It was a long while since he had been among strangers, and his appearance was against him. At the thought of how he looked, what he was seeing suddenly fell into place and he understood that he was watching the women of the town washing their garments, even as the shipwrecked Odysseus had once found the Phaeacian women, and had hesitated to come forth from his hiding place for fear of frightening them.

But Odysseus had come in summer, and found a princess and her attendants fresh from bathing themselves in the river, while he had come in winter, when the waters were bitterly cold. It would not be the great ladies who did the washing of Cunetio, but the common slaves, and the armed guards were probably as much to keep the women to their task as for their protection against marauders.

He went forward slowly, expecting to be challenged at any moment, and dropped from the road to the riverside, keeping the bulk of the bridge between him and the women. The waters were chill and naked, flowing between banks at this point well defined. (He suspected the hand of the wall-builders in that, for the Romans were a race who loved to control their surroundings.) Kneeling, he splashed water over his head, gasped at the cold for all he expected it, and let the liquid trickle through the tangle of his beard and down his chest. His clothes were beyond rescue. In any case he dared not loosen the topmost layers for fear that once touched they might all fall apart and leave him naked. At least, he thought ruefully, he was in better state than Odysseus, who had been forced to seize a leafy branch to cover his loins. He ran his fingers through his beard, checked the knife and pouch at his belt, and clambered awkwardly back on to the road, humming softly to give himself courage.

The bridge was a single low span of wooden planks laid between two stone piers jutting from either bank. The main current was funnelled between the piers, but the small waves lapped at the stones, eating away the mortar that bound the blocks together.

“This too shall pass,” he said aloud, and set his feet upon the planks.

The wind rose and cast spray in his face. He blinked, wiped his eyes, heard voices calling in the distance above the babble of the river. His foot slid on the wet boards and he caught himself on his hands. Sparkling drops of water trickled down the wood, snagged on splinters and grew until they burst in flurries of silver. He could see the knots and whorls in the planks, the uneven edges where they had been hastily trimmed, the marks of the adze in their surface.

He stood, lurching. The voices grew louder. He waved a hand to show he was all right. The centre plank was rotten, soft beneath his feet; in one place it had gone through, and down below the water flowed past with dizzying speed, drawing his gaze and holding him fascinated.

The voices roused him, louder now and with a note of anger to them. He raised his head from contemplation of the current, swayed before he caught his balance, blinked the length of the bridge to the blurred figures at the far end. Their arms beat the air as he dragged himself on, canted to one side like a wrecked coach or a beached boat, knowing he was smiling ingratiatingly and despising himself for it.

“Where did you come from?” demanded one of the voices. “Did you see that?” it continued excitedly to its companions. “He appeared out of nowhere in the middle of the bridge!”

“I came over the hills,” he said. “A long way and a hard way.”

He was near enough now to see the face of the man who had spoken, the solid flesh and broad bones, the pink skin scraped clean by a razor. Suddenly he was very aware of his own tangled beard, and he tucked in his chin to look down at his broken sandals.

“God!” exclaimed the man. “What do you want?”

He glanced up and saw the expression of disgust on the man’s face.

“I was hoping to find some shoes,” he said.

The man grunted deep in his throat. “Do you not have a tongue in your head? Get on with you. We have no need of your kind here.”

“Oh, let him be,” said another voice. “He’s harmless enough and he can barely walk. Been living rough, I’d say, and the weather has driven him to seek shelter.”

“You are kind, sir,” he said, “and I have indeed been living rough, though perhaps not for the reasons you imagine. I am on a journey – I have an errand to complete. I intend no more than to pass through your town ...”

“What is he doing?” exclaimed the first man. “He’s dribbling down his beard!”

“Don’t let him touch you,” said a third. “By rights we should douse him in the river before we let him in.”

“Best carry him downstream then,” said a fourth. “The women will not thank you for dirtying the water above their washing pool.”

There was a roar of laughter. He waited, head bowed.

“Oh, come, where’s your charity?” said the second voice. “Who knows what he has suffered? You can see for yourselves he has been badly injured at some stage.”

There was a long pause while a cold wind blew across the river.

“All right, Bolanus, if you feel that strongly about it you look after him,” somebody said, and sniggered unpleasantly.

“Very well.” After a moment’s hesitation Bolanus stepped forward and took his arm, drawing him away from the group. “Come with me, uncle. Let’s see if we cannot find you some better clothes. And a hot meal would help. This has been a bad winter: no time to be out in the wild.”

Behind him he could hear the others muttering and laughing, and it seemed to him the inhabitants of the town were greatly changed from those he had known as a youth. But then, perhaps it had always been so, if you came alone and unheralded, dressed like a beggar.

He allowed Bolanus to lead him through the darkness of the entrance tower, over the hollows worn in the paving flags by countless feet before them, and he had a sudden flash of memory, of walking through a similar tunnel from dark to light and the sound of cheering, so that as they came out the far side he hesitated, almost overwhelmed by the force of the recollection.

“Strange that you should mention time,” he said to his new friend. “As I grow older I find myself less firmly anchored in its stream. Walking through this land I have been more aware than ever that time is not a river flowing from past to future as we so often think, but a great lake in which there are many currents, in which one can move up or down or sideways as well as back and forth.”

“Gently now,” said Bolanus, tugging at his arm. “This way. Don’t distress yourself.”

“Obviously one thinks in terms of wheels, of the cycle of the seasons turning always about its axis, of the long slow rise and fall of the generations. And just when one hopes one has freed oneself of the tyranny of now, something happens to remind one that one is trapped in an ageing body.”

He stopped, and Bolanus perforce stopped with him. “My companion. I arranged to meet him on the other side of the town. We will not be too long, will we? I know that sounds ungrateful, and believe me ingratitude is the last thing I intend, but I worry about him when he is alone.”

“Yes, there are a lot of buildings,” said Bolanus. “And people. I expect you are out of the habit of seeing people.”

He frowned, puzzled by this non sequitur. “A little,” he admitted. “How do they all occupy themselves?”

They had reached an open space in the middle of the town. He blinked, unsure how they had arrived there. Long lines of stalls ran across the breadth of the square, the lanes between them busy with men and women laughing and chattering. On the far side of the space, in front of an ornate colonnade, were the animal pens, crammed with sheep, cattle and pigs (he shuddered at the thought of his friend, trapped in such a place). Dogs darted through the crowd, or sat patiently by their owners’ feet. Smoke curled from the braziers set among the stalls, and his mouth watered at the scent of roasting meat.

All around the square the buildings towered: white stone walls and roofs of red tiles, higher and broader than any house made by mortal men had a right to be. There were few windows, and most of those were shuttered, which gave the facades a blank and haughty appearance. None of the buildings looked comfortable; most looked long abandoned. He imagined them cold and draughty, full of echoing spaces and empty rooms, dusty floors and bare walls.

“The mansio, and the basilica opposite,” said Bolanus. He gestured toward the far side of the square, adding helpfully: “The public inn, busy today because of the market, and the great hall which serves as the palace of justice and a meeting place for the City Fathers.”

“I know what a basilica is,” snapped Moccus. “I have been here before, you know. And visited a large number of cities – though none recently, I will admit.”

“There were a great many public offices here once,” Bolanus continued as if he had not spoken. “No longer needed, and most of the buildings are in a sad state of disrepair – you may have noticed that the statue of one of the Emperors on the roof of the basilica has a broken arm ...”

Moccus let the sound of the other’s voice drift over him. The statue looked more like one of the old gods than an Emperor – perhaps Mercury overseeing the merchants in the market place below, or great Jupiter himself, symbol of the power and majesty of Rome. In any case for him there could only ever be one Emperor, and this statue, even allowing for weathering and damage, bore no resemblance to Arthur as he remembered him. (Not that he had known Arthur when Arthur was Emperor: his memories of him were older than that.)

“Arthur,” he said aloud.

Bolanus started. “Arthur, did you say? Why, you can speak after all!”

“Speak?” he said. “Of course I can speak. I have been talking to you ever since we left the gate.”

The eager expression on the other’s face faded. “Never mind. Come with me. A hot meal may help you regain your wits.”

They moved away from the grander parts of the town, into narrow side streets scattered with rubbish, past open patches of ground that showed signs of cultivation, and others that were strewn with rubble as if nobody could be bothered to clear them. The houses here were poorer, little more than huts of wood and thatch with peeling plaster, and Moccus could smell the odours of raw sewage and stale cooking trapped between the walls. What the place would be like on a hot summer’s day he dreaded to think.

“It may be cold in the wilds, but at least it is clean,” he said aloud. “If you make a mess you bury it and move on.”

“Not far,” Bolanus said encouragingly. “Around the corner here.”

“What do administrators do when there is nothing left to administer?” he mused quietly to himself. “Live like savages in the ruins. No, worse than savages. Savages work with their surroundings, or else they would not survive. These people try to shape the world to their will. It is like a branch on a tree: the bough can be bent so far, and then it will snap back to its rightful place, taking with it those who tried to force it.”

“Stand aside!” cried Bolanus, tugging at his sleeve and pulling him into the shelter of a porch.

A small boy with a pinched face ran by them waving a stick. Hard in his wake came a flock of sheep, filling the road with their bodies, jammed together in a wave of wool that rose and sank as the creatures hesitated, sensing the men, then dashed forward on fragile black legs, stumbling and falling over each other in their haste to pass the porch. Behind them came the cause of their eagerness, a wiry man wearing an old tunic, sweating lightly despite the cold. He raised his switch in salute and called something indistinguishable to Bolanus, who laughed in return.

“A deacon of my church,” said Bolanus, “though you would not think it to see him in his working clothes.”

He must have expressed his surprise, because Bolanus suddenly stared at him through the gloom of the porch. “You *do* understand me. What happened to you? Your injuries are old. Were you a slave who disobeyed his master?”

He shrugged in reply, not wanting to explain, and Bolanus took him by the arm again and drew him out into a wider street, where the houses were a mixture of stone and wood.

“Today is a market day,” said Bolanus. “Of course, at this time of year the market is quiet, and this afternoon is quieter than ever – oh, I dare say it seems busy to you, but you should see it in summer, when every street heaves with people and animals, when pedlars set out their goods in the square, when every farmer for miles around comes in to meet his fellows. That is how the town has survived you know, by acting as a gathering place for the outlying farms, somewhere they can exchange their produce and animals.” Bolanus shook his head. “I do not understand it myself, not being a stock breeder, but they tell me it is a bad thing for too many animals in the herd to be sired by the same male. Not like us, eh? Too many men are driven by the urge to sire as many heirs as possible.”

“And usually the worst of them,” Moccus replied as they made their way between the old buildings. “Though perhaps I think that because I myself sired none, despite my one-time hopes. I have heard that Vortepor of Dyfed fathered a dozen sons or more, and he was probably the vilest man I knew, while the best sired but two, and both died before their time. Therein lies our present tragedy – though perhaps you yourself, being younger than I, do not perceive it as a tragedy?”

“Too much time spent on earthly pleasures, and not enough devoted to the Kingdom of Heaven,” continued Bolanus. He turned down a side alley and stopped beside an unmarked door. “Still, I do not think that is your failing. You look like a man who has not tasted an earthly pleasure in a long while.”

Moccus made to protest, but before he could speak the other rapped his knuckles on the wooden door. They made a hollow sound with something irreversible about it, as if by allowing himself to be drawn into whatever lay on the far side of the barrier he would be committing himself to a particular course of action.

He cleared his throat. “As I mentioned earlier, I cannot stay too long. I must meet my friend on the far side of the town. You said today is a market day, and to be frank that disturbs me a little. I would not like my friend to fall into company.”

Slowly the door swung open on stiff hinges. A big man with a broken nose peered through the gap, his stolid face brightening when he saw Bolanus.

“Home so soon, master? I had not looked for you yet a while.”

“I found a hungry wayfarer,” said Bolanus, “in much need of sustenance!”

“I cannot stay too long,” Moccus repeated, feeling the panic rise within him as the other’s fingers closed upon his arm and steered him through the doorway.

“Ah, one of your needy strays!” said the big man with a hint of affection in his voice. “Does he speak, or just make those grunts? Sounds like a pig, doesn’t he?”

They were in a courtyard. A fig tree grew against the grey stone of one wall, facing south to the sun, its gnarled trunk thick and twisted with age, its branches lashed back in a broad splay to rusty iron nails embedded in the mortar. It had yet to be pruned of its summer growth – he supposed they were waiting till the last of the frosts were gone, which would not be for several months. The new shoots were incongruously fragile against the older branches, and he wondered what fruit, if any, a tree so ancient could bear.

“My father’s pride,” said Bolanus, following his gaze. “They say that was the outer wall of the old house, and when the building was demolished they spared the wall for the sake of the tree. My father Koisis reckons it must be well over a hundred years old, yet it still gives good fruit every year.”

Across the yard was what he assumed was the new house: a sturdy timber-framed building, two storeys high. Smoke sifted through the thatch, and he shivered, suddenly cold despite the shelter of the walls. The memory of the meat cooking in the market place returned to him, and his mouth watered uncontrollably.

“Come,” Bolanus said sympathetically. “You are weak with hunger. The kitchens are on the far side of the house.”

Bolanus lifted a door latch and they entered a place filled with the aroma of sweet herbs and rushes, of beeswax polish and scented oils. It was dark inside, so dark that he stumbled on the threshold and would have fallen had Bolanus not caught his arm.

“Steady, uncle,” his host said cheerfully. “The steps are uneven. I should have warned you.”

He was standing at one end of a long corridor. A series of doors punctured the wall to his left, doors and frames alike heavily carved with fruit and leaves. All of them were shut, but he could hear faint sounds from beyond, in what he assumed was the main body of the house: women singing, and the notes of a stringed instrument rising and falling. To his right the black timbers of the wall frame had been left exposed between panels of whitewashed plaster, creating a pleasing effect of distance. Bronze lamps were spaced at regular intervals along the corridor, but only two were lit, and the shadows they cast added to the sense of peace and shelter. Although he knew the house could not be of any great age, it had a timeless feel about it, as if it had been here for ever, a haven from the outside world.

He shook his head, surprised at himself.

Bolanus led him the length of the passage and out into another yard. This was larger than the first, divided into sections by low stone walls. After a moment’s puzzlement he realized these were the foundations of an earlier building, that what had once been its rooms were now being used as individual plots to grow vegetables – which was a curious thought, and one he would have liked to spend more time with had Bolanus not been hurrying him on to the kitchen.

The heat within made him dizzy. Again the other’s arm saved him from falling, and his host guided him to a stool near the hearth, where a huge bronze cauldron hung suspended from an iron stand above the fierce red embers of the fire. The cook, sweaty-faced and stout as all cooks should be, turned from cleaning an iron griddle.

“Master Bolanus. To what do I owe this unexpected pleasure?”

“Food for my friend, if you will. Something warm and nourishing.”

The cook smiled. “He appears to be in need, like most of those you bring to me. What about the broth simmering in the cauldron?” The cook lowered his voice. “Not too hard on the teeth, if you take my meaning.”

“There is nothing wrong with my teeth. Or my hearing,” Moccus said sharply.

The cook seemed taken aback, and glanced at his master for reassurance.

“I think he has lost the power of speech,” said Bolanus. “Perhaps from disuse, perhaps from some other cause. But he understands well enough. Give him a bowl and see how he does.”

The man shrugged, ladled a generous portion into a badly chipped crock (plainly Bolanus’ strays did not warrant the best pottery), took a small loaf from a rack and broke it in half, leant forward and offered bread and broth as if he expected them to be snatched from his grasp.

“Thank you.”

The cook stepped clear, staring; retreated to his corner on the far side of the hearth and busied himself with the griddle. Moccus forced himself to eat slowly, using the bread to spoon the broth into his mouth. It was a blend of many flavours, beef, beans, bacon, onions and garlic, and he had no doubt it was not a simple recipe, but one that had taken hours of preparation.

“He likes it,” said the cook in a tone of relief. “Master, will you forgive me if I leave you for a while? I must check my storerooms. The cauldron will do well enough as it is, simmering nicely.”

Bolanus raised a hand in a gesture of assent. The cook shuffled around the hearth, keeping his distance, and left with an expression of relief.

“I shall find you a cloak,” Bolanus said after a while. “We keep a chest of old clothes to distribute to the poor. And perhaps a pair of shoes: those sandals are about done. Help yourself to more broth if you wish.”

When his host was gone Moccus shifted the stool back into the corner, away from the heat of the fire, and rested his head against the wall. Food and warmth had made him drowsy, his eyelids heavy. He jolted himself awake with an effort and placed the bowl on the floor before it slipped from his grasp. It was years since he had been in a place like this, among people like these. Bolanus was obviously a man who believed in practising Christian charity; it was just as clear that his servants did not approve. He wondered how the other members of the family felt about it, whether they looked upon it as an embarrassing foible or whether for them too it was important. Whatever else, the man did not lack moral courage: he had stood forth among his peers and done what he considered right, despite their mockery.

His host returned, carrying a new cloak and a pair of simple leather shoes with rawhide laces. Before he could move, Bolanus had knelt at his feet and eased off the broken sandals.

“Will you wash them?” he asked, amused.

Bolanus glanced up as if he had understood. “Give me your old cloak.”

He frowned. His host gestured impatiently. Moccus reached for the bone pin that held the front of his cloak and pulled it free, shuffling on the stool until the tattered garment fell loose to the floor. He regarded it with distaste: it was dirtier than he recalled, unpleasantly stained.

“One of the perils of sleeping with a pig,” he remarked apologetically.

His host took the cloak and tore it into strips. The wool parted easily, weak with age.

“Do you have a name?”

“Moccus.”

Bolanus shook his head. “At times I can almost follow you.” He crossed the kitchen, and returned bearing a pitcher of water. “Yes, there was bacon in the broth you ate. We keep pigs in the pens in the garden. They’re due for slaughtering in a few weeks.” He smacked his lips. “Nothing can beat a fine flitch from your own hog. At one time we would cure our own, but one of the butchers in the market does such a fine job we use him nowadays.” He dipped a length of the cloak into the water and knelt to sponge his guest’s feet. “Keep still.”

Moccus stared down at the hard yellow horns of his nails, at the great toe bent under its fellows on his right foot. His skin, grainy with dirt, was ridged with old scars from going barefoot, while his ankles were bonier than he remembered, their joints misshapen.

“My name is Moccus,” he said as clearly as he could. “Moccus.”

Bolanus looked up and smiled. “Nearly done. Don’t distress yourself, uncle.” Then his eyes narrowed. “Or do you mean your name is Moccus? Would you like me to call you that?” He gave the feet a final wipe, then took the new shoes and fitted them over the toes and heels. “A little loose,” he said, tightening the rawhide laces. “But I think we can

swaddle them with your old cloak, like the countrymen do.” He wound the strips of cloth round and round the shoes until they were hidden under the wrappings. “There,” he said, straightening triumphantly. “It will not last for ever, but it will help for a time.”

The door opened and two men came briskly into the kitchen. One was the gatekeeper, the big man with the broken nose; the other, though smaller and older, held himself very erect, so that the eye was drawn to him rather than his companion.

“Father,” said Bolanus.

Moccus stared in surprise. This was presumably the Koisis Bolanus had mentioned earlier. Either he was much older than he looked, or else Bolanus, who appeared to be in his thirties, was a great deal younger.

“I thought I might find you here.” The newcomer’s voice was hard and cold, full of suppressed fury. His gaze passed over Moccus and dismissed him. “Have you heard the news? Ynis Witrin has fallen.”

Bolanus blinked. “What? What do you mean?”

“Ynis Witrin has been taken. The old lord Pabo seized, held under sufferance, a new one installed.”

For an instant Bolanus seemed stupefied. His face went blank, and he glanced at Moccus as if his guest might offer an explanation.

“By whom? Saesons?”

“No.” Koisis hooked a toe under a stool and pulled it to him, using it as footrest to balance with elbow on knee and chin on fist. “One of your churchmen.”

“What?”

“Do stop saying that.” The older man frowned absently at Moccus huddled in his corner. “It makes you sound like a fool. By an abbot. A Dumnonian abbot.”

“An abbot?”

“Yes.” Koisis rubbed his chin across his knuckles. “There have been changes in the church since I was young. Still, only to be expected if the sons of great lords take places within it. Those born to wield power will find a way of exercising power, regardless of their vows. Not, in fairness, that this abbot is the son of a great lord, but he had done well for himself till recently.” He lifted his head and smiled, revealing small sharp teeth. “The man became over ambitious. Custennin dealt with him, though he lacked the will to execute him – or to arrange a quiet accident.”

“Which is what you would have done,” Bolanus said quietly.

The older man straightened, kicking the stool aside. “Yes, boy, I would. If I were the High Lord of Dumnonia, and the leader of my warband, my own sister’s husband, raised a rebellion against me, he would die. Either by the process of law, or through some mischance. The last thing I would do is exile him to a monastery in the middle of nowhere and give him the chance to rebuild his following.”

He strode to the middle of room, spun on his heel, and pointed a finger at his son. “So. What was Custennin’s problem now becomes our problem. Ynis Witrin is popularly considered impregnable – and up until today I would have said that was true. This Angus will use it as a stronghold from which to tighten his grip upon the land. He intends to carve himself a kingdom, boy.”

Bolanus rubbed his head. “How did it fall?”

“Treachery, of course,” snarled Koisis. “The Lords of Ynis Witrin were never much loved by their subjects. The gossip in the market is that a bard lodged with Pabo through the winter, spread gold and promises to suborn his followers. A bard who claimed to be the son of the lord of Dyfed.”

“Vortepor’s son?” Bolanus demanded quickly.

“It may be true.” Koisis shrugged. “Vortepor has many sons.”

“You think this is Vortepor’s doing?”

“There’s the question, isn’t it?” Koisis slowed, and lost some of his anger. “Who knows. Possibly. It would suit him to have his man there, controlling the sea marshes and the northern route out of Dumnonia.” He sighed. “Still, it is easy to see his hand in everything, once you start looking.”

There was a long silence while father and son regarded each other. The big man with the broken nose shifted uneasily from foot to foot in the background, as if uncertain his presence was still required but too diffident to ask. Moccus kept very still, not wishing to attract Koisis’ attention.

“What does it mean for us?” Bolanus’ voice was husky.

“Directly, nothing. If I am wrong about this so-called abbot, and he is merely an adventurer, then it need not make any difference to us at all. But if as I fear he is something else, a man who would be a king or even an emperor, then it may be important. The Lords of Ynis Witrin have kept themselves to themselves for generations, content to sit and brood in their old house in the shadow of the tor. New blood means new ambitions.”

He smiled thinly, as if at some irony which was lost upon Moccus, and continued: “This abbot has sons by his marriage to Custennin’s sister. They are the grandchildren of Kynfawr – we called him Cunomorus when I was young. Kynfawr was a great lord, and many regarded him as Arthur’s heir in the west, though that claim would not sit well upon the shoulders of Custennin his successor. I believe the new ruler of Ynis Witrin will seek to expand his power. CUNETIO is a small state, surviving by the grace of its hinterland. Though we grow what we can within the illusory safety of the city walls, we still rely upon the rents from the farms in the surrounding countryside. And those farms are vulnerable, boy: vulnerable to raids and to conquest.”

He stopped, stared angrily at Bolanus.

“Why do you say the safety of our walls is illusory?” asked his son, and Moccus, listening, had the sense that this was the beginning of an old argument between them.

“Because they are crumbling faster than we can shore them up. A few more years and the west face will collapse.”

“We should repair them.”

“Yes, we should. But who will do the work and how will they be recompensed? We have no skilled masons, and no labour gangs to do their bidding. The Council will not agree the work needs doing: ‘The walls have stood since our great-grandfathers’ time,’ they say. ‘The walls will stand a while longer.’” Koisis clenched his fist and pounded his palm, his voice growing louder. “I say they will not stand, but my fellow councillors do not wish to hear. And my son and heir, instead of being at my side, plays at being a Christian gentleman, another St Martin ministering to the poor.”

He gestured contemptuously at Moccus. “You seek to outdo St Martin by giving the object of your charity a whole cloak, not a half, but you fail because the cloak was not your own but one I your father had discarded. It is easy to be generous with other people’s belongings. If you had the courage of your much vaunted convictions, you would start a mission among the heathen newcomers to the south, instead of skulking in familiar surroundings.”

Bolanus drew breath to protest, but his father overrode him, his voice rising to a shout. “This city is done, boy. I doubt it will last your lifetime, not in any recognizable form. I will go further. The very concept of the city is done, at least in Britain. It is an idea

that has outlived its time. The future lies with the small farms and the strongholds of the local warlords.”

“What was Athens but a city state?” muttered Bolanus. “Or Rome herself, in the beginning?”

“Exactly!” his father crowed. “Exactly! Rome fell, and the world moved on. Men like Angus and Connor are wolves, creatures of the pack. While Arthur lived, they acknowledged his supremacy. Now they quarrel amongst themselves, vying for control.”

Moccus moved involuntarily. All three turned to stare at him.

“Who are you, apart from another of my son’s strays, brought here to consume my food?” Koisis said suspiciously. “What does Arthur mean to you, that you flinch at his name?”

“He spoke Arthur’s name earlier,” Bolanus said doubtfully. “Perhaps he knew him once.”

“Or knew of him, more likely,” Koisis sneered. “Well, have you nothing to say for yourself?”

Moccus opened his mouth and struggled to reply. He could hear the grunts he was making, had been making ever since he crossed the bridge into the city, and knew he had deluded himself, believing he was carrying on a civilized conversation when all the while he had sounded like a pig.

Koisis flared his nostrils. “Can he not speak? The creature is useless. He would be better off dead. Could you not have found someone more worthy of your charity?”

He gestured to the big man with broken nose. “Throw him out. I’ll not have some old cripple lounging here eavesdropping on family business.”

Somewhere Bolanus uttered a cry of protest. Moccus snatched the precious cloak from the floor and clutched it to him. The big man seized him by the collar, ripping the cloth, and hauled him from the stool. His hip made him awkward: he staggered, and the big man, thinking he was resisting, shoved him towards the door, then moved on him fast, arm upraised.

“Right out,” said Koisis. “Into the street.”

Without thinking, Moccus raised his own arm to block the blow, felt the jar of the other’s meat on his thin bones and knew he would bruise badly. He fell back against the door jamb, heard Bolanus in the background still protesting, caught a glimpse of Koisis’ face, deep grooves around the mouth, and then he was out in the cold air and hustled across the yard, still clutching the cloak. His vision blurred when the big man flung him against a rough stone wall. Wood dragged over gravel, then as his sight cleared he was hurled through an opening in the wall and sent sprawling in the mud of an alley.

The gate slammed hard behind him.

PART I

CHAPTER ONE

1

During the last days of January the cold tightened its grip upon the land. Cattle lowed with hunger in fields burnt by frost. The streams curled and twisted under sheaths of ice. The woods were sullen and empty. At twilight the howling of wolves hastened wanderers to their homes. Snow fell, melted, froze again. Echel and his kinsmen began to talk of slaughtering the weaker animals in the herd to ensure the stronger might survive. Some members of the family abandoned their own houses and took to sleeping in the communal hall, where it was warmer. All agreed it was the coldest winter for years: a wolf winter, a hungry winter.

Obstinately, Bedwyr clung to the hut they had given him. He went early to bed most evenings, slept for a while then lay awake in the watches of the night, listening to the owls hunting across the meadows, shivering despite the heavy blankets and his cloak. He would doze fitfully, jerking awake to the cries that carried out of the silence of the night: the shriek of an owl or the curdling scream of a vixen. More than once he reached for his sword, thinking the farm was under attack and Gwenhwyvar in danger, only to settle again cursing his foolishness. Usually he drifted back into sleep in the hours before dawn, waking tired and gritty eyed as the farm came to life around him.

Sometimes he dreamed, though all that remained to him on waking were odd fragments: Arthur standing on a hillside with the wind ruffling his auburn hair, telling him that the long struggle was not quite finished; Cei turning in a dark building of stone, face alive with laughter, eyes clear of the disease that had contributed to his death, bidding him be strong a while longer; Lleinawg the Irishman, watching him with steady gaze across the rim of a cup; Teleri, whom he had loved, briefly, as he had never loved another woman, stretching out to him in the darkness and giving words of comfort. Of them all only Lleinawg never spoke – even as once before, during Bedwyr's final days in the guise of Budoc the hermit of Sanctuary Wood, when his old friends and comrades had come to him in his fevered dreams, Lleinawg alone had never uttered a sound.

Those dreams had ushered in the events which had led him to abandon his solitary life of contemplation, his attempt to grow nearer to God in the last years of his life in the hope this might help atone for his many sins. (In his more despairing moments he would think of himself as a great sinner, and then sense would reassert itself, and he would realize that whatever else he might be, he was not a *great* sinner, with its connotations of wickedness and pride, only a very ordinary one, small and petty-minded like most mortals.)

Since then he had seen a peaceful village destroyed by raiders from overseas; the death of Gorthyn, his last living blood relative; the return of Arthur's old foes, the Children of Menesty; the rise of another ancient enemy, Vortepor of Dyfed; and the

reawakening of evil men's ambitions. He had met with Celemon, Cei's daughter, whom he had known since her birth, and found her much changed, not the friend he had expected. He had fought a man in a deserted house in the city of Lindinis, and had nearly died.

He had fought the same man again in the ruins of Caer Cadwy, Arthur's fortress, and had won. He had discovered Arthur's widow, Gwenhwyvar, who had gone into hiding after the disastrous battle of Camlann, and he stood ready to defend her with his life in fulfilment of his vow to Arthur. He had found new allies in the form of Echel and his kinsmen, the descendants of his old friend Glewlwyd. Above all he had met Nai, foster brother to Gorthyn and thus the closest thing he had to a kinsman, and between them they had put an end to the Children of Menestyr – he hoped for ever. And now he was waiting, waiting for the weather to improve and Gwenhwyvar to give him the signal that it was time to act, passing the days by teaching Nai how to use a sword as the Companions of Arthur had once used a sword, and while he waited he suffered his dreams.

* * *

In the hut he shared with Seradwen, Nai also suffered nightmares.

The pony's hooves are like thunder in the confined space of the alley. He can feel the power and balance of the body under his as the two of them merge and become one creature. The riders ahead have no warning of his appearance, no time to dodge aside or turn and face him. His arm has a life of its own, rising and falling like a great scythe, seizing and releasing spears from the quiver that hangs on his saddle, and before him the roadway becomes a chaos of screaming men and horses.

Every time he dreams this dream he notices some new detail: a man tumbling from his horse to be trampled beneath the hooves of another; the bard, Regin, fumbling for his sword as his mount goes down with two spears in its ribs; smoke trailing from the hilltop above; the feathers in a man's hair nodding in the breeze; a mouth open in a soundless scream; a horse plunging and rolling as it struggles to regain its feet; the inexperience of the Pictish riders.

And every time the horror of what he is doing, what he has done, rises within him till he groans aloud, and in his groaning comes to wakefulness.

"Nai, it's all right. It's all right."

Seradwen's voice was soothing in the dark. Blindly he reached out a hand, found her arm, clung to it. He tried to speak, his throat raw, nodded and grunted.

"You had to do it," she said. "If you had not killed them they would have killed us."

"Not me," he rasped. He sucked his dry cheeks, summoned saliva, swallowed. "It feels like someone else."

"In the dream?"

He swung his legs free of the bedding. The draught from under the door was cold, cutting through the last shreds of drowsiness. "And at the time."

She was silent for a while, then began tentatively: "To do what you did, one must go deep inside oneself, lose oneself in the moment."

Despite the darkness of the sleeping hut he could see the faint glimmer of her form. "Forgive me, I must have air," he said, and blundered across the room until his outstretched hands found the door latch. He waited until he heard her sigh, and then the rustle of blankets and clothing as she pulled on a robe against the cold.

"I am ready," she said.

The door opened at his touch and the freezing air swept into the hut, dispelling the lingering warmth from the rush lights they had been burning before sleep.

“I felt, then and now, as if somebody else were sitting in my body, controlling my actions,” he said, his damaged voice harsh in the quiet of the night. “And that, my dear, before we begin to talk of possession and the like, is no more than me trying to avoid the responsibility for what I did in Caer Cadwy. It was not warfare; it was murder. I can feel the spirits of those I slew crying against me, gibbering in the night.” He shuddered. “Their pale shapes press upon me when I sleep. Only then do they have the strength to break the barrier between their world and mine.”

Nai stared out into the night. Looming black against the skyline was the hump of the hillside where it had happened: Caer Cadwy, Arthur’s one-time fortress town, abandoned these last ten years. There Nai and Seradwen had ridden in search of the last of Arthur’s Companions, Bedwyr mab Petroc, and there, on the shortest day of the year, they had fought with him against his enemies.

“It will pass,” said Seradwen.

“A month now,” answered Nai, his eyes straining to discern some detail on the hillside. “A month since I killed them, and nearly every night they have haunted me.”

“It is cold. Come back to bed.”

2

“Watch!” said Hildeburh. “Like this, strong but not too strong, eh?” She clenched and unclenched her fist in demonstration. Eurgain schooled her face into an expression of interest and nodded.

The Saeson woman had been using simple words rounded out with hand signals all afternoon, speaking slowly and forcefully as if to make her meaning clear through the power of her will alone. By now both of them were feeling the strain.

Eurgain looked down at the creature in the trap. It was not long dead. At home she had been taught that one should always skin the corpse while it was still warm, or else the pelt would tuft, and she stood unmoving as Hildeburh knelt to free the noose, wondering whether this was true.

In one of the trees in the hedgerow a bird was singing. The sound was hard and insistent, not pretty as people always made it seem when they gave their imitations. Every so often the bird appeared to have a slight stutter. To Eurgain it sounded as if he was saying: *mine, mine, all mine.*

“Do you see?” said the Saeson woman. She turned the scrawny grey body onto its back and raised the knife. “Not too deep.”

She slit the belly skin from throat to vent, shifted the carcass with her left hand and sliced along the inside of each leg. “Now,” she said, and began to draw off the pelt, which came reversed. There was surprisingly little blood.

The pelt stuck around the head. Hildeburh grunted to herself, loosened it with little nicks under the ears, pulled steadily. “Never too much force,” she said, her face flushed with effort.

The skin caught again around the muzzle. Hildeburh frowned, bent over the head and fiddled with the knife, finally tugging the pelt free.

She waved it in the air, cracked it like a whip to lose the loose shreds of meat and fat. The waiting ring of dogs drooled in anticipation, shifted forward low to the ground with their tails wagging, but the woman quietened them with a word. Then she stretched the pelt between her large ugly hands and laid it flat on the ground to stiffen.

“What name has it?” asked Eurgain, pointing to both carcass and pelt.

“Cat,” replied Hildeburh, surprised that Eurgain did not know. She spoke the word again, slowly.

“Cat,” Eurgain said awkwardly, trying to mimic the harsh sound. In her own tongue the word was *cath*, close enough but not quite the same.

“Good!” Hildeburh smiled. “And this is the fell. Fell! Can you say that?”

“Fell,” Eurgain repeated obediently, examining the pelt with a critical eye. Hildeburh had been clumsy at the last, where the skin had snagged around the nose and lips, cutting too close and marking the head. Eurgain’s mother would have been furious if her daughter had been so careless.

“If you would be useful to him, girl, you must learn how to do things like this.” Hildeburh peered at her doubtfully. “Do you understand?”

“I understand,” she said.

The Saeson woman kicked the skinned carcass towards the dogs. They leapt upon it, snapping and snarling, until one drove the others back in a flurry of limbs and settled to bolt the remains.

Hildeburh laughed, not unkindly. “Always Graedig, the greedy one. Well is he named, that hound! His hunger pushes him to lead the pack.” She glanced sidelong at Eurgain. “Among us as among hounds, Weala-girl. The folk must have a leader, lord of the pack, lord of the kin. Your man, your boy. If he stays, he must accept his brother Wermund as land-fruma, first in the land.”

“Does he not do so?” Eurgain asked innocently.

The older woman grunted, her hands busy with the task of resetting the snare.

“His father filled his mind with tales of wonder. Dreams of a noble lineage: twice royal, by descent from the god Wotan on his father’s side, and from the old lords of Cant through his mother.” She sniffed, pulled the brambles across the hole in the hedgerow, and stepped back to admire her work. “There! Perhaps next time a hare or something for the pot. You know this name, hare?” She held her fingers to her head to mimic long ears, and despite herself Eurgain smiled.

Hildeburh dropped the pelt into a sack and they set off along the hedgerow. The Saeson woman strode out in the lead, the long cloak falling away from her body to reveal the tailored jacket straining across her chest. Eurgain scurried to keep pace. The dogs loped beside her, their breath steaming.

She had been cold ever since arriving in this strange land. Growing up in southern Dumnonia she had been told that their valley by the sea was a favoured place, sheltered from the worst of the elements and warmer than other parts of Prydein, but like most children she had taken her home for granted, assuming (in so far as she thought about it at all) that the conditions which held sway there held sway throughout the rest of the world. Even the sight of the distant hills lying white in winter, far inland, had not changed her mind, for those hills were obviously the rim of the world and not therefore strictly a part of it, any more than a fence was part of a field.

But now she had crossed the edge of the world, travelled further than any of her kindred had ever travelled, and there was so much she would have liked to tell them about what she had seen and the people she had met, so much she would have liked to have shown them, from the hairstyles and clothing of the women to the tools and materials of the men. The very stones of this place were different, greyer and sharper-edged, not green and rounded as a stone should be. Even the soil was not the same: neither red and sticky like the inland fields, nor the grey black silt of the waterside. The land did not fold the way

it should, tumbling into steep and hidden valleys with streams gurgling through the brambles at their bottoms; instead the slopes were broad, long and open – which was why, when she thought about it, the air was so bitterly cold.

“You miss the sea?” said Hildeburh, her broad face creased with what Eurgain would once have taken for concern.

“The sea? Yes.”

“I also,” the woman admitted. “Like you I was raised by the sea, in Cant, far to the east. You know Cant?”

Eurgain shook her head.

“Of course, my father was *leod-gebyrgea*. Yours was one among many, yes?”

“*Leod-gebyrgea*? I do not know this word,” said Eurgain, deliberately thickening her accent.

Hildeburh frowned. “Protector of his nation. A great prince of the Half-Danes, the Ytes. He was a son of Oeric, of the lineage of great Hengist,” she added with satisfaction.

Patches of frost clung to the ground in the shadow of the hedgerows. Looking at the patterns of light and dark in the slanting rays of the autumn sun, Eurgain could see the truth of what the older men who worked for Wermund had told her: that once far more of the land had been under cultivation. The boundaries marked much larger areas than those now used by the Saesons and their thralls, who had created fields within fields, or even broken through the old hedges where it suited them to make one lesser field from the corners of two greater.

Down by the stream where the woods began – she could see the very tops of the trees bending in the wind, black and brown against the green and grey land – were the ruins of the old house. She had not seen them yet, though the thralls had described them to her, not once but a dozen times. Their parents and grandparents had lived in servitude to the owners, and according to them the last of the landholders had been a great and powerful queen. Sometimes it was difficult to know how seriously to take the thralls’ tales, since for them (as indeed for her until recently) the world revolved around the few hides of ground they called home.

“The cat,” Hildeburh said suddenly, breaking into her thoughts. “It was old, which was why it was caught, but it was not a wildcat.” Her hands described a shape in the air. “Those are bigger.” She added something Eurgain did not quite catch, something about cats and old women gone wild. (Old cats and wild women? Or was it old women and wild cats?)

“The fell is good. We will put it with other skins. No need to tell Wermund or the menfolk what we have found.” She tapped the side of her nose in an exaggerated gesture.

Eurgain frowned. Cats of any kind were rare: she had never seen a live wildcat, and only a handful of tame ones. (Two of those had been during the recent long journey from her home: one prowling the top of a red wall at Isca; the other scavenging scraps at a farm where they had stopped to barter fresh supplies.)

“Why not?”

“Because the cat came from the ruins, and the ruins are where the old woman lives. Did you not hear what I said?” Hildeburh shook her head impatiently. “No, you heard but did not understand.”

She halted, pulling the cloak close around her body. The dogs hesitated behind her, then pushed past, spreading across the hillside to investigate the grass, running from tussock to tussock, noses to the ground. One put up a bird from the hedge and bounded in pursuit with a flurry of high pitched yaps.

“Stupid animals,” Hildeburh said with affection. She whistled and they came to her, shoving their heads against her legs while she pulled their ears and cuffed their muzzles.

“Listen,” she said to Eurgain, staggering as the dogs buffeted her with their demands for attention. “Steady, there, steady!” she snarled, and the dogs fell away. “An old woman camps in the ruins, not all the time, but often enough. She is not a seemly person, but Wermund will not let us drive her off. He says she does no harm, but – ” Hildeburh shook her head doubtfully. “Who knows what harm she might do, living there all alone with her cats for company? Mangy, slinky beasts. For myself, I would set the dogs on her and have done.”

“A wise woman?”

“*Wise woman?*” Hildeburh spat contemptuously. “Dried up and useless and thus pretending to powers to make herself seem important. I know her kind! A *weala-woman*, a foreigner, a homeless sponger. Wermund takes gifts of food to her and thinks I do not know, I who keep his hall and household.”

“I too am a *weala-woman*.”

Hildeburh laughed. “You are a girl. You will learn our tongue and become like us. Your children will be Wermundings. By Ceolric’s wish, you are our *giest*.”

Eurgain’s ear was growing accustomed to the shades of meaning in Hildeburh’s speech. The word *giest* was one she had heard before, from her friend and lover Ceolric as they travelled eastward. It meant *stranger*, and although it could be used of a stranger who was sheltering under your roof and sharing your food, as Hildeburh seemed to be employing it here, it was more often used in the sense of the stranger as an unreliable and probably hostile unknown.

“I would have thought myself hearth-friend,” she said aloud.

“Would you, child, would you?” said Hildeburh. She wrinkled her wind-reddened face. “It may be so; it may be not. There is an old saying among us: ‘Praise no day till evening, no ale till drunk, no wife till dead.’ And you are not yet Ceolric’s wife, only his sweetheart.”

She shook her head and marched away along the hedgerow without waiting to see if Eurgain followed.

CHAPTER TWO

Bedwyr and Nai were sitting outside the main hall in a companionable silence, enjoying a rare patch of afternoon sunshine, when Echel brought them the news. Nai was working on a warshirt he had found in the farm's small armoury, using rags and fine sand to scour the rust from the hammered iron links; Bedwyr was sewing a patch on to his cloak with a needle and thread he had borrowed from Echel's wife.

The farmer came round the corner of the building at a fast walk, stopped suddenly at the sight of them side by side on the bench, and laughed.

"You can do mine when you've finished," he said, nodding at the cloak. "There's a hole in it the size of my fist where I caught it on a branch this morning. My wife will be furious when she sees it."

Bedwyr looked up and grinned. "She's hardly likely not to notice my patching."

"True," said Echel. "But at least she'll think I tried."

He sat down on the bench, his bulk forcing Bedwyr to squeeze up beside Nai. "I was looking for you. One of the lads has just come back from the town. He says the market is abuzz with the news."

He paused, savouring the weak sun on his face.

"And?" prompted Bedwyr.

"Ynis Witrin has fallen. Pabo mab Melwas is either dead or a fugitive."

Nai laid aside the rags and bowl of sand, lifted the mailshirt from his knees and set it carefully on the frozen ground. Bedwyr glanced at him, expecting him to speak, then nudged the farmer.

"Well?"

"Fallen to an abbot."

"How?" said Bedwyr impatiently.

"By treachery. A bard has been lodging in the great hall there these past few weeks. He is said to be a man of noble birth, who was set upon by thieves after leaving Lindinis. They broke his harp and came close to killing him, but he escaped and found refuge with the Lord Pabo."

Again Bedwyr looked at Nai, but the younger man's face was expressionless.

"They say this bard slew the sentries and opened the gates of the stockade in the middle of the night. The Abbot's men caught the defenders by surprise: nobody expected an attack, least of all in the dead of winter."

Bedwyr narrowed his eyes. "They will have had more help than one man. Ynis Witrin's defence has always rested on its position in the marshes, not its walls and gates."

The farmer shrugged. "It may be so. The news is uncertain. But it is agreed the new master of Ynis Witrin is a man of late middle years who calls himself Abbot Angus, and that he is surrounded by a troop of warriors, some of whom call themselves monks." He

chuckled. “The word in the marketplace is scathing. Monks are supposed to withdraw from the world, not overthrow lords.”

“Does Angus act alone? Or did he have help from Dyfed?”

Water dripped from the eaves above them. Nai pulled the warshirt closer into the shelter of the overhang.

“Nobody knows,” said Echel. “But there are no reports of any Dyfed men with him – apart from the bard, of course.”

“I should have killed him,” growled Nai, blotting fiercely at the damp spots on the mail.

“You broke his harp,” Bedwyr said mildly. “You could not foretell what would happen.”

Nai grunted.

“I wonder why,” Bedwyr said thoughtfully. “The true reason for Ynis Witrin’s invulnerability has always been the simplest: it was never important enough to be worth the effort of taking.”

“You have been there?” asked Echel, then shook his head. “Of course you have. I had forgotten the story.”

Bedwyr smiled. “Stories are rarely accurate, but yes, I have been there, with Cei. After all, it is not so very far from here as the crow flies.” He stared across the yard. Beyond the roof of the barn Caer Cadwy was clearly visible for the first time in several days: a hump-backed hill green in the low sun, apart from the circling white scars where the snow still clung to the banks and ditches.

“That is why,” murmured Nai. “Because it is close, vulnerable despite its reputation.”

“We always left them alone,” Bedwyr said as if he had not heard the other. “They had no reason to love us, either the lords of Ynis Witrin or their people. Why should they? The troubles never touched them, safe behind their lakes and marshes, and what had we ever done for them save steal away the beauty who would have been their bride?”

The three of them were silent, remembering the old tale – though to Bedwyr it was no tale but a part of his past – of how Arthur and his friends had rescued Gwenhwyvar from her wedding feast when her father would have married her to Melwas of Ynis Witrin.

“This Pabo,” said Nai, his voice rough, “is the son of Melwas?”

Echel nodded. “Yes. A quiet man, they say, though I never met him. It is said that he sent a few men to fight for Arthur at Camlann.” He looked questioningly at Bedwyr.

“If he did I never saw them,” the older man answered tightly. He made a fist of his good hand, then relented. “But perhaps it is true. It was a confused time.” He opened his fingers. “Pabo was not our enemy, whatever his father may have been.”

He stood, stretched. “Is Gwenhwyvar in her workshop?”

“She is,” said the farmer.

Echel and Nai watched the old man stride across the yard. Nai picked up the mailshirt, spread it across his knees, and resumed cleaning the links before the light failed. The farmer waited for a while, seemingly in no hurry to go about his business.

“You know that we come under no lordling now?”

Nai nodded, engrossed in the shirt.

“This land was Gwenhwyvar’s once – still is, I suppose. Nobody else has ever laid claim to it, though from time to time the City Council of Lindinis make noises about placing ourselves under their protection.” Echel sniffed, and shrugged the broad shoulders he had inherited from his grandfather Glewlwyd. “So far we have avoided the issue. But a

new lord in Ynis Witrin, claiming control over all the Summer Country, that might be a different matter.”

“Angus is no fool,” said Nai. With his left hand he worried at the scar on his throat, leaving a smear of rust on his neck. “Sooner or later he will make the same leap we made: that the one place the Lady Gwenhwyvar would feel safe is with family of her old retainer Glewlwyd.”

“Ever since my father died and the responsibility became mine I have been waiting for the day,” said Echel. He shuddered suddenly, pulled his cloak closer though the sun was no less warm. “Those last few months, one could feel them sniffing us out, the little dark men from the north, the Children Of Menestyr. You would be out in the fields and look up, and there would be a shadow vanishing over the brow of a hill; or in the woods suddenly you would sense a presence nearby, see a bough moving where a moment before a man had been standing, watching you.”

“I know,” said Nai, remembering his own journey across southern Dumnonia with the Children of Menestyr hard on his heels.

“We lost five men at Caer Cadwy a month ago.”

Nai blinked, pushed the warshirt aside. “Do you begrudge them?”

“Of course I begrudge them!” exclaimed Echel. “They were kin, men I had known all my life. Two were my nephews, another my cousin’s son. If you are asking me whether I blame Gwenhwyvar – no, I do not.” He leant forward. “She knew you were there, even before you lit the beacon fire to summon us. She asked us to be ready – and there’s the point, that she asked. All of us who fought that day fought because we wanted to fight, and I do not believe that any of us, living or dead, would do things differently if we had our time again.”

“Then what worries you?” Nai tried to make his harsh voice gentle.

“There are ten of us left who can fight. Of those, three are properly trained – by my lights, not yours. None of us are real warriors like my grandfather, or you.”

“You flatter me.”

“I saw what you did at Caer Cadwy,” Echel said simply. “It was a feat worthy of the Companions.”

Nai closed his eyes, remembering the horror and desperation of the slaughter. He had ambushed their attackers in the ruined streets of the old town, where they could not use their numbers to outflank him. With the advantage of surprise, he had ridden through and round them, casting spear after spear into the helpless mass of men and horses. At the end the killing had sickened him, and partly for that reason he had spared the life of Regin the bard when he had found him trapped under a fallen pony.

“I fear a new lord in Ynis Witrin,” said Echel. “Especially a new lord who seeks Gwenhwyvar.”

Which is why Angus chose it, thought Nai. He knows we fought and defeated his servants at Caer Cadwy, that we must be somewhere close.

“Now that is a feat,” he said aloud. “To take Ynis Witrin in the winter.”

“You see why I am worried?” The bench creaked as Echel shifted his weight. “This Angus must be an unusual man.”

“Like granite,” said Nai. “Like granite.”

* * *

Bedwyr sat in a corner of the workshop by the door and watched Gwenhwyvar’s sunlit hands moving with the clay. He had always thought of potters as moulding a shape on the wheel, pulling the clay into the form they would have it take, but he saw now that

this was not so – or at least, it was not how she worked. And when he thought about it, he found this did not surprise him at all.

“The light will go soon,” she said, her movements never ceasing. “You look like an old cat basking in the heat.”

He laughed. “You do not see many cats these days.”

“No. They are almost as rare as Arthur’s Companions.”

Bedwyr stood awkwardly, knocking the stool aside as his legs cramped. He grunted, lurched while he waited for them to work, and finally hobbled across the workshop to the oil lamp.

“Will you be long?” he asked.

“As long as it takes,” she said tranquilly.

He found the flint and tinder on the shelf beside the lamp. His fingers were cold – he had not noticed how cold with the illusory warmth of the sun playing on them – and it took him several attempts to light the wick.

“Do you not get stiff, hunched over the wheel?”

“No,” she said. “But then I have many years of practice.” Her lips curved. “Besides, I did not spend most of the day pretending to be half my age.”

Her hands stroked the clay as it strove to climb from the revolving wheel, and for a moment he lost himself in contemplation of the shapes: the glinting long-fingered hands, the spinning clay, the invisible spiral mounting to the roof. “Axis,” he muttered aloud, not sure what he meant, and Gwenhwyvar grunted in annoyance.

“Lost it!” she said. “That is what comes of talking to you.”

The wheel slowed and the clay slumped onto the plate. She scooped it up and flung it onto the tray at her side, dipped her hands into a bowl of water and rubbed them clean.

“I am sorry,” he said.

“I was joking.” She stretched, shook her hair loose so it tumbled about her thin shoulders, flexed her fingers. “My hands are not what they were.”

He gazed at her fondly, seeing both the woman he remembered, the ever-youthful golden creature who had once run through sunlight to be with Arthur, and Gwenhwyvar as she was now, more of the moon than the sun, the gold turned to silver, the hands in repose stained with liver-spots and the once-elegant fingers twisted around the enlarged knuckles.

“How did we come to be so old?” he asked hoarsely.

“Time!” she said tartly, taking the piece of clay and working it to remove the air before throwing it to the centre of the wheel with practised skill. She leant forward, long silver hair dangling perilously close to the plate, feet pushing the wheel into life, gently at first, fingers finding the heart of the clay, then returning slightly crooked as the wheel gathered speed and the clay climbed with her guidance into a glistening tower that gradually widened at the top, and widened more until suddenly it faltered and her fingers drew it down again into itself to rest a moment while the wheel span ...

“The clay remembers,” she breathed. “Watch!”

And he saw how the tower rose again at her urging, bulbous where it strove to regain its former shape.

“Do you see? If I tried now to build it straight it would insist on flowering as before.”

“I see,” he said, studying her lined face and finding in it the beauty of her youth, his youth, thinking how much he loved her and always had, though she was Arthur’s, then and still.

“So,” she said, as the wheel stilled. “They are kind to me, Glewlwyd’s kin. They allow me to spend my time in here, rather than spinning or weaving, and they accept without complaint the gifts I give them. They trade some in Lindinis, I think, though there is little call for pots these days.”

She dipped her hands in the bowl and dried them on a cloth. “Hardly anyone uses a potter’s wheel now. There used to be an entire town of potters at Durobrivae – the Durobrivae in the Nene valley, not the one on the north coast of Cantware. It must have been a common name once.”

“The fort of the bridges,” Bedwyr said softly.

“Mmm? Oh yes, I suppose it must mean something like that.” She shook herself. “Anyway, the whole Nene valley was famous for its ceramics. Good clay, you see, so they made the pottery on site, then carried the finished goods down the river to the sea, or took them out along the Great North Road.”

Laying the cloth aside she looked directly at him. “Did you ever go to Durobrivae?”

She did not wait for an answer, but closed her eyes as if to picture more clearly what she described.

“It is a strange place. The town is almost deserted, and has been for a long time, ever since the pottery trade collapsed. The ruined kilns lie to the west, covering an area of nearly three miles, bigger than the town itself at its height. Around each kiln are huge mounds of waste, hundreds of paces wide, like giant molehills, with a few puny weeds sprouting from their flanks. Nothing lives there. As you walk between the mounds you realize how quiet it is: no birds sing, no animals rustle in the undergrowth, nothing. I only went there once, out of curiosity, with Arthur after a state visit to Lindum. I remember the dust, blowing on the wind, how it got into your eyes, coated your face so you could taste it on your lips.” The memory made her cough: a dry, harsh sound. “Arthur loathed the place, could hardly bear to wait for me to finish. The land had been destroyed, buried under the mounds of spoil and old shards.”

Gwenhwyvar opened her eyes and contemplated the shape on the turntable, nodded to herself and stretched across to pick up her cutter.

“Just think how many pots they must have made to create so much waste, and over how many years. And think too that pottery is very difficult to destroy: to break a pot is easy, but the pieces survive, and will continue to survive almost anything.”

The cutter was a short length of bronze wire bedded in a pair of wooden handles. She pulled it taut and ran it across the surface of the turntable.

“Off to the north of the town was a rich man’s villa. Even in our time, when it lay in ruins, you could see it must have been a palace in its heyday. I often wondered who lived there. An imperial official? The owner of the kilns? Were the pots produced by slaves, or by freemen working for a wage?”

Carefully she freed the vase from the plate, cutting through the excess clay around the base.

“I think of Durobrivae and its surrounds and I see how we were doomed to failure. We talked of restoring Britain, Britannia, of remaking it as Albion, but we never understood the magnitude of the task. How could we restore Durobrivae? Even if we found the potters to make one tenth part of the pots that place must have made in a year, what then? What would we do with them? How would we move them? Who would want them? Standing there, in that grim manmade landscape, I understood more fully than ever before what we had lost. Even seeing the remnants of the public buildings in Eburacum or Corineum had never brought it home to me in the same way.”

She shrugged, set the finished vase aside to dry. “And now, each household makes its own pottery, or uses containers of wood and bark.”

Bedwyr righted the stool and placed it back in the corner where it lived. “How much of what you create do you keep?”

Gwenhwyvar laughed. “Very little, or the farm would be filled with unwanted pottery. Most I do not bother to fire.” She sighed. “Even in the old days I kept only a tiny proportion of the whole.”

“And what ...” he began, edging towards the question he had always wanted to ask, but had never been able to, because on one level the answer was painfully obvious. “What made you..?”

“You know why.” Her voice was abrupt. She turned away to study the newly made vase, the silver curtain of hair hiding her expression.

“I know why you buried yourself in activity,” he said carefully. “But I do not know why you chose pottery.”

She swung to face him, turned the full force of her ruined beauty upon him. “Clay,” she said. “Was Adam not made from the red earth? Are we not all clay on the great potter’s wheel, even such as you and I? You take this stuff, this common earth, and you mix it with water, mould it, leave it a while, and behold! It dries to the shape you have made! What could be more marvellous than that?”

The vehemence of her words choked her. She clutched at the edge of the turntable as the cough became a fit that racked her body, leaving her struggling for breath. Weakly she waved him away, then indicated a jug and beaker on the shelf beside the lamp.

“Water,” she said hoarsely. “Not from the bowl.”

He reached to do her bidding, held the beaker to her lips.

“All right, Bedwyr. I am not helpless,” she said crossly, taking the beaker from him.

“Lady,” he murmured, reverting to court manners.

She drank, breathing slowly and deeply. “I am sorry,” she said after a moment.

Lightly he touched her shoulder, feeling the frailty of the flesh.

“When my son Llacheu died,” she said, her voice clear and strong again, “much changed. Cei retired from public life and came but rarely to the court in the last days of his life. You were busy in the hill country, in Gwynedd and Powys. The younger generation began to intrigue – no, perhaps that is too strong a word. They began the manoeuvres which would ultimately become intrigue. Arthur’s heir was dead and somebody, one day, would have to take his place. It was foul, Bedwyr, foul.”

He nodded slowly. “One reason why I was eager to stay away.”

“Arthur was wise to keep you out of it.” She smiled a smile of such sweetness it tore his heart. “You would have killed someone. Your solutions to problems have always been short and direct.”

“And who did I learn from but Arthur himself?”

“True. And there are always those who need killing, God save us. But Arthur was Amherawdyr of Albion and determined not to rule as a tyrant. In many ways it was a golden age. In fact, to those outside the court – and no doubt to many within it – it was a golden age, without qualification. The land was largely at peace, more so than at any time in the past hundred years. We were rebuilding much that had been lost. The Church and its centres of learning flourished. The Saesons were, if not our friends, at least not our enemies.”

She reached out her hand and took his, not the good right hand but the scarred left with the stiffened fingers. “I had no role,” she said simply. “I was not the mother of the heir, and at nearly forty I was unlikely to bear another child. Some urged Arthur to set me aside and take a second wife.”

For a moment he did not believe what he was hearing. “They what?” He stepped away from her, the rage rising within him. “They did what? Who? You were the luck of Britain.”

“Bedwyr, Bedwyr,” she chided him. “It was more than twenty years ago. This is the reason Arthur kept you busy in Gwynedd.”

His anger cooled as quickly as it had come. “He refused, I take it?”

“What do you think?”

He was aware she was laughing at him. “Of course,” he said, chastened.

“So, I turned to something which had nothing to do with Britain and her quarrelling warlords, to something that seemed to me an affirmation of life and civilization, of all those virtues for which we had been struggling for so long. To create objects of utility and beauty, in which form and purpose were purposely married – what could be better?” She grinned wryly. “I began, in my ignorance, by admiring the products of places like the Durobrivae pottery.”

“I thought they were good!” he said, surprised.

“They are dead, Bedwyr. Mere repetitions of forms one could make in metal. There is no feel for the material, no sense of excitement in them.”

She was more animated than he had seen her since he and his companions had arrived at the farm.

“You take one of the most pliant, adaptable, supple materials in existence and you use it to repeat the same old tired shapes your ancestors beat out of a lump of metal with a hammer.” She waved a hand in the air. “Ridiculous! Sometimes I wonder about the Romans, Bedwyr – the real Romans, I mean, the Romans of Italy, not the Romanized Gauls or our own half-civilized ancestors. Did they *feel*? Did they *see*? Think of all those ghastly mosaics they sold by the yard, the kind you can still find in townhouses where someone hasn’t lit a fire on them (and the best thing for them in my opinion): dull geometric patterns, and when they tried their hand at living creatures, stags or lions, they made them portly and stolid, like themselves. So tame, so dull and unadventurous. There was no wildness in their designs, no life, no conflict. They smothered the land under their stone and concrete, and they stopped looking at things. Did you ever see the white horse cut into the hillside near Durocornovium? There is more movement in those few lines than in all the detail of Achilles at Skyros or whatever that month’s special bargain may have been.”

Gwenhwyvar ran out of breath and stopped to take a sip of water. “You are one of the few people left who still understands what I mean by Achilles at Skyros,” she said as she put the beaker down.

The temperature was falling fast now the sun’s rays no longer penetrated the interior of the workshop. The wind tugged at the open door, bringing the smell of rain and decaying leaves.

“Echel prophecies more bad weather tomorrow,” said Bedwyr. He pulled the door to and dropped the latch.

“He is usually right.” She warmed her hands above the lamp flame. “We should tidy up. It must be nearly time to eat.”

They worked together in silence for a while, Bedwyr sweeping the floor while she cleaned the turntable and tray, and wrapped the unused clay to keep it moist.

“When the weather improves we will leave, I promise you,” she said suddenly.

He leant on the broom and regarded her. “If I seem impatient it is only because I worry about Echel and his family. Angus has taken Ynis Witrin. One does not need to be particularly clever to deduce that we must have taken refuge near Caer Cadwy.”

“Even if we leave they will still not be safe.”

“True. But if we are caught here, then Echel will fight to defend us. He has already lost five of his retainers – ”

“I know,” she said. “They were friends of mine.”

“If we have gone, there is a chance that it will not come to blows.”

She frowned. “Do you believe that? And it is not Angus alone we have to fear.”

“Do you remember him from his time as one of the Companions?” he asked, suddenly curious.

“I do.” She gazed unseeingly at the lamp flame. “He was friendly with Llacheu, though they were not close. I never much cared for him, though perhaps that is no more than hindsight. He was jealous of the older generation, of you, Cei and the others.”

“Then there is Vortepor of Dyfed, in the person of his son Regin. Vortepor himself does not travel much these days.”

“I have heard he has become grossly fat, his flesh betraying his foul appetites,” she said with a grimace of distaste. “He was another one I never liked in the old days.”

“And Custennin of Dumnonia, though he is perhaps less likely to search for us, having troubles of his own.”

“Among them this Angus,” she said thoughtfully. “Remind me of what we know about him.”

“Angus married Custennin’s sister, led his warband, came close to replacing him as High Lord of Dumnonia last summer. Custennin exiled him to a monastery, lacking the confidence to execute him.”

“As you would have done.”

“Yes, I would, once he had declared himself in open rebellion against me. With Angus gone, his supporters would have settled. As it is, Dumnonia is a mass of factions, and Custennin’s grasp upon the rule precarious.”

“So some symbol of unity, some connection with past glory, would be useful to Custennin.” She ran her damp fingers through her hair, smiled at him. “It is a long time since I have played this game.”

Bedwyr was quiet for a moment, recalling the sessions in the hall at Caer Cadwy long ago: how one person would enumerate what they knew about a problem, another would throw out ideas, a third add modifications, and thus through debate they would reach a consensus and formulate a plan. It had been Arthur’s way of using the talents of those around him, and for as long as he had been surrounded by the young of spirit to whom all things were possible, it had worked well.

“Useful also to the others,” he said aloud. “We have no reason to think Angus has abandoned his designs upon Dumnonia. And I suspect even Dumnonia would have been no more than a stepping stone to greater things.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Indeed? A man of vaulting ambitions.”

“Meanwhile Vortepor schemes as he has always done. What he cannot have himself he will prevent others from taking, but at heart he has always seen himself as chief among the Lords of Prydein.”

“I suppose by now he has some claim in that he must be the most senior. He has ruled Dyfed for a quarter of a century.”

“The Clan Menestyr I fear no longer. Nai spoke with one of their leaders, and the man told him their power was dwindling fast. Once they ceased to be guardians of the chalice they lost much of their influence.”

“And for that reason they sought so desperately to regain it,” Gwenhwyvar mused softly. “For them I can feel some pity.”

“I believe the last of their strength was expended a month ago at Caer Cadwy. They will not come again.”

“So. Angus and this son of Vortepor ride together?”

“Yes, for the present. Vortepor gains from an unstable Dumnonia. It suits him that Custennin should have a rival.”

“Is Angus truly such a threat to Custennin?”

Bedwyr shrugged. “Custennin is not a well-loved man. For that reason he feared to punish Angus’s treachery with death.”

The wind rattled at the door. The lamp flickered, casting deep shadows into the corners of the room. Outside a dog barked, more in greeting than in challenge.

“The others will be gathering in the big house,” Gwenhwyvar said absently. “Will the alliance last?”

“I do not see how it can. If they were to gain the chalice, they would at once fall out. Angus will want it for himself, while Regin will seek to take it to his father.”

She moved towards the doorway. “I had hoped these past ten years of hiding would have made a difference, that the chalice and all it represented would be forgotten. Yet they press upon us as eagerly as ever, these would-be heirs to Arthur, as if Camlann were fought but yesterday and he were freshly gone.”

When she opened the door the wind blew in and extinguished the lamp in a cloud of black smoke. Bedwyr damped finger and thumb and squeezed the wick to be sure it was dead, then followed her out into the yard.

The wind caught them and stole their breath so speech was impossible. Bedwyr found himself staggering, and offered Gwenhwyvar his arm, fearing she would be unable to withstand the force of the gale. She turned, teeth pale in the gathering darkness, hair swirling unbound about her face, and gestured at the porch of the house. He frowned, not understanding, and she was gone, running low against the wind to fetch up gasping in the shelter of the porch.

“Slow!” she said, “slow!” and doubled over in another fit of coughing.

He made to lift the great latch but she reached for his wrist and restrained him. “Wait!” The word came strangled from her throat though her grip upon his wrist was strong. “They must not see me.”

In his heart he had no doubt that Echel their host and his kinfolk were well aware of her weakness, but he lowered his hand and waited until she had recovered. At length she nodded and he pushed open the door.

* * *

Seated on a bench by the fire, soaking the warmth into his battered bones, Nai watched them enter. The old man looked concerned, his brow furrowed and his eyes intent upon Gwenhwyvar, but to Nai’s disgust he was moving with his customary grace.

“Ach, you should see him when he has been sitting down for a while,” Seradwen murmured in his ear.

“Am I that obvious?”

“Not at all. Just the usual hatred of the pupil for his master. Mind you, that was a fair crack you caught him on the thigh this morning, even if it was an accident.”

Nai began to clench his fists, and winced as the flesh creased through the blisters on his palms. “Fourteen mornings,” he said. “Fourteen mornings, and I can barely move. Every time I stand to face him I fall over my own feet. He has ruined me.”

She laughed. Bedwyr turned at the sound and waved, then escorted Gwenhwyvar to a seat beside Echel. Once the guests of honour were settled, Echel nodded to his wife, and the younger members of the family began to serve the stew from the great cauldron bubbling over the fire.

Everybody had their own pottery bowl. Nai rotated his between his palms, admiring the pattern incised under the lip, the way the lines flowed one into another, verged on meaning.

“A curious thought, is it not?” said Seradwen, reading his mind again. “To eat your supper from a bowl made by Arthur’s Queen.”

“Very,” he agreed, and lost himself in the stew. Echel’s family were good cooks, and over the last month he had found himself anticipating mealtimes with an almost sinful eagerness.

When his bowl was scraped clean he stretched back on the bench and stared idly at the roof. High among the rafters, in the very place one would have thought the smoke from the fire would swirl the thickest, were the crumbling remnants of two swallows’ nests, held to the beams by whatever miraculous glue the birds spat from their beaks. He studied them, puzzled, unable to understand why the creatures chose to build in the path of the smoke. He could see the advantage of warmth, but surely the chicks would suffocate. Since the fire was never let out, even in the height of summer, it could not be that the parents had picked the site when the fire was not burning. He watched more closely, squinting against the dark, and saw how the grey wisps of smoke eddied around the rafters and drifted through the thatch, close to yet never quite touching the nests.

“What?” said Seradwen.

“The nests.” He lifted his chin to indicate them. “See? There must be a draught under the roof. I thought they would be in the path of the smoke, but they are not.”

She wrinkled her nose. “What a mess when the eggs hatch.”

“Most of it would fall in the fire.” He followed her gaze to the cauldron. “Oh.”

Echel beat upon the table for quiet. It was his habit every evening to review what had been accomplished during the day, giving praise where due, and to allocate tasks for the next morning. Afterwards, depending on the hour and the family’s state of tiredness, there might be an entertainment of some kind: a game or a story, or perhaps a tune, one of his daughters being skilled with the flute.

Nai let his host’s voice pass over him: no easy task, for Echel had inherited the barrel chest and powerful lungs of his famous grandfather, and he spoke like a man who intended to be heard. The room showed the signs of prosperity one might expect from a well-established family: plenty of lamps, filled with good-quality imported oil that burned with an even flame, plenty of copper and bronze hung to catch and reflect the light, straw and rushes on the floor, fleeces on the principal chairs. It was a comfortable place, a welcome haven after several months of rough living. Above all it was safe: he felt more secure here than he had at any time since leaving his lord Gereint’s hall last summer.

A sword sheathed in red leather hung vertically on the whitewashed wall behind Echel’s chair. It was the man’s proudest possession, the blade carried by his grandfather, Glewlwyd of the Mighty Grasp, one of the great heroes of Arthur’s court.

Originally Glewlwyd had been gatekeeper to Ogrvran Gawr, Gwenhwyvar's father, and thereby hung a tale of love and loyalty. The young Arthur, in those days one among many of the Warlord Ambrosius's warriors, wooed the fair Gwenhwyvar and won her love. Her father, however, would not agree to their marriage, having already promised her hand to his near neighbour, Melwas of the Summer Country. Arthur and a few followers (Bedwyr among them) came in disguise to the wedding feast. Although Glewlwyd recognized them and guessed why they had come, he allowed them entry. Arthur stole Gwenhwyvar away; Glewlwyd was disgraced and flung into prison. There he languished until Arthur had become Warlord of Prydein in succession to Ambrosius. When Glewlwyd was released Arthur made him his own gatekeeper, at Caer Cadwy, and of all the gatekeepers in the island of Prydein, he was the most famous, and the most loyal.

Now his heirs gave shelter to Gwenhwyvar, despite the risks, despite the fact it had cost them five lives so recently the dead were not yet settled in their graves.

"Echel says one of the mares is carrying awkwardly," Seradwen whispered. "He has asked me to help." She repressed a smile. "He was very diffident about it."

"Diffident? Why?"

Seradwen kicked him under the cover of the bench. "Because, although it may have escaped your notice, my late husband and I established some reputation as breeders of horses."

"I had not forgotten," he protested hastily. "What I meant was that I had not realized your fame had spread so far."

She narrowed her eyes, growled menacingly, then abruptly relented. "Neither had I. I suspect Bedwyr has been exaggerating my prowess. Anyway, Echel obviously felt it might be beneath my dignity to look at one of his ponies. They do not breed selectively, as we do, but just keep a mare in foal so they have a steady supply of work horses."

Nai glanced at the room again. "They are very nearly sufficient unto themselves here. Only a few luxury goods like wine and oil come from outside – and at the worst, they could survive without those."

"Very easily," she said, leaning forward so she spoke directly to his ear. "Have you heard anyone mention an overlord? No, neither have I. These lands were part of Gwenhwyvar's dowry; so far as I know, no one else has ever laid claim to them."

"They could not. Nobody knew what happened to her after Camlann, and nobody had the courage – or the gall – to declare her dead and himself her heir. Echel touched upon it this afternoon."

"So Echel and his kin pay neither tax nor tribute," Seradwen finished triumphantly. "Hence their prosperity."

Nai eyed the sword hanging on the wall, and their host's broad shoulders. Looking around, one could see the strong family likeness among the rest of the kin. All the men were powerfully built; the women too had a formidable appearance. It would take a strong band to subdue these farmers and he had the feeling that by the time they were subdued there would be little left worth having.

"Tomorrow," he said, changing the subject, "I thought I might borrow a nag and ride northwards." He cocked an ear and listened to the wind howling around the eaves. "Depending on the weather."

"It will be bad again," Seradwen said with a farmer's assurance. "Today was a lull, no more. Still, you are used to it."

One of the best things about Seradwen was that she did not ask unnecessary questions, or try to dissuade him from a necessary action – which was two things, really, but it was warm by the fire and he was drowsy.

Nai thought it wise to scout towards Ynis Witrin for signs of danger. He was convinced that Abbot Angus, Angus mab Connor, would come for them. Given the speed with which the man had taken Ynis Witrin he thought it would be sooner rather than later.

(Angus of the Eoganacht Maigi Dergind i nAlbae, Angus of the lands of the Children of Eogan in the Plain of the River Oak in Albion – Nai glanced uneasily at the door, for even in his head the Irish words were like an incantation that might summon the man himself at any moment.)

It had been a month since Bedwyr had killed Isgofan, the Abbot's prize pupil, striking the younger man down as if he were an untrained peasant holding a sword for the first time in his life. To Nai it seemed likely the Abbot would want to avenge his pupil, and, perhaps more importantly, to measure his own skill with a sword (of which he was inordinately proud) against the last of Arthur's Companions.

"He must have moved hard and fast," Nai said aloud.

"Angus?" said Seradwen. She shivered despite the heat of the room. "Yes."

A roar of laughter went up from the far end of the room. A girl – one of Echel's nieces, Nai thought, though it was difficult to tell them apart – snuffed the lamps, grinning broadly, till only one was left burning.

"Are you sure?" boomed Echel's voice. "It is not a tale we have ever told in this hall, for obvious reasons."

"Oh, stuff!" said Gwenhwyvar in amusement. "If I had wed Melwas of the Summer Country and *then* eloped with Arthur it might have been a matter of concern to me, but as you well know I did not. The tale was told in Caer Cadwy on occasion, without embarrassment. You must have heard it there yourself as a child."

Echel pulled sheepishly at his beard. "Well, if you insist, Lady."

"Will you tell it yourself?" asked Bedwyr.

The big man bowed. "Unless you would like to? No? Very well then."

He unhooked the one remaining lamp from the wall and placed it on the floor before him. Then he took a cloak from its peg by the door, pulling the hood over his head to hide his face, arranging the folds to swathe his body, disguising its outline so his shadow on the wall behind him loomed large and menacing around the axis of his grandfather's sword.

"Listen," he said. "Listen." Only his hands were visible outside the robe, so broad they seemed foreshortened, one little finger crooked in token of a long-ago accident, the palms calloused (yellow horn in the lamplight) by endless work. He clapped once, and the report fell flatly into the silence of the room; clapped again, harder; then wove an intricate rhythm that echoed from the walls and rafters, till it sounded as if a multitude were beating their hands together and not one man alone.

Suddenly he flung his arms wide (the children in the audience squealed with mixed terror and delight) and waited until the last of the echoes had died away.

"In the beginning Pwill came to the place appointed for him. Out of the north he came, out of the unknown mountains and the forests, moving like a mist across the face of the land, and in his wake he left no footprints. The beast he followed was sacred to the moon, lady of the dark, and it was a great beast, larger than any now on the face of the earth, with crescent tusks that could dig to the very roots of the world, and her colours were the colours of night, red and white and black."

The cloak swirled about Echel as he imitated Pwill's actions, the shadow leaping and shrinking on the wall behind him. "He pursued her across the barren moors of the north, where the first men reared their standing stones to pin down the earth lest it be swept away into the whirling skies. Every day he tracked her from dawn until long after dusk. Each morning he found the water gathering in the hollow made by her vast bulk where she had rested overnight, yet however fast he went – and he could travel fast, that one, far faster than you or I – he never drew any closer to his quarry."

The shadow acquired a life of its own as it hastened across the wall.

"He followed her down from the northern moors and into the fields and forests of middle Prydein: the wealthy lands, the soft lands, where a man can plant a field of corn and sleep all spring while it ripens."

Echel waited until the ripple of laughter had died away. "Once, at twilight, he glimpsed her shape in the distance: sway-backed, fearsome, crossing a blood-red skyline, and it seemed to him that her body was even more swollen than he recalled, as if she had been eating well. Onwards he went in the fading light, to the place where he had seen her, and there he found the scattered dead of some great battle between the lords of that region, lying in tumbled heaps of outstretched limbs, surrounded by broken spear shafts and shattered shields. Their pale faces stared at him in blind reproach, but he averted his eyes and hurried on."

The shadow twisted in horror, clutched at its head and raced away.

"Day after day he followed her, with ever growing urgency. They came to a vast plain, as empty as the northern moors save for the discs and barrows of the first men. He pursued her past the hanging stones the enchanters raised, across the empty land to the valleys where the farmers laboured, clearing the weeds and felling the trees to make their fields. Perhaps he came by this very spot, slipping through unseen like a grey ghost, a patch of mist, and perhaps the memory of his passing remains with us yet, as when one straightens from the hoe, feeling a stranger watching, and sees nothing but the absence of a presence."

Dwindling, dwindling, the shadow merged into the darkness of the room.

"Through the wetlands Pwill went, along the old paths that run by still water, skirting the cones of the hills that rise rounded from the fen. The marsh birds cried above him, and the herons flapped slow and majestic over the black pools like omens of an unknown future. For an age he wandered through the wilderness, pushing through the reeds and fighting the hungry mud, standing on the shores of long lagoons and retracing his steps, brushing through the yellow-flowered woad that grew on the dry land in profusion. He was lost, as lost as one could be within a realm one claimed for one's own, lost in a place of no firm footing, where even the tracks of the beast he followed were swallowed by the mire."

Bowed and weary, the shadow trudged along the wall.

"At last, when he was on the edge of despair, he saw before him a hill beside which all other hills were but shadows or copies, poor imitations of the one true original. Around its foot was a dense wood of low trees covered with white and pink blossom. Here the ground grew solid and he sat to clean the ooze from his boots. A strong wind leapt up and the petals fluttered around him like drifting snow, but he rose and brushed them aside."

The shadow moved with quick decision.

"Nearby a spring gushed across the earth, red and muddy. He bent to drink, cupping his hands, and tasted the taint of iron. Above him rose the green hill, skewed,

otherworldly, mysterious, and now he saw a path encircling it like a great serpent wound upon herself, reaching almost to the summit, ending at a grey boulder.

“He laughed, for he recognized this place from his dreams. Lifting his head, he shouted: ‘Henwen? Old White, where are you?’ “She squealed in reply, her flight done now, and he went forward under the apple boughs until he found her, lying in the litter she had made, the great white sow surrounded by her seven newborn young. And he gave thanks; and was joyful.”

The shadow danced in celebration.

“Later he built his stronghold there, in the hollow of the hill, and in aftertimes he brought to it the son he thought should have been his – or perhaps was his. From that stronghold the child was rescued by Teyrnnon and his companions – and though they had travelled long and hard to reach the place, when the strife was over they discovered they had gone nowhere at all.

“Some say Pwill, the grey man, named the place for himself; some he named it for the hill, the green mound; others that he named it for the yellow-flowering plant which grew so well on the rich soil by the marsh and gives the blue dye with which his servants tattooed their skin; and yet others that it was for none of these things, but for the still waters around the island of the tor, waters that reflected hill and sky.

“But I say these were merely the signs by which the true name was made manifest, for what else could it be called, that place, but Glas-dun, the green fort?”

Echel and the shadow swept each other a bow, then he tossed the cloak aside and was once more himself, a thickset and stolid man of little imagination, embarrassed by the attention he was receiving.

“I thought it was called Ynis Witrin,” whispered Seradwen. “That is where he means, isn’t it?”

Nai suppressed a smile. “Yes. Ynis Witrin in the Summer Country. But that is not what the peasants call it. They still use the old name.”

“When Regin came to our farm he came close to causing a riot by telling a tale of Gwenhwyvar and the Lord of the Summer Country.”

“That Gwenhwyvar left Arthur for him?” Nai’s voice was a low growl. “Yes, you told me.” One hand reached up and unthinkingly massaged the scar at his throat.

“The old trick: mix a little truth with your lie to make it stronger.”

“Regin. Sometimes this last month, and especially today, I have thought I should not have spared him. Among so many, what would have been one more death?”

“You broke his harp,” she offered, which made him laugh, not because it was funny, but because it took him back to the moment of relief when he had stood looking down the slope of Caer Cadwy at Bedwyr and Gwenhwyvar and had realized it was over, their enemies defeated and they themselves – against all odds – still alive.

CHAPTER THREE

Sheep were crying in the fields far away. The young pig grunted as it rooted through the undergrowth. He ducked under a hawthorn branch, following the faint gurgle of the stream where it washed around the boulders that blocked its course. A foot slipped on the muddy ground and he caught at the branch to save himself, clinging hard until the flare of pain in his hip had passed, not daring to move. The piglet brushed against his leg: he stared down at the sparse hair of its spine and the sandy skin freckled with dark patches like islands, biting back the urge to scream; saw the skin flicker as the piglet twitched with excitement at being in this new place; felt the branch shift under his weight as the sweat ran stinging down into his eyes and he shook his head to clear them.

Then the moment passed and he could move again, probing cautiously along the muddy bank of the stream, swollen beyond its usual size by the recent snows. The sky, glimpsed between the bare branches of the scrubby trees, was dark and menacing, the clouds moving fast though down here in the shelter of the valley the wind was not strong.

“Even the birds have taken cover,” he said to the pig. It grunted at the sound of his voice, then wandered away about some purpose of its own. “Wiser than I,” he called after its tail as it vanished into a tangle of brushwood, not sure whether he meant the pig or the birds.

The boulders in the stream were yellow – dark sand where the water had washed them, paler and greyer where they were still dry. He stopped to stare at one of the largest, sculpted by the current into the shape of a giant’s bowed back, the head and limbs hidden below the surface, the body riven with knobs and furrows like a spine. Spumes of white spray burst endlessly over the hollows. Tiny basins filled and drained, filled and drained, and a raft of old sticks and leaves bobbed helplessly against the rock until the current seized it afresh and whirled it away.

He wiped his clammy face, limped a few more paces, favouring his bruises from CUNETIO – and there, suddenly, was the pool. It was smaller than he had expected, shaped like a horseshoe with a tuft of grass for an island in the middle, and at once he was taken back to childhood and the game he used to play beside the brown river where he was born, of imagining whole nations of tiny people to whom that clump would be home, and what they would make of the freshwater sea that surrounded them, and the great river that flowed to their east.

Water gushed all along the natural wall that defined the horseshoe, but a torrent poured from the cave opposite the stream. For a moment he lost all sense of scale and thought he might be able to walk inside to explore the tunnel, then realized it was scarcely large enough to admit his body even if he went on his hands and knees.

Slowly he waded out into the backwater of the pool, savouring the sensation of bitter cold seeping up his legs. The pale silt disturbed by his feet clouded the clarity of the water, changed its colour and consistency, altered it from pure drinking water into

something else, the swirling trails thickening and marrying until they came to resemble milk, the milk of the mother, the symbol of the earth's bounty, even as under other circumstances wine might change its nature to become the symbol of blood.

Careful to steer clear of the current, he peered into the blackness of the tunnel. Moss glistened on the chalk walls and moisture dripped from the curved ceiling, falling into the white spate of water that had its birth somewhere deep within the earth, running from darkness to light, from enclosure to freedom. He leant his back against the wet rock, the cold beginning to bite into his thighs, cupped his hands and shouted: "Pig!"

The word echoed from the low cliffs. He waited, but there was no response, only the endless rush of the stream. Again he shouted, raising his voice to a full-throated bellow, and his voice returned to him, hollow and lifeless.

Setting his hands on the top of the bank he dragged himself up out of the water, bottom scraping against the rock, his arms trembling with the strain as he levered his body over the edge of the cliff and collapsed in a sprawl of limbs in the long grass.

He lay on his back and gazed up at the black clouds scudding across the low sky until his arms had stopped shaking, then pulled himself up into a sitting position.

The hill lay behind him. He could feel its presence, palpable in the landscape, louring at his back, but he schooled himself not to turn. Instead he concentrated on unwrapping the lengths of cloth from around his feet and spreading them out on the long grass to dry in the gathering wind.

They filled and billowed, like the pennants he remembered from his youth fluttering on the ends of the spears as the warriors rode into a town or a village, and he remembered how once the young girls had crowded the streets to see him and the rest go by, giggling and nudging each other, the bolder – or the more brazen – among them blowing him a kiss and sometimes casting an unmistakable look of invitation in his direction.

In those days his hair was long and fair, fine as any woman's, curling to his shoulders. His skin had been without blemish, his body straight and strong, his movements graceful. He had been famed for the colour and quality of his clothing, for the courtliness of his manners, for the sweetness of his nature. Now it was different. Now the girls averted their gaze when he passed and made the sign against evil, even as they had done when he made his way out of Cunetio, counting himself fortunate that no more of the inhabitants tried to speak with him.

He rebound his feet and struggled upright, aching in every bone, to survey his surroundings. He was at the bottom of a broad valley, under a gently folded ridge with the sky large above him. Trees betrayed the line of the river where it followed the long slow curve of the land. In the distance dark smudges against the pale hills marked the presence of small woods hanging on the slopes. This was good pasture land, undulating, feminine; wealthy land, where there was no need to slaughter the stock before winter.

Specks of snow drifted on the wind. He turned, careful not to turn so far as to see the mound behind him, and found what he sought, a nearby copse that would give him shelter from the coming storm. Already the tops of the trees were swaying in the wind.

Suddenly he was transfixed by the sight of the pig, whirling and dancing like a creature possessed, panting and guffawing, chasing its tail first one way then the other. It stopped for a moment, lifted its head and looked into the wind, then began again, wilder than ever, seemingly overcome with merriment.

Of all living things, he remembered, pigs alone can see the wind.

“Moch, moch!” he snorted, to attract its attention, and when it did not respond he dredged from memory the ancient chant the swineherd had used when he was a boy, like a flourish of trumpets:

“Tantassa, tantassa, moch, tow-a-row, tow-a-row! Tig, tig, tig! Tantassa, tantassa, moch!”

The pig stilled, swivelled its ears and charged joyfully towards him. He limped to meet it through the stippled air. The snow was coming faster now, sprinkling the ground. He waved an arm in the direction of the wood; the pig swerved around him in a circle and ran for cover. He followed at his own pace.

They found a clear space under an arch of old trees, sheltered from the worst of the wind though the air was chill and damp. In this place it was not hard to find kindling and fallen branches, and with much concentration he managed to coax a small spark into flame. The pig lay on its side, grunting contentedly, occasionally thrashing a leg, while he fed the fire and watched the snowflakes falling from the sky, listening to the wind in the upper branches, his back secure against a solid trunk, his new cloak wrapped snugly about him.

* * *

Dawn came softly and subtly to a grey world. The fire was ashes, the place where the pig had slept a crushed and empty hollow. The snow must have stopped during the darkness, for although some of the branches bore a thin coating of white, none had settled on the ground.

He rose, stiffly, and looked about him. A bird chattered above his head. Mist drifted between the trees as he fumbled in his pouch for a stale crust – if he had any sense, he thought ruefully, he would have filled it with fresh bread when he was left alone in the kitchen. There was a handful or so of dusty oatmeal in the bottom of the pouch that would have to last him for the next few days.

Refreshed, he set about the business of the day: gathering enough wood to keep a large fire burning from dusk till dusk. In the old way of reckoning this was the true measure of a day: not from light to light, as among the Romans and those who had adopted their customs, but from darkness to darkness; and it was with this measure that he felt happiest, for it was the one he had known as a child.

Every piece had to be carefully considered, for this would be no ordinary fire, but one of great ritual significance. Only the best woods, the right woods, could be burned upon it. First and most important was rowan, the tree of quickening and life, which men call *Luisiu*, or flame, the tree of divination. Then came oak for royalty, willow for enchantment, hazel for wisdom and birch for inception. Lastly came ash for water and rebirth, and alder for fire and resurrection. Already wrapped in his pouch were a few roots of heather for the kindling, and a handful of sage to cast upon the flames.

His one-time skills had faded with disuse and he found himself quickly distracted, so that he became absorbed in the shape and feel of a branch, the way the bark thickened here, peeled there, until he woke from a near trance to find himself shivering in the cold, with only the birds in the trees for company, though a moment ago it seemed to him he had been engaged in a deep and fascinating conversation with an old friend.

The longer lengths he hacked with his heavy knife, cutting them down to manageable size. As he lost himself in the mindless rhythm of the work present and past began to merge. He became again the child he had once been, staring up into the bare boughs of a tree at the shape of a man straddling a branch, so high it seemed that if the figure just raised its arm it could touch the white clouds scudding through the blue sky.

The big-toothed saw stroked steadily across the rough bark, and the green dust drifted down from the ever widening wound, floated on to the upturned faces of the big men where they strained on the ropes that would slow and guide the branch's fall, making them blink and curse aloud. His father's strong hand was on his shoulder, squeezing the soft bones, and the familiar voice was saying: "Must be lopped, boy, to save the barn; we should have done it earlier," and he remembered his father was a man who loved trees, especially the great monarchs of the forest, oak and beech, and not merely for their usefulness – even at his age he knew that trees provided nearly all a man might need, from houses and fences to tools and baskets, from fruit and nuts to fodder and fuel – but also for their beauty, whether leaf clad or, as now, naked at the end of winter.

But this branch must go, for the sake of the tree it was unbalancing, and for the sake of the barn which lay fairly in the path of the tree's fall, and it was a decision his father had delayed for as long as possible – too long, he had heard some of the men say.

Then suddenly there rose a great shout from the man in the tree, a shout taken up and echoed by the others, and he himself stood gaping, not understanding what he was seeing, except that the tree was bleeding, the sap spurting from the wound like water from a fountain – or blood from the great vein of a man, he would think when he was older – and the men below were shouting and cursing as the sticky liquid fell all around them.

A lifetime later he stood in the copse with the crude knife loose in his grasp, the branch in his other hand dry and winter brittle, sapless, though soon the sap would be rising. And that rising, that rebirth, was why he was here, if only he could force his mind and body to concentrate, and not lose himself in contemplation of the snow lying in the hollows where the weak sun had not reached, or the black and silver plumage of the magpie watching him from its vantage point in an oak, doubtless drawn here by the moat around the nearby mound – for magpies, he seemed to recall, were fond of pools.

He worked all day, using lengths of ivy to bind the wood into bundles which he left piled at the edge of the copse. Only when the light faded and the pig returned from its wandering did he cease. Then he relit the camp fire, ate sparingly of his oats mixed with water (the pig watching every mouthful), propped himself against the same trunk as on the night before, and was at once asleep.

* * *

In the cold light before dawn the mound gradually regained the depth it had lost during the darkness, when it had seemed flat and sharp-edged, like something a child might scratch on a slate. It came looming into existence through the morning mists that rose from the water meadows by the stream, hung floating above him while he negotiated the causeway across the moat, as if it had been elsewhere during the darkness and had only just returned from that otherworld.

The path was narrow, rough with long neglect, full of sharp edges and deep potholes gouged by the runoff from the rain, so that he was glad of the rags Bolanus had tied around his feet, though he knew they would not last long. His muscles ached from the previous day, and the bundle of firewood – first of many – weighed heavily on his shoulders, dragging him back.

He had wondered whether he might meet others about a similar quest, but as he climbed higher above the mists of morning he saw no people moving in the landscape. The country was white with a thin covering of snow that emphasized the scars of old tracks. Once he glimpsed a line of sheep moving along a trail; if there was a drover with them he did not see him.

"Imbolc," he muttered to himself. "In the belly."

Imbolc was one of the four great festivals of the year, a time when the country dwellers should celebrate the stirrings of life after the long winter. As he climbed he sang an old song to hearten himself:

January the month; smoky the vale;
Weary the wine-bearer; wandering the bard;
Lean the cow; rare the bee's hum;
Empty the milk fold; empty the meat rack;
Slender the horse; quiet the bird;
Long to the dawn; short the afternoon.
Wisely spoke Belin's Hound,
'Caution is the best guide for man.'

But with Imbolc the year began to turn again. The yows gave birth and produced their milk, good for people as well as lambs. The days grew noticeably longer, and though the weather might be nasty – as now: it was starting to snow again – at least the end was in sight.

"Imbolc," he muttered again. "Oimeic. Cleansing."

It was that also, a festival of purification, a festival of fire, a time when one invoked the protection of the goddess and her serpents against all ill, against foot-rot and murrains and plagues and famines. It was a time for new beginnings, a time when the dross of the old was burned away, a time of hope and renewal.

Six times he climbed the mound, carrying his bundles of brushwood and logs. When he rose to make the seventh and last ascent, the pig waited for him at the place where the land rose in a causeway above the still waters of the moat.

"I do not know when I shall return," he said.

The pig stared at him, ears flickering back and forth. The snow fell in small hard lumps around them, dusting the ground, vanishing on the black surface of the water.

"You should go back to your forest," he said sadly.

The pig snorted in mockery of its name and walked away. He watched the retreating form until it was lost among the shadows of the trees.

The wind was cold in the early dying of the day, scouring his cheeks though he had pulled the tails of his hood across his nose and mouth like a scarf. This final climb stole his breath, so he paused often, the great bundle of brushwood cutting into his shoulders as he stood, head hanging like a beast of burden, waiting for the pounding in his ears to subside.

Even through the hood tails he could smell more snow on the wind. He tugged the makeshift scarf aside for a moment, the chill air searing his teeth, and looked up at the summit of the mound, at the winter grass rippling white along the flat crest, and then behind and below at the ditch filled with dark water, the causeway crossing it like the cord that binds a child to its mother, already half concealed by the swell of the land that rose and fell like some ancient grassy ocean. His frequent rests meant he had come no distance at all, but hung suspended between top and bottom like an old spider on a thread.

The light was failing, though it could not be so very long after noon. He glanced at the grey sky, trying to find the glare of the sun through the thick cloud. It was later than he had thought, but then everything now took him much longer than he expected.

"Imbolc," he mouthed. The fertility of the herds and the need to purify them by fire, those were two things the festival marked. And the third, the third was the Lady of the Lightning, great Bolga herself, though the common people who were all that now kept her festival had forgotten this.

"Once I rode the lightning," he said quietly to himself. "Once."

He forced himself up and onwards before true dusk was upon him, and all his efforts for nothing.

In his mind the memory of one climb merged with another, so that it seemed to him that he had been doing this for ever, limping up the hill against the force of the wind with a heavy burden on his shoulders – like that Greek king whose name he had forgotten, doomed to spend eternity rolling a boulder up a mountain only to have it slip away from him at the summit and all the work to be done over again.

The pain in his hip flared as he missed his footing. He clenched his teeth and began to pray under his breath, asking her whose mound this was to aid him, to give him the strength of body and will to complete his task, and he prayed in the old tongue, his cradle tongue, calling her by the name his people called her, not that by which she was known in these lands:

Brigit of the Victories
Glory of the Kindred
Sister to the Heaven King
Noble by Birth
Far-flung Flame
Spark of Wisdom
Generous of Deed
Brigit of the Victories
Aid me now!

A strength came to him, a warmth and vigour that coursed through his body and enabled him to straighten his crooked back a little, so the load did not cut as harshly into his shoulders. His feet began to tread more firmly on the path, and it seemed to him that other eyes guided his steps, so that without being aware of it he avoided the sharp stones and the potholes.

Soon he was at the summit, with no clear recollection of how he had come there. He released the last of the wood with a sigh of relief and raised his arms to the heavens in thanks.

The mound lay on the floor of a valley, so despite his long climb there was no great view of the surrounding country, only glimpses between the hills, and these were fast being swallowed by the gathering gloom. In the foreground he could see the line of trees across the meadow, marking the course of the stream where it flowed south. Even as he watched the trees were blurring into the hill behind them, and he knew that he should finish his preparations, lest the night catch him unawares.

There was no shelter on the plateau. A wiser man would have earlier fashioned a frame to form a windbreak, but he had never claimed to be wise, only determined. He built a barricade from his bundles, piling one on top of the other until he had created a small pool of calm in what was now a gale. Then he took the heather roots and some wood shavings from his pouch. One way of bringing fire to the hilltop would have been to carry the embers from last night in a hollow branch, as he had seen men do in the wilder parts of the land. Another would have been to use the flint and steel he carried in his pouch. Neither would work. Tonight's fire must be a virgin fire, else its efficacy would be lost, and there was only one way in which it could be kindled: the old way.

He fumbled through the layers of his garments until he found a cloth bag. Opening the drawstring he shook out a blunt- pointed stick not much longer than his middle finger and a block of soft wood with a depression in its centre. He fitted the point of the stick

into the hollow and scattered the shavings around it, hunching his body to protect them from the wind.

Then he began to twirl the stick between his hands, and while he twirled he sang the incantation, the gwarchan, as it should be sung: “Brigit of the white feet, Brigit of the harvest, Brigit of the white hands, Brigit of the flock, Brigit of the smith’s fire: kindle my flame!”

Over and over he sang, hands sliding back and forth, losing himself in the ritual while the snow fell about him and the wind tugged at the flimsy barricade. In his head he was again the boy watching the tree limb spurt its life blood and at the same time the old man whose feet Bolanus had washed, one at the beginning and one at the end. He broke off his chant to shout wildly into the bleak sky:

“Old magic, deep magic! It is necessary that one should die for the good of the people!”

He found himself cackling, his hands moving with a rhythm of their own. The shavings were turning black. A wisp of smoke rose from the hollow under the stick.

“An axis!” he cried. “The turning of the year!”

He groaned. His palms were raw, but he could feel power inside him, pushing and nudging at the blocks within him, like water testing a dam; and then suddenly there was fire, true fire, under his hands, and he blew upon it to encourage it to further life, fed it gently with small morsels suitable to its appetite until it burst into flame and he had his beacon blazing brightly on the hilltop.

All around him were bells and chimes, great drums and rattles, and the howling of the wind. The dams burst and the power raged through him, so that he seemed a pillar of fire, burning without being consumed. His last act was to cast the handful of sage upon the flames. Then he let the power sweep him away.

* * *

The land is the goddess. In his heart he has always known this, but now he sees it for the truth. These chalk downs which cover so much of southern Prydein are moulded into the shape of a reclining woman, repeated over and over again: here her rounded limbs, here her breasts, here her buttocks, here the endless rippling swell of her back, here her clefts. The streams that cross the land are milky with her chalk. The grass and trees are her hair – here a fine down threading her spine, there a thick bush hiding her secrets.

She rises from her long rest, crouches before him holding a chalice. An unending stream of milk flows from her breasts, yet the chalice is never full.

He blinks, but she holds his gaze with merciless owl eyes. The mound and he upon it become a spindle stretching up into the starry abyss of the heavens. She seizes great handfuls of mud, slaps them against the base of the mound, draws them up into strange shapes then crushes them down again.

The snow returns, swirling about him, and on the curtain of its constant movement he sees visions. Men hunt across a winter landscape. A great boar is driven to the sea, where it stands at bay while the snow turns red with its blood. Wolves pursue a long-legged heron far into the marshes near the Severn Sea. Warriors fire farmsteads, slaughter the inhabitants while the smoke rises black and greasy to an uncaring sky. Images and faces whirl past him. Some he recognizes – a fair lady shrunk with age, an old man with one good hand. Others are strangers – a dark man leaning on a spear, a blond boy and a girl with hair the colour of molten copper.

Another man, a big fair Saeson, wrestles with a giant while others stand and watch within a dark ruin: the giant turns, face reaching for the light, eyes red and crusted as if

they have been scoured with sand, and he knows him, he knows him and he reaches out to touch him but the vision is slipping away, dissolving into the snow.

He hears the thunder of hooves and the voices crying: “We ride, we ride, Amherawdyr,” louder and louder till they seem to fill the world, to be all around him, and he sees the boar put down his head and charge his tormentors, scattering them.

Far away across the landscape is a glow like the sun, a glow that might illumine all the world if its full light were unveiled. He frowns, marks its position in his mind, reaches out and tries to touch it ...

And is flung aside, so that he wakes, suddenly, to the glimmer of his fire and the freezing wind of the hillside in the time before dawn.

CHAPTER FOUR

Black smoke curled from the pyre, hung thick in the air above the bright flames. From time to time the odour of burning fat wafted across the mourners as the wind gusted, and they shuffled awkwardly around the fire, trying to avoid choking on the fumes while remaining outwardly respectful.

Only Hildeburh did not move, staying rooted to the place she had chosen when the pyre was lit, ignoring the discomfort as befitted a descendant of the hero Hengist. Her back was straight as a spear and her arms were by her side, exaggerating the shelf of her breasts. Without shifting her head she eyed her fellow mourners and wrinkled her nose in contempt at their weakness.

Watching her, Eurgain thought it typical that Hildeburh should seize the position of chief mourner, as if the old man had been *her* father instead of merely the father of her husband's second wife.

Eurgain clung to Ceolric's arm. They were so rarely together during daylight that there was pleasure to be found in it, despite the occasion. She had not disliked the old man, but he had been dying all winter, for as long as she had known him, and she could not feel much grief. A little sorrow, perhaps: she would miss his presence, the sight of him huddled on the settle by the hearth with his crony Guthlaf. (One thing she would not miss was his wandering hands – she had quickly learnt never to turn her back on him.)

The wind caught the flames and fanned them high. Embers scattered across the open hillside, sparked in the branches of the old thorn tree. The sky was grey and the wind was cold on her back, making the fire seem all the warmer at her front. She shivered and squeezed Ceolric's arm. He glanced down in surprise, unused to signs of affection from her.

The pyre had fallen in upon itself now, the carefully constructed shape eaten away. It had taken a whole day to build: a great cone wider across its base than two men lying head to foot; almost as tall as a man on a horse. Eurgain had never seen anything like it before, and she had watched the process with fascination, stealing away from her duties whenever she had a chance.

Hareth was the first adult among the followers of Wermund to die since the Saesons had come to this place. There had been other deaths: babies or young children in the first two winters; and a steady trickle of the native-born thralls. But the children, though much loved, were creatures as yet unfinished, while the thralls had customs of their own, or else could be hidden without ceremony under a thin covering of soil. Hareth was different: a far-travelled man from across the grey sea, a man of some repute whose life had been lived to the full, whose help and advice had been useful in establishing the settlement. Above all, he had been the father of Wermund's second wife.

First the men had chosen the site for the pyre. The decision had been important, because it would affect their children, and their children's children if the settlement thrived.

In time others would lie with Hareth, and the graveyard needed to be neither so close it would disturb the living, nor so distant it became a burden. They had picked a plot of land on a hillside: a piece of ground awkward to plough, treeless apart from a few thorns, well-drained and easy to dig. Then they had laid Hareth's body on its back on the ground, arms crossed on the chest, straggly grey hair and beard neatly combed. He was dressed in his best tunic and trousers, wrapped in his favourite cloak, with the brooch he claimed to have received from the daughter of the great Weala hero Cei prominent on his shoulder. Beside his head they had placed three wooden bowls, containing hazelnuts, eggs and water for his journey.

When all was ready the pyre had been built above and around him, until the body was hidden from view. Wermund and his two wives had kept vigil all night, with others coming out at intervals to pay their respects. At dawn the ritual began: the long incantation from Wermund as head of the family, the wailing of the women, the daughter's lament for the passing of the old hero. Much of what was said Eurgain did not understand, for her grasp of the language was still imperfect, and they were using an ancient and stylised form. But she grasped the gist, that Wermund was summoning the gods to see Hareth safely home, reminding them of the service he had done them during the course of his long life: Fosite of the Pillar, lord of the Frisian seas and upholder of middle-earth, whose servant Hareth had been in his youth; Tiw the one-handed warrior, whose man Hareth had been through the years of his prime, and by whose rites the body was now disposed; Wotan, master of all, guardian and forefather of the Wermundings, among whom Hareth had been numbered in the days of his dotage.

Then while the women sang their sorrow Wermund took a lighted torch from Ceolric his brother, and thrust the flames deep into the heart of the pyre. For a long moment nothing happened. Dark smoke trickled between the stacked branches, and a small glow grew large and leapt to life. The mourners passed around a wooden bowl charged with barley beer and some fiery spirit. When each had drunk his or her fill the bowl was returned to Wermund, who drained it and cast it among the flames, crying:

"He was a brave man, Hareth, worthy of his ancient name: a strong warrior and a good man in times of trouble, never one to shirk danger. His hands were skilled in many things: in sword play and axe play; in the shaping of wood and the shaping of men. He never stinted his efforts, even in his age, and gave freely of his knowledge. He hoarded neither wealth nor wisdom, but was a noble and generous man."

Now at last the flames were dying down. The smoke rose, ever thicker and blacker, hung above the pyre then was swallowed by the sky. Ceolric tugged at Eurgain's arm.

"We can leave," he murmured. "The rest is for his close kin, Ricola and Wermund, his other daughters and their husbands."

"And Hildeburh?" she whispered in return.

He grinned. "That one will stay. Nothing of importance can happen unless she is present."

"However will we manage without her in the hall?"

"Not easily," laughed Ceolric. "The house slave will be hiding in a corner, avoiding her duties; the water will not be boiling; the fire will be smitching; the hearth unswept. Luckily, we have Eanfled to stand in her stead."

The Wermundings were a group of eleven Saeson adults (twelve before Hareth's death) and their children. It had taken Eurgain a long time to sort out the various relationships, which were far more complicated than those of her own village where each man only married one woman at a time. Even now she was not sure she had them straight.

The settlement revolved round Wermund himself, the acknowledged leader, and the family of his first wife's brother, Leodwald. Like Wermund, Leodwald was married to two women: Eanfled and one of Ricola's sisters. In Hildeburh's absence, Eanfled would be keen to assert herself as mistress of the hall.

Ceolric had told Eurgain that it was unusual among his people for a man – except a king with a strong need for an heir – to take two well-born wives: it was more common for the second woman to be of lower status, and for her to be passed off as a children's nurse or a servant rather than a wife. Although he had not said so, Eurgain wondered whether this difference had something to do with the group's decision to strike out west of the Sallow Wood, thus isolating themselves from their countrymen.

"Hareth lived too long," Ceolric remarked as they walked briskly down the hillside. "Better to die while hale and hearty than linger into bitter old age."

"You say that now," said Eurgain. "Different when it is your turn."

In the distance she could see the hall and its outbuildings, the land still raw and unsettled around them, and beyond that the black woods by the stream where the ruins were, the tumbledown remnants of a great house. Low walls of old stone and the remains of charred timbers lay half hidden under shrunken brambles and a thin covering of leaf mould. The thralls claimed this was the site of a huge hall, a many-chambered house filled with people whose clothes were all the colours of the rainbow, a place of warmth and endless food and drink, where even the least slave slept upon a snug straw pallet instead of curling in the cold ashes of the fire, a place where the sweet music of harp and flute constantly echoed through the rooms. The hall had been razed by fire long ago and never rebuilt, and all that remained were the ruins, and occasionally, they said, very occasionally, the ghost of the music, faint under the encroaching trees.

Not long before Eurgain and Ceolric had arrived at Wermund's farm an old woman had set up camp among the ruins, using some of the timbers to create a shelter between two of the more solid walls. The Saesons and their thralls regarded her with deep suspicion. She was not a native of these parts, but appeared to be one of the many made homeless by the various troubles that had afflicted the northern and eastern parts of the island since Arthur's death – if indeed he did die, which some doubted.

"He and Guthlaf told good stories," said Ceolric.

"Yes, they did," she answered absently, her mind still on the old woman, whom she had not yet seen. "Do you think they were true?"

"True? Who knows?" Ceolric laughed. "Guthlaf will have free rein now, without Hareth to gainsay him."

She thought about the two old men on their settle before the coughing sickness had sapped Hareth's strength. Guthlaf would begin to describe some happening in the past and Hareth would interrupt, tell him he was an old fool who had forgotten the name of his father, that it had not been like that at all, but like *this*, and then Guthlaf would snort and interrupt in his turn. It was a game the old men played, their stories of their Frisian homeland becoming wilder and wilder as each sought to outdo the other. (Cattle the size of a large hound and tiny pigs like children's toys were two things she found hard to credit, though she was now more ready than she had been to believe in winters so cold all livestock had to be housed indoors.)

When she had first arrived among the Wermundings, at the beginning of autumn, Ceolric had had to translate nearly everything the old men said. Although Ceolric had taught her a little of what he called the common tongue during their journey from the west,

the old men had used a great many words from their native Frisian dialect, some of which gave even Ceolric trouble. To Eurgain it had been nonsense talk.

Language was not a thing she had ever thought about until very recently. Growing up in an isolated area of southern Dumnonia (not that Eurgain had ever thought of it as isolated) she had not come into contact with anyone who spoke a different tongue until the previous summer. Then her heightened awareness after the death of everyone she loved had allowed her to understand some Irish – but Irish did have some similarities to her native western rural British. The harsh Saeson language was totally different – like the raving of dogs rather than human speech – and to begin with she had been more than half convinced that the Wermundings (including Ceolric) were playing an elaborate joke upon her, that whenever she was in earshot they snarled nonsense at each other. Sooner or later they would drop the pretence and talk properly, like real people.

Then for a while she had believed all Saesons must live in a permanent state of anger, because of the way they barked all their words. Eventually she had grown used to the sounds and had learned to distinguish emotions by tone and gesture. In that respect – this was obvious, yet it still surprised her – the Saesons were very like her own people, moved to the same range of feelings by the same kind of happenings.

Despite the fact that Wermund, like Ceolric, was fluent in British (their mother was supposedly a native born princess from the eastern part of the island) he refused to speak it. Eurgain had only ever heard him use it once, when he was explaining something complicated to one of the thralls and needed to be certain the man had understood him. Otherwise he made do with signs, or simple words from the Saeson tongue, reiterated loud and often.

Ceolric had challenged him over this during the building of the pyre. Wermund had narrowed his eyes and studied his younger brother appraisingly. “They must learn,” he had said, “and they will not learn if we make matters easy for them. This is our land now and I do not care what language their former masters spoke. If I get a new hound-pup from a Weala lordling, I give it commands in my tongue, not his. Likewise with my sheep and cattle, and my thralls.”

“Yet you make an exception for the old woman,” Ceolric had observed.

His brother had flushed slightly. “That is between us. In any case, it would be better now if your girl dealt with her. I cannot send one of our women – they are afraid of her, though they will not admit it – and she is not a task to be trusted to the thralls.”

Coming down the slope towards the hall, Eurgain thought of this new duty laid upon her. The thralls were afraid of the old woman, though Eurgain had noticed that when one of them injured himself with a chopping axe and the wound refused to heal, as wounds often did, they had no qualms about asking for her help and advice. From their description, she was even older than Hareth, who had suddenly become very frail and feeble in his last few weeks. Yet they had also said that she was ageless. Perhaps that was a result of living alone. The only person Eurgain had known who had lived a solitary life was the hermit Budoc (she did not count his predecessor) and he too had possessed that quality, of being old without being aged. Of course, he had been no common man, but the last of Arthur’s warriors, Bedwyr mab Petroc, living out his final days in obscurity.

“Strange that Hareth and Guthlaf should have met Bedwyr,” she said aloud.

“Not really,” Ceolric shrugged. “They were wanderers, men seeking to make their reputations in either Frisia or this island. In many ways it would be far stranger if they had

not met Bedwyr. Garulf, the other Frisian I knew, the one who was the steersman aboard my father's ship, had also come across him."

Eurgain frowned a little at the mention of the ship. She glanced uneasily back up the hillside, to where the thick black smoke hung above the skyline. The air was growing hazy with the coming of night, and the figures gathered around the pyre seemed unnaturally long and thin.

Save for what could be termed either an accident of fate or the will of the gods, according to one's taste – and some days she thought of it one way and some days the other, depending on how she felt – Ceolric's father and his crewmen would have enslaved her and her family. At least her kin would still have been alive, she supposed, though she had come to the conclusion that there were worse things than death, which after all comes to everyone at the end.

As it was the Saesons in their ship had been destroyed by the same wild Scotti raiders who had destroyed her village, raping and killing until they were sated. Only she had survived, and to this day she was not sure whether that had been blind chance, or if she had truly heard the voice of some spirit or goddess warning her to run and hide at the crucial moment. Just as she had been the sole survivor of her village, so too had Ceolric been the only survivor from his father's ship, swimming ashore unseen in the darkness to be found by the hermit Budoc, who was more than a hermit, and whose name was not Budoc.

"You are frowning," Ceolric said softly. "What are you thinking about?"

"Bedwyr," she said. "I still find it hard to believe that the old hermit to whom I carried food when he was sick was once one of Arthur's great warriors."

Ceolric smiled ruefully. "I wonder where he went afterwards. And what happened to the dark man, the quiet one."

"Nai," she said. "He will have healed, I think. He was a hard man, too."

"I liked him. And I liked his big friend, Gorthyn."

"Yes," she said. "I did not mean I did not like him."

CHAPTER FIVE

Nai felt the kiss of cold metal on the side of his neck. He held his head very still and waited, the stool hard under his buttocks, fixing his attention on the smoke where it seeped through the thatch of the house before dissipating on the wind, breathing slowly and deeply to calm himself. In the distance he could hear a baby crying and a woman singing softly to soothe it, an old rhyme about the royal swineherds foretelling disaster falling on the kingdom from the sea.

“How many did you kill?”

He would have shrugged had the metal not been touching his skin. “Too many. It was not difficult. They were packed in a confined space. They panicked.”

“And you showed no mercy.”

He shuddered at the memories, felt the metal press harder in response. “At the end I did. When they were no longer a threat. I spared the bard.” His voice was strained.

“But not his harp.”

“No.” This time he did not laugh.

“I was a man possessed,” he said suddenly. “I and not I rode through them. Thinking back now, I cannot understand how it succeeded.”

“You slaughtered them.”

“They should have killed me the moment I left the cover of the ruins. Or they should have stopped me riding through them. It was a plan born of desperation.”

He was sweating despite the cold. The baby had stopped crying but the woman continued to sing her lullaby, describing the forest of masts the swineherds saw moving on the deep.

“I and not I, you say. You sound like a bard yourself – I and not I sing it, they claim, by which they mean they are in the grip of a poetic fever. Was it so with you?”

“I am not trying to excuse myself. I did what was necessary.”

“Ah, a flash of spirit! Raise your head.”

He lifted it obediently and gazed up into the sky, where sunshine and clouds created a latticework pattern that endlessly broke and reformed.

“So deep,” he murmured. “So deep, the sky.”

“Keep still,” Seradwen said impatiently. “It is bad enough I allowed you to persuade me into doing this without you twitching like a small boy.”

“You must have cut hair before.”

“Often. And ears. On the farm they learned not to ask me.” She pushed his head roughly to one side and clipped the locks around his temples. “I’d sooner pluck sheep. At least one can do something with the wool.” Her hand grazed his shoulder and sent a clump of hair sliding to the ground. “I am taking out the grey where I can.”

“There is more of it than when I first met him,” Bedwyr’s voice remarked from behind him.

“Small wonder!” she said.

Nai shifted on the stool. “I thought of riding out in a while, now the wind has dropped.”

“Don’t wriggle!” hissed Seradwen.

Bedwyr moved forward until he was in Nai’s line of sight. “Would you like company?”

“I would,” he said gladly, though his original plan had been to ride alone. Seradwen grunted in approval.

“There!” she said, brushing around his neck and shoulders. “A little lopsided, but nothing time will not heal.”

“Thank you.” Nai stood, stretched, peeled off his jerkin and tunic to shake out the loose hair. “What will you do the rest of the day?”

“Help Echel with that mare I was telling you about. He is concerned about her discharge.”

“Good.” He turned to Bedwyr, missing Seradwen’s grin at her dismissal. “I think we would be wise to borrow mounts from Echel rather than take our own; if Regin or Angus see us they might recognize our horses.”

“Do you think we will meet them?” Bedwyr asked curiously.

Nai shrugged, dragged his tunic over his head. “I don’t know,” he said, his voice muffled. “I have a feeling.” He surfaced, wrestled with the sleeves. “We would be wise to be cautious. I was thinking,” he added with a sideways glance at Seradwen, “we might stay out for a day or so.”

“You do have a feeling,” the older man commented drily.

The three of them walked away from the houses and through the gate in the wicker fence dividing the living quarters from the farmyard. The yard itself was almost deserted: most of the men were out in the nearby woods, gathering timber for fuel or building material, while most of the women were working down by the stream, harvesting reeds and osiers.

In one corner was a hayrick, its once neat shape now reduced to a ragged apple core. Echel stood beside it, frowning, talking with one of his cousins.

“Plenty of leaf fodder,” the cousin said as they approached. “We knew the hay supply would run short.”

“I did not expect it to go down so rapidly,” Echel said gloomily. “Where are we now? The end of January. At this rate we will not last to March. And we cannot borrow or trade, because nobody else will have any either.”

“We knew it would happen,” the cousin repeated stubbornly. He kicked the bottom of the rick. “Like I said, we have plenty of leaf fodder. Ash and elm, the very trees the boys are out with now.”

He was referring to the process of stripping in summer the leaves of those trees marked for felling in winter. The leaves were dried on racks and stored for later use. Since both sheep and cattle are by nature browsers rather than grazers, they will, given the choice, prefer dried leaves over even the finest hay.

Echel nodded absently to the newcomers. The cousin glanced up and winked slyly at Seradwen, who was a favourite among the family because she too was a farmer.

“You think I worry too much?”

The cousin grinned, showing a mouthful of jutting teeth. “I think we would do better to see how those boys are going with the fencing. Young Ecdor can be a bit slapdash.”

“You are right.” Looking harried, Echel pushed back his pointed leather cap and scratched his scalp. “Seradwen. The mare.”

“I’ll see to the lads,” said his cousin. “You show the lady the mare. It will put you more at ease.” He strolled across the yard, whistling tunelessly between his teeth.

Seradwen tucked her arm through Echel’s and coaxed him away from the haystack. “Nai and Bedwyr would like to borrow a couple of mounts for a few days.”

He glanced dubiously at the sky. “Looks well enough now,” he said, “but there’s another storm on the way.”

“Needs must,” said Bedwyr.

Echel considered a while, his mind so obviously working through the possibilities that Nai expected him to voice his thoughts aloud.

“Very well,” he said at length. “Take any except the grey gelding. His off foreleg is not fully healed yet.”

“Thank you,” said Bedwyr.

The farmer shrugged his massive shoulders. “We will keep a good watch while you are gone. Take care.” He hesitated, as if he would say more, but looked at Bedwyr’s face and allowed Seradwen to lead him away.

Nai and Bedwyr exchanged a glance. Nai had spent part of the previous day helping carry stakes from the wood where they were cut to the field where the fence was being replaced. His hands, badly blistered from his practice sessions with Bedwyr, prevented him from driving home the posts, and he felt a touch of guilt at the fact he was living on Echel’s bounty without making adequate repayment. Bedwyr seemed unworried, but then he belonged to a different generation, and was accustomed by virtue of his birth and position to having other people deal with matters like providing food and shelter. Even when he had been the hermit Budoc, living in a solitary hut on the cliffs of southern Dumnonia, most of his food had been brought to him by the inhabitants of the nearby village.

“What are you thinking?” asked Bedwyr as they walked towards the stables.

“I was feeling pangs of conscience about not contributing more.”

Bedwyr raised an eyebrow. “Indeed? You can be a warrior or you can be a farmer. Better to do one well than both badly.”

“I suppose so. Though they say the Saesons manage it well enough.”

“Ha!” The older man snorted. “They may claim to be farmers, but they do not get their hands dirty. They give orders, and have others to work for them. Mind you,” he added, “if I remember rightly one of the Roman writers extolled the virtues of farmers as soldiers – soldiers, mark you, not warriors – by which he meant they were accustomed to relentless labour and the discipline of going straight from one task to another, and thus were less likely to falter under extreme burdens or discomfort than any other class of men.”

“Is that true, do you think?”

Bedwyr shrugged. “They conquered all the world, did they not?”

“And lost it again,” Nai said sourly.

Although they intended to scout the land in the guise of travellers, they armed themselves as if they were going to battle. Both men borrowed plain white shields from the farm’s small armoury, and Nai strapped a quiver of javelins to his war saddle. The ponies they chose were sturdy beasts, the steadiest and least temperamental they could find; creatures that might lack any great turn of speed but were capable of carrying them all day.

“How are your hands?” asked Bedwyr, watching Nai struggle with the saddle girth.

“Sore. I have not blistered like this since I was a youngster first learning how to hold a blade.”

“It will pass. You clutch the hilt so tightly because at present you think about every move you make, just as you did when you were a child and new to it all.”

They followed the track as it wound along the valley, water gleaming in the freshly cleared drainage channels on either side. Here were the infields, the most intensively farmed, waiting for the spring ploughing, their fences and ditches immaculate in the pale sun. On their right they could see a white scar in the hillside copse where last night’s gale had felled a tree; a tiny figure waved as they passed.

“You see? They are quite content without our help,” called Bedwyr.

“You justify yourself,” said Nai, pushing his mount into an amble.

Most of the men were fencing among the outfields. The sound of sledgehammers pounding on posts pursued them as the track led up on to the ridge overlooking the farm.

Nai reined in and stared about him while he waited for Bedwyr to catch up.

“What did you plan?” asked the older man.

Nai frowned uncertainly. “To scout towards Lindinis. We should stay off the main road. You know this country better than I. Is there somewhere we can see the road without being seen?”

“Yes.” Keen eyes peered at him from under bushy brows. “What do you expect? To find Angus and his men riding towards us as bold as you may please?”

He managed a shamefaced smile. “No, not that. But I feel we should be up and doing, not sitting waiting for whatever may happen next. The women are safe enough with Echel’s kin; safer than they would be anywhere else,” he added doubtfully.

“Nothing short of an army could hurt them in that place,” Bedwyr acknowledged gravely.

“Supposing Angus comes with an army?”

Bedwyr’s face changed. “Then Echel and his kinsmen will fight.”

Nai shook his head, the urgency rising within him. “Will they be enough? And what about Custennin, or the Painted Men? I know you think the Children of Menestyr are finished – ”

“I have been wrong before,” Bedwyr said mildly.

“Echel cannot stand off a large force.”

Bedwyr leant across and touched Nai’s arm. The ponies shifted restlessly beneath them.

“I have lived with this for so long I have forgotten how hard it can be. It will end soon, I promise you, within a few months at most. Meanwhile, yes, we live with constant danger. You are right: someone will come. Most likely Angus, possibly Custennin or the servants of Vortepor. Less likely are the Painted Men: I do not believe there are many of them left. But yes, we have enemies, and for as long as Gwenhwyvar is believed to have the Chalice of Sovereignty that Arthur brought back from the Iardomnan, they will pursue us.”

“Does she have it?” Nai blurted without thinking.

“She does. Not here, but hidden. We will reclaim it when the weather improves.”

Nai glanced at the sky, the high clouds being blown by a strong wind, and then at the green and brown country around him.

“She cannot travel far in this cold,” Bedwyr said. He sniffed the air. “And the farmers are right. There is more bad weather on the way.”

By early afternoon, when the light was already failing and the air was dark with the threat of rain, Nai was prepared to admit the older man had spoken truly. This was not a time to be travelling: despite his leather gauntlets, his hands were frozen, his clothes were soaked, and his lower legs and feet had long ago lost all feeling.

They had begun by riding west, parallel with the main road leading to Lindinis, keeping to the cover of the woods wherever they could. They had seen nothing moving along all the length of the road, but when they had come to the river, black and smooth-flowing, an unvoiced caution had made them turn downstream rather than upstream to the bridge. They had searched until they had found a ford, a cattle crossing between broken banks.

The water was high, spilling out over the muddy ground, and they could see the strength of the current in midstream. They went cautiously, taking it in turns, the one on dry land watching every movement of the other, though in truth there was little to be done if the ponies missed their footing. Nai went second. He was halfway across when the pony stumbled. For a moment they were floating, the force of the current beginning to turn them, tugging at Nai's legs so he slipped slightly in the saddle. The surface of the water, dark and dirty, was very near, and he heard Bedwyr shout something incoherent from the bank. Then suddenly a great shudder passed through the pony and it struggled free, hooves biting into the riverbed, and they crossed the remaining distance to the bank in a series of jerky leaps that drenched Nai to the skin.

Not far away was the city, a smoke hazed huddle of buildings half concealed behind crumbling walls. A small group of people with great bundles on their backs was making its way along a path to the nearest gate. Even at this distance Nai could tell that some of the group were women, and the bundles they carried were obviously firewood. Apart from the grey sheep grazing outside the walls, there were no other signs of activity.

For some reason, and despite his earlier words to Bedwyr, Nai had been convinced they would meet Angus and his men on the road, or failing that, on the verge of entering Lindinis. When one thought about it, this was not likely, since Angus had last been heard of several miles to the north at Ynis Witrin, but the feeling had been so strong Nai could not help an irrational sense of disappointment.

He squeezed water from his cloak, grinned ruefully at Bedwyr. "I suppose you will tell me we cannot go in?"

Bedwyr looked at him doubtfully. "I had sooner not. Lindinis holds few good memories for me. How wet are you?"

"Very." Nai dismounted, tipped brown liquid from his boots. "Have you ever noticed how damp feet give the illusion of warmth – for a while?"

"Often." Bedwyr stared at the city. "Perhaps we should go down. There may be news, and in any case you need a fire."

Nai shrugged. "I have been wetter than this and lived." He replaced his boots, grimaced. "Cities are strange places to me. Crowds make me uncomfortable. If you do not wish to enter, I have no objection."

"Yet we need to know," Bedwyr murmured.

Shivering against the wind, Nai pulled himself into the saddle. He scanned the walls, reluctant to ride to the gate and make a formal enquiry of whoever kept the guard. The stones were pale stained, as if some giant had spilled a beaker of milk over them. There were gaps along the uppermost course, and many of the surviving blocks seemed none too safe. Black lines showed where the mortar had broken away, and even as he looked something small and white fell from on high.

“They are in better state than they were thirty years ago,” said Bedwyr.

Nai made no answer. His gaze passed over the sheep spread across the turf, over the rounded hummocks which might have been the remnants of a ditch.

“There!” he said.

He took the pony up the slope towards the walls at a steady walk so as not to frighten either the sheep or their shepherd. Behind him he heard the faint jingle of harness as Bedwyr followed.

A man with a curved staff was moving among the long-legged animals, pausing and bending over them from time to time to check their health. At the sound of the hooves he straightened, his features hidden under a broad brimmed hat and a grey beard. The sheep closest to him huddled behind his broad form, bleating imperiously, and he waited warily for the riders to approach.

“Health to you and your flock,” Nai called from a distance.

“And to you,” replied the man. “A bad time to be travelling. You are for the city?”

“Not us, if it can be avoided,” Bedwyr said lightly, allowing his pony to overtake Nai. “We wondered – we heard of friends on the road, though we have not passed them. Do you know if any strangers have entered Lindinis recently? Or should we ask the gate guards? They are mostly Saesons, I suppose, and I have no great love for Saesons.”

The shepherd grinned, showing strong white teeth. “Arrogant and quarrelsome creatures, the lot of them. I can answer your question myself. No strangers have entered the city for a month or more, not since some foreign men of the north were found slain in an abandoned house. A close watch has been kept on comings and goings ever since; redoubled since we heard that Ynis Witrin had fallen to an adventurer from the west.”

“You are sure?” asked Nai.

“I am sure,” the shepherd said sharply. He pushed back his hat and stared at them both with narrow blue eyes. “I did hear tell that more of the foreign men rode out of the city shortly after their fellows were slain and came themselves to an ill end at Caer Cadwy. But no doubt you would know nothing of that.”

“No doubt,” Bedwyr said evenly. “They did not return then?”

“None of them. They vanished into the wilderness of the world, like so many before them.” The shepherd tapped his staff upon the ground. “I must see to my flock.”

“And we must be on our road. I am grateful.” Bedwyr raised a hand in salute, and the two of them turned away, riding carefully until they were clear of the flock.

“I have a hankering to go north-west,” he said when they were out of earshot. “That is the way Vortepor came to Caer Cadwy long ago, with Teleri in his train, when he set us, albeit unwittingly, on the path which led to the chalice and the empire of Albion.”

“You have humoured me,” Nai said formally. “I will do no less for you.”

So they skirted under the walls and rode away from the city, passing quickly through the semi-cultivated fields of the hinterland out into the wilderness beyond. Gradually the clouds lowered in the heavens and the wind grew brisker. Nai sank into himself, paying little attention to their surroundings until he realized there was no sensation in his feet. He woke with a start to find they were climbing towards a range of hills, Bedwyr hunched in the lead, seemingly uninterested in the route they were taking.

“I am sorry,” shouted Nai.

“For what?” The older man turned in genuine surprise.

“For bringing you out in this. We could have stayed home by the fire.”

“If it’s a fire you want I will find you one soon. This was good grazing land once, and well populated. There should be a farm nearby.”

A light drizzle had begun by the time they saw their first sign of people, a trickle of smoke curling up from a valley in the middle distance. Now they rode a rough path between fields which though empty were obviously still in use during the summer months, and at last they came upon a small flock of sheep huddled in a corner, who ran bleating towards them as they passed.

“No shepherd?” Bedwyr said as much to himself as Nai.

Nai raised himself in the saddle and peered around. “Probably hiding.”

He sat straighter and lifted his arms away from his body, hoping to make himself seem less dangerous despite the shield and spears, but the shepherd, if there was one, did not appear.

“I daresay strangers at this time of year usually mean harm,” he remarked, and Bedwyr nodded.

The path had become a drover’s track, muddy and churned with recent hoofmarks. Nai dropped back, let Bedwyr take the lead again, and scanned the landscape, noting every feature and searching for anything that did not fit the pattern.

“We’re being watched from the copse to our left,” he said quietly.

“I know,” Bedwyr answered over his shoulder. “I was wondering whether we should hail them.”

Again Nai caught a flicker of movement between the black branches. The watcher seemed to be withdrawing into the shadows.

“Too late,” said Bedwyr, though his head had not moved and he appeared to be giving all his attention to the track. “Still, if we stay on the path they should realize we are no threat.”

The banks on either side grew steadily higher as the track descended the hill into the valley. The ground became increasingly muddy, and the smell of wood- and peat-smoke was strong upon the air. For a while they were unable to see what lay around them, then suddenly the banks melted away and they came out on to level ground just as the drizzle turned to real rain.

“Look!” said Bedwyr, pointing.

The valley was long and almost treeless, unless one counted the withies growing along the banks of the stream that wound between the patchwork of small fields.

The settlement stood not far from the stream. Most of the buildings were round wooden huts with high thatched roofs rising to a point, but behind them was an oblong hall of stone. A low wall sprang from the ends of the hall to encircle the huts, reminding Nai of a hen bird enfolding her chicks in the circuit of her wings. Outside the wall was a motley collection of tumbledown barns and stores, their thatch green with moss and mould. A number of figures were moving among these barns, and at the sight of the riders they stopped whatever they were doing (repairing the drainage ditches, Nai decided when he saw their spades) and began to chatter excitedly. A pair of dogs ran forward at the sound of the horses’ hooves, barking wildly until they were restrained by two of the labourers.

“Peace and prosperity be upon all who dwell here,” called Bedwyr when the dogs had quietened.

A man came forward from the crowd, stocky and built like a bear, his head thrust forward on broad shoulders; an ageless man, weathered and worn as his clothing, with a frown under his cap.

“And on you, strangers,” he said, wiping muddy hands on his jerkin.

“We would beg a night’s food and lodging,” said Bedwyr.

The man peered up at him suspiciously. “An ill time to be on the road.”

“And thus the smoke of your fires was doubly welcome to us,” Bedwyr said smoothly.

“By your voice you are not from these parts.”

“Indeed, and I am not. My friend and I are from the west, the lands near the southern sea – though I knew these parts well, many years ago. This was Tingyr’s farm once, was it not?”

“Long ago,” the man said reluctantly. “A very long time ago. You must be older than you look, to remember that. Where are you bound?”

“North and west.”

“Not east?”

“No, not east.”

“Good,” growled the man. “If you were I’d have the dogs on you.”

Lifting an eyebrow, Bedwyr made to swing from the saddle. The dogs snarled, twisting and pulling in the grips of those who held them.

“I did not say you could dismount,” said the farmer. “This is not the old days, when every traveller could expect free food and lodging.”

Bedwyr flushed and for a moment Nai thought he would ride the man down. The farmer must have seen the same look on the old warrior’s face, for he tensed his body as if to leap aside.

The moment passed. In a marginally more friendly tone the farmer said: “How did you come to know Tingyr?”

“A long story. I doubt it would interest you.” Bedwyr wheeled his mount – no easy matter, with the crowd before him and the dogs still snarling – and nodded to Nai, who began to back his own pony while keeping watch on the group, one hand near his spears, ready to throw if the dogs slipped their collars.

“Wait!” cried the farmer. “Perhaps it would interest me. Tingyr was my father.”

“A shame you did not inherit his courtesy.”

“Things were different in my father’s day.” He stared at the retreating Bedwyr with a kind of hopeless yearning that sat incongruously on his weathered face, then drew a deep breath. “Will you not stay the night?” he said gruffly. “What little we have you may share, you and your silent friend who is debating whether to put a spear in me.”

Nai let his hand fall away from the quiver.

“We are not from Ynis Witrin,” said Bedwyr. “Glasdun. Whatever you choose to call it.”

“A den of thieves is what I choose to call it.” The farmer’s features tightened. “Parasites, all of them. They exact tribute from those of us too small to stand them off. Bully boys, spending their days in idleness consuming the goods bought by the sweat of my brow.”

He turned suddenly, and roared at his workmen. “Enough gawping! The old man and his friend will entertain us this night, never doubt it. But the ditch must be dug first, lest we all be flooded in our beds.”

Although his voice was fierce several of the men grinned as they returned to their labours.

“It is for their own good,” the farmer remarked to Bedwyr. “Their huts are the ones that will suffer if they do not clear the silt. Not that they see it that way. They think I force them to work for my own amusement. Without me they would sit around all day bewailing their lot while the buildings collapsed about their ears.”

Bedwyr swung down from the saddle. The dogs came forward cautiously, tails slowly wagging. Nai waited until he was certain they were friendly before dismounting into the mud of the yard.

“You can stable your mounts over there,” said the farmer, pointing to one of the tumbledown barns. “Dry enough if you keep to the higher end, and not cold once you are out of the rain.”

His gaze swung over them, hard and unblinking, as if he were already regretting his offer of shelter. Nai shivered, stamping his feet.

“What you need, lad, is some real exercise, something to keep you warm.” Their host smiled coldly, revealing worn yellow teeth, then added in a more friendly tone: “We will eat as soon as the ditch is clear.”

“Good,” said Nai. “I am chilled to the bone.”

The farmer started slightly at the sound of his ruined voice, glanced doubtfully from one to the other. “You are an odd pair to be travelling the country in winter. Are you outlaws?”

“No,” Bedwyr answered shortly.

The farmer scowled. “Are you telling me the truth? I have no wish to find some lordling’s warband intent on burning my home about my head because I gave shelter to a pair of wanted men.”

“We are not running from anybody,” said Nai, seeing Bedwyr growing angry again. “We bring no trouble in our wake; or at least none of which we know. All we ask is food and a space to sleep in exchange for my companion’s memories of your father.”

“And stabling for two horses,” grumbled the man. “A poor bargain to my mind, but I cannot deny you on what promises to be a wet night.”

He strode away towards the ditch and its pile of silt, casting a parting shot over his shoulder. “Besides, I cannot disappoint the men, who saw your arrival. Had you come to me alone it might be different.”

Avoiding Bedwyr’s eye, Nai gathered the reins and led the ponies to the building the farmer had indicated. After a moment the older man followed and set about unsaddling his mount without a word. Nai concentrated on his own pony, rubbing it down with long, slow movements, clucking his tongue and murmuring nonsense.

Suddenly Bedwyr stamped his feet and began to scrape with a heel at the muck on the floor.

“He is a hill farmer, living on the margins of habitable land, struggling to survive,” said Nai. “All hill farmers are hard men, quick to drive a bargain in their favour, slow to trust an outsider.”

The other grunted, continued to worry at the ground.

“This one hates being inside,” Nai said after a while. “Strange how some horses prefer it and others would rather stand in the rain.”

“They each have their likes and dislikes,” Bedwyr answered absently. He straightened and looked around the barn, at the muddy floor with the puddles in the corner, the gaping hole in the roof, the thick black cobwebs hanging from the rafters. “In this case, I cannot blame him.”

He shrugged, pushed a toe at the hole he had made. “I expected a warmer welcome, as you probably gathered. Come see this.”

Standing aside he indicated the hollow he had scraped in the dirt. “Do you see? A mosaic floor, or the remnants of one. Makes a good hard standing. That stone building they use as a hall was a barn once. The house was here, under our feet. Do you see the reversal?”

They use the animal quarters for humans, and the human quarters for animals. God save us all, but the world is sadly shrunken.”

“If you will fetch some water, I will finish the horses,” Nai said quietly. “There’s a bucket hanging from the beam.”

CHAPTER SIX

Wermund's hall was warm and bright when Ceolric and Eurgain entered. Some of the thralls had remained behind to tend the fire and prepare the evening meal for the mourners on their return. Eanfled, who had rushed back to seize her chance while her rival Hildeburh was still occupied at the pyre, was standing in the middle of the open space, barking orders. Thralls ran back and forth, carrying firewood and rushlights, bowls and cauldrons. She scowled at Ceolric and Eurgain and waved them to the side, out of the way.

Ceolric laughed and pulled a bench against the wall. The two of them sat, and he took Eurgain's hand in his own.

"Do you regret coming here?" he asked tenderly. "Even now it is not too late. We could get you back to your own land."

"There is nothing for me there," she said, then realized how bald the words sounded. "I am here because I want to be with you."

"When winter is over we will leave." He stared at the chaos around him with unfocussed eyes. "I miss the sea, and I think you do too."

She nodded. "It seems strange. The sea was always there, as much a presence as the land itself."

"Wermund is a good man. Though we are brothers he owes me nothing."

"You have worked hard for him." She studied him in the half light of the hall. He had filled out over the autumn and winter, becoming broader and more muscular. She had fled from the ruins of her home with a youth; now she sat beside a man.

"Felling trees for a winter's keep. Our father would not have approved. He had men to do such things for him." He smiled a little sadly at the memory of his father's dreams. "Wermund still has friends among the Gewisse. He reckons his brother need never go hungry in those lands."

"How will we live?"

He released her hand, studied his own. "Much of that country is empty. I thought we might do something like Wermund has done here: find an abandoned farm with the thralls left masterless, take it for our own. Once we were established I could spend part of the year making trading voyages – not in my own ship at first, but if the gods smile upon us ..."

"Trading voyages?" she said more sharply than she intended.

He clenched his fist. "I shall not go raiding. Nor shall I make another voyage of conquest. I swear it to you, Eurgain, by Wotan my forefather and Thunor the Thunderer. Not now I have seen the misery it brings."

Eurgain glanced up and met Eanfled's hostile stare. There was a time when she would have blushed, but not any more. None of the Saeson women approved of young Ceolric's liaison with a Weala girl, and there was nothing she could do about it. If she had had the sense to lie, to tell them she was well born, that her father had ruled several

villages, they might have accepted her. Even then she had her doubts. As it was, they took her for something useless, a creature so ignorant she might as well have been an animal: Ceolric's bed-warmer and nothing else.

She could remember the early days after their arrival among the Wermundings. Both of them had been exhausted by the long journey, by the need to deal constantly with strangers not from a position of power but as beggars. At first they had travelled under the safe conduct of Nai and Gorthyn's lord, Gereint. Then matters had been the other way about: she had been the local girl, admired for her beauty, while Ceolric had been the stranger, regarded with suspicion. All too soon they had passed beyond the area where Gereint's word had any meaning, and only the kindness of those they met along the way had kept them safe. Two youngsters travelling alone, they had been fortunate not to be seized as slaves.

So on reaching the haven of Wermund's hall, they had for several days done little but sleep, eat and drink. At length Ceolric had recovered enough to go out with the men in the morning, leaving her alone in the hall. The Saeson women had not known how to treat her. She was not a menial like the thralls, yet like the thralls she did not speak the true tongue. They had set her simple tasks, like spinning or carding wool: the unending makeweight jobs one did when one was not busy with something else.

Gradually they had come to trust her to perform a few of the more difficult tasks in the hall, though the women still regarded her as a simpleton who needed constant supervision. For a time she had taken charge of cleaning and feeding Hareth while the old man sank deeper into the daze that would lead to his death. She had soon learnt to avoid his hands when he was awake – there was still great strength in his fingers, and for several days her buttocks bore the bruises to prove it. To her disgust the Saeson women had blamed her for the old man's lust, as if she had somehow provoked the attacks.

"What is it?" said Ceolric, leaning back against the wall. "Are you hungry? The others will return soon, and then we can eat."

She regarded his profile. His beard had thickened over the last few months, so that now it was a true growth and not the scrubby fringe she remembered from their first meeting. There was a scattering of fair hairs high on his cheekbones that had appeared over the winter, and fresh creases around his eyes. By any standards he was a handsome man, far better looking than his brother Wermund – and Eurgain did not think that was simply her besotted mind talking; she had noticed the glances the other women, even Ricola, cast in Ceolric's direction when they believed themselves unobserved.

"I was thinking about Hildeburh and Ricola," she answered truthfully. "Are all Saeson women like them?"

Ceolric pursed his lips. "I suppose so. I never thought about it. After my mother died my father and I were not much in the company of women. My brothers and sisters had homes of their own, but we rarely saw them. Wicga my father gathered a band of warriors around him and strove to make himself a great lord among the East Saxons. Most of our time was spent moving from place to place, fighting a skirmish here and building an alliance there. What women I saw, save on our brief visits to the halls of the powerful, were the kind who are attracted to a wanderer's life."

"A nice way to put it," she said.

He coloured faintly. "Well, you understood what I meant. Hildeburh is well born, as I am sure she has told you."

"Often," Eurgain said drily.

"She is not a person who would ever be a camp follower."

“No.”

“But from what I have heard,” he added hastily, “and from what I remember of life at home when I was small, I would say the women of the Wermundings are not unusual.”

“Then may the gods have mercy upon you all,” murmured Eurgain, too softly for him to hear.

“You must remember that life in the old country was hard. Even those of us born here in Britain grew up with the stories of famine and harsh winters. It makes a difference. My people do not see life the same way as yours. To us doom is always waiting around the next corner. We do not expect to be happy, and if we are, we do not expect it to last.”

“Is that so of you?”

He gave her the crooked grin she loved. “You forget, my mother was British. Because of her, and because I have been much in your company, I am far more like you than I am my fellow countrymen. And there I betray your influence – we do not think of each other as fellow countrymen, but as Saxons or Ytes or Frisians by descent, and Wermundings or Oescings by adoption. Once in a while we might take the larger view and speak of East Angles or West Saxons, but only rarely.”

“I suppose the same is true of us. I would not have thought of myself as a Dumnonian, until I came here.”

“To your people – by which I mean those who speak my mother’s tongue – a Saeson is a Saeson, even if his father and his father’s father were born here.”

A shadow fell across them.

“So,” said Guthlaf. “May I sit with you? I have stood too long.”

He smiled down at them, a grey haired man a little stooped with age. Ceolric made space for him on the bench and he settled with a sigh.

“I shall miss him even if his death was a mercy – not that I would say so to his daughters. We had been friends a long time.” He turned to Eurgain. “You put up with much. The wandering hands, the pinches. He was not always so.”

“I thought you would stay till the end,” said Ceolric.

“Not I. I was his friend, not his kinsman. Even our friendship came about through shared misfortune rather than choice. Let his daughters and their husbands have the last of him. He is gone down into the dark now, though he avoided it longer than most men.”

He stared moodily about him, at the thralls busy with their preparations, at Eanfled, sweating from the warmth of the fire, waving her arms as she berated a serving girl.

“No way to win the best from people,” he muttered, and looked again at Eurgain. “You were talking in your own tongue when I joined you. It would be better if you used ours. The other women will accept you more quickly.”

She flushed. “I find it hard to say things in your language. Only simple things. And if you say simple things all the time, people think you are simple.”

“I know,” Guthlaf said gently. “I do know. Easiest to discuss deep matters in your own tongue.” He stretched out his feet, nearly tripping a harassed-looking thrall carrying a steaming bowl. “The others will return soon and we shall eat. Funerals make me hungry.” He laughed suddenly. “Poor Hareth! He did not expect to die an old man. Danger was so often our companion neither of us thought our ends would be other than a shallow grave in hostile country, a hasty burial by our fellows before they went on their road.” He blinked, tugged his grey beard. “Or to be taken by the sea, that was another possibility. Strange are the ways of Weird.”

“Burial?” said Eurgain. “But he was burned.”

She had never seen such a thing before. Her own people buried their dead, sending them back to the Mother from whom they had sprung, letting their bodies return to the soil even as did the bodies of the beasts who were also her children. She had heard that the great lords of the land, the rulers in their fortresses who followed the teachings of the Christ god, did likewise. Budoc the hermit (who had been Bedwyr the warrior and thus himself one of those lords, she recalled with a start) had once spoken to her of the dead coming alive again, but she had not really understood what he meant.

“Ah,” said Guthlaf. “Like me, he was a follower of Tiw. That was why he was sent to the flames. A follower of Thunor would be treated otherwise. For Tiw it is fire, always fire.”

“What if you had died in hostile country?” asked Eurgain. “Supposing your friends were not able to burn you?”

“Then you would presumably have died in battle, or of your wounds. Tiw would understand. Fire is proper, that is all.” Guthlaf shook his head. “The pursuit of knowledge is good, child, but you ask too many questions.”

The door opened and the remaining mourners came in to the hall: Wermund and Leodwald, deep in conversation; Ricola and her sister, the chief daughters of the dead man, both weeping quietly; then Hildeburh, walking alone and eyeing her husband and her brother as if she thought she should be privy to their talk; and behind her, all in a crowd, the other daughters and their husbands.

Hildeburh is the link, Eurgain suddenly saw very clearly, the one who connects them all, far more than the sisters. Tonight they are important because Hareth was their father, but after this they will be second wives, to be bossed about by their betters.

“Why are you here?” she said suddenly to Guthlaf.

He started, showed his broken teeth. “Why am I here?”

“I mean – ” she felt herself colouring “ – why are you among this family?”

“She does not intend disrespect,” Ceolric said hastily. “Her grasp of our tongue is still not strong.”

“I know,” said Guthlaf. He turned his faded blue eyes upon her. “Eanfled is my sister’s daughter. Is that enough for you?”

Eurgain nodded, embarrassed. She watched the thralls arranging the tables and benches in the middle of the hall. Eanfled’s voice rose to a shriek as she shouted commands the thralls ignored.

“Why can she not leave them alone?” Guthlaf asked irritably.

“You are all kin,” she said. “All of you. Wermund and Leodwald through Hildeburh, then the rest through Hareth’s daughters. Did they marry them because of you?”

“Because of me?” Guthlaf stopped scowling at his niece and gave Eurgain his full attention.

“Yes.”

He stared at her for a moment then laughed. “You see me as the spider at the centre of a web. I think you credit me with too much cunning. Wermund and Leodwald took as their second wives women whose families they knew, as is prudent. They did not wed strangers. That would have been foolish.”

He levered himself up with the aid of Ceolric’s arm and moved to a table by the hearth.

“I have offended him,” said Eurgain.

“He is upset by Hareth’s passing,” said Ceolric. “Come, we should join the others.”

The death feast was spread upon the tables. A ram and an ox had been slaughtered, the choicest cuts an offering to the gods, burned upon small pyres of their own before the great corpse fire was lit. Plenty remained from the carcasses, and for once the tables were laden with food.

One of the many things Eurgain missed about her home was fish freshly caught from the sea. She found the gruel which was the staple diet of these people a dull and tasteless mush. This was a bad season for them, as for everyone: food was always short during the dark nights; summer and autumn were the times of plenty. But her family had not only had the sea and its fish; they had also hunted in the woods, setting snares for birds and small game, gathering in stores of nuts and fruits to keep them for the winter.

Neither the Saesons nor their thralls liked the woods. They were afraid of the great forest to the south and east, rarely ventured into its shadows, and then never far. Hildeburh’s trapping in the hedgerows was more for her own amusement than anything else; it was a game she played, though how the points were scored and who was her opponent were matters Eurgain had not yet resolved. The herds of sheep and cattle were too precious to be slain for meat, although when one had to be killed no part was wasted.

Eurgain had been hungry ever since she arrived here, she realized now: not starving, not desperate, but always with a faint edge of emptiness that had gnawed at her for so long she had ceased to recognize it as hunger, had come to think it a form of loneliness or sorrow for her murdered family.

But tonight there was food, real food with taste and smell, meat glistening in its own fat, and Ceolric was at her side to help her take the best pieces. For a long while she gorged, as did those around her, and the chatter of the hall was stilled.

When she surfaced, full to bursting, she realized for the first time that there were strangers in the hall, guests seated in the place of honour between Wermund, Leodwald and their wives. She stared, forgetting her manners, then nudged Ceolric.

“Who are they?”

He glanced up from the bone he was chewing. “Neighbours.”

“Wealas?” she said, surprised Wermund would allow them to eat at his table.

“Yes.” Ceolric tossed the bone to one of the dogs lurking under the table, licked his greasy fingers. “Not thralls, but landowners.”

“Where from?”

Another of the dogs thrust its nose into her lap, hoping it too would be rewarded. She dropped the few scraps she had left to the floor, wary of the eager teeth.

“North and west. The bald one’s lands are close to the marshes.”

She looked more carefully. There were three of them: the bald one, and two younger men. All wore brightly coloured tunics with long sleeves folded back into a cuff, decorated at the neck and wrist with complicated designs. The front of the bald man’s was embroidered with a stylized picture of what she thought was a horse – it was difficult to tell at a distance. Either the men were very rich, or else they were wearing their best clothes.

“What do they want?”

Ceolric smiled without humour. “Protection. These lands have no lord to keep them safe.”

She frowned. “I do not understand.”

“They are farmers, not warriors.” He sighed. “My father, as you know, travelled many leagues to found a kingdom of his own, where he might flourish without fear of any rival.”

“And my people would have been his subjects.”

“Yes.” He took her hand and squeezed it gently. “I did not know you then.” He held it for a moment longer, then released her. “Weird ruled otherwise, and my father found nothing but his own death. Wermund, on the other hand, allied himself with those who stood high in the councils of Cerdic, king of the Gewisse. He and his fellows came here, to an empty land – in my father’s defence I will say that he believed your land was empty as well – and settled upon a long abandoned estate.”

“Then where did the thralls come from?” she demanded.

“They were thralls, Eurgain, descendants of the slaves who had once worked the land. They do not count.”

“And my people?” She was close to tears. “Did they count?”

“Are we quarrelling?” he asked, peering at her face. “Surely your kin were different. They did not need anyone to tell them what to do. These people were starving when Wermund and the others arrived. They welcomed my brother, welcomed him eagerly. He did not conquer them, my love. He did not need to. They came to him: a few at first and then more when they saw he would give them food and shelter in return for work.”

His voice was soft and persuasive.

“This is the way of the world, Eurgain. Your people were fortunate. They lived in a place others had forgotten, and for many years they lived peacefully. But at the end that changed. Eremon and his Scotti raiders came, we came. I am sorry, more sorry than I can say, but I cannot alter that.”

She nodded briskly.

“What we are watching now is an old pattern. My folk, those of us you call Saesons, came to this island as warriors. All the stories, yours and mine, agree that first we served the Romans against their enemies, and then when they were gone we served whoever ruled after them.”

“Some of you,” she said, remembering the tales she had heard during their journey. “Others were the very enemies against whom we needed defending!”

“True. I told you we were not one people. But listen. My forefathers fought against the raiders from the sea, the Scotti, the Picts and, as you say, their own kinsmen. In return they were given lands and honour. They became leaders among men, and grew to rule those they defended, found wives among their neighbours. What is Cantware, where I was born, but a consequence of that mingling? Remember, my mother was a princess of Cant.”

“And you think it is happening here?”

“See for yourself. Three landowners, threatened by some local chieftain they are not strong enough to resist, seek to make an alliance with newcomers who have proved they are here to stay. To the landowners it is an obvious wisdom. My brother and Leodwald will ponder for a while, then agree. They too need allies, or they also will fall to this chieftain.” Ceolric leant close, dropped his voice. “What the landowners do not see, or do not care about, is that those who lead them in war will come to lead them in peace. Perhaps they prefer a fellow farmer like my brother, who understands their problems and concerns, to a native lord living in a hilltop stronghold.”

“Yes,” she said slowly. “I see how it might happen.”

And she did. People needed a defender – the fate of her kin was proof of that – and in return the defender needed to be fed and housed. That was why lords demanded tribute or a tithe from those they ruled: a man could not fight and farm at the same time. Once you began to give a tithe to a defender, it would not be easy to stop – there would always be other enemies eyeing your wealth. You would expect the chosen defender to make decisions during time of war, obviously – that was why you had picked him in the first place, because he was wise in matters of which you knew little. But if you were always under threat from outsiders, then you were always at war. So you grew into the habit of turning to him for help and advice, for comfort when things went ill, and before you knew it, he was the master and you were his servants.

As Ceolric might say, that is the way of the world.

“You witness the birth of a kingdom,” he said suddenly, interrupting her thoughts. “What my father sought with a sword, first in the east and then far to the west, my brother has achieved without bloodshed, by the building of a hall.”

There was a trace of bitterness in his voice.

Hildeburh, as first wife of the foremost man among them, moved around the benches bearing a cup which she offered to each male Wermunding. Eanfled followed behind, carrying a flagon of beer from which she recharged the cup after each had drunk. Ceolric, who was and was not a Wermunding, was served last, and then Hildeburh turned to the guests. Guthlaf rose and stood beside her, translating her words for the visitors.

“Welcome, friends,” she said. “These are hard times for us all. For us this is a sad day, since today we lit the fire that consumed the house of bone of an old comrade, one whose wisdom was dear to us, one who gave us much guidance in this strange land where we make our home. But we are not bereft of counsel! He who speaks my words now is no less wise.”

Guthlaf blinked, taken by surprise, but he managed to give the gist without faltering.

“Yet even a sad day may bring joy before it ends. And so it is with us, for here are you, our neighbours, come to share our feast and your wisdom against the dark times ahead of us. I say again: welcome!”

“A pretty speech,” Eurgain whispered to Ceolric. “Now her pride stands her in good stead. But why does she talk of hard times ahead?”

“Listen and you shall hear.”

The bald man stood to reply, speaking slowly so Guthlaf could interpret. Eurgain wondered whether he realized Wermund understood everything he said.

“I thank you all for the warmth of your welcome. These lands have been untenanted too long, a source of worry to us all, and we are glad to see them in such good hands. You have done well in a short while, and I note with pleasure the fine healthy faces of your labourers, in contrast to their starveling appearance of a few years ago.”

Eurgain hid a yawn behind her hand.

“You may have heard the news, brought to us by our kindred fleeing the usurper. Pabo of the Summer Country has been driven from his home, either slain or dispossessed. A new lord rules in Ynis Witrin, in Glasdun.”

Guthlaf rendered the second name as “The Grey Fort,” which had an ominous ring.

“This new lord, Angus by name, is known to us by reputation. Last summer he sought to overthrow his superior, Custennin of Dumnonia.”

Eurgain sat up and began to pay attention.

“He failed, and was exiled to a monastery. He soon made himself master of the monks and gathered his friends about him. Then he struck at Ynis Witrin. But his ambition does not end there. Already he has sent threatening messages to us, demanding we swear allegiance to him. Soon they will come to you as well, if they have not done so already.”

The bald man was sweating with the effort of his speech.

“I have come to ask if you will stand with us against this Angus.” He glanced round in appeal. “You do not seem to me the kind of men who will take kindly to another claiming the fruit of your labours. Neither Angus nor his predecessor Pabo have any rights over these lands.”

“Does anybody?” interrupted Wermund.

There was a pause while Guthlaf translated.

“No,” answered one of the younger men. “They belonged to Ogrvran Gawr once.”

Guthlaf frowned. So far as Eurgain could judge, he had been providing a faithful rendition of what the speakers were saying. Now he added an interpolation of his own for the benefit of his listeners. “Ogrvran Gawr was the father of Gwenhwyvar, Arthur’s wife. When our thralls tell of a great queen who was the last to hold these lands, I think they are remembering Gwenhwyvar – though they may also be muddling her with her mother.”

“So,” said Wermund. “And this Angus, what else do you know of him?”

“He led Custennin’s warband for many years,” said the bald man. “Their loyalty was given to him rather than Custennin. He is rumoured to be a mighty warrior. He is said to be kin to one of the greatest of Arthur’s Companions, Lleminawg the Dancer, the Fated One.”

Wermund shrugged. “Lleminawg? The name means nothing to me.”

“He died young,” said the bald man. “A long time ago.”

Eurgain nudged Ceolric. “If this Angus is kin to Lleminawg, then he must be kin to Eremon!”

“Yes,” said Ceolric, intent upon the others. “He must.”

Eremon had been the leader of the reivers who had slaughtered both the inhabitants of Eurgain’s village and the crew of Ceolric’s ship. Eremon’s family, of Irish descent, had been settled along the banks of the River Oak for several generations, and Eremon himself had been fostered at the court of the local lord, Gereint. On reaching manhood Eremon had turned renegade, raiding the nearby villages until Gereint had driven him out. Five years later he had returned leading a band of Scotti warriors out of Ierne and landed in the Porthyle estuary. The slaughter of Eurgain’s family and the Saeson crew had been a diversion from his main purpose, which was to capture a mysterious chalice he believed to be in the keeping of an old hermit living on the cliffs above Eurgain’s village.

Two of Gereint’s warriors had been tracking the Saeson ship westwards along the coast. Gorthyn and Nai had reached the Porthyle estuary only to find the Saesons had been overwhelmed by the Scotti raiders. Guessing that the raiders were led by their old enemy (Nai bore the scar of their previous encounter at his throat), the pair had crossed the water and found Eurgain. She had been frightened of them at first, frightened of them and also for them, since they were two and the raiders were many. Later she had grown to love them: big fair Gorthyn who seemed afraid of nothing, and Nai the Silent with his broken voice.

Then they had met the hermit and the Saeson youth Ceolric. The five had formed an alliance, guided by the hermit. Although Gorthyn had remained suspicious of the Saeson up until the time when the two of them had fought together against the Scotti, she herself had fallen for him almost from the beginning.

She glanced at him now, still intent upon the conversation between his brother and the visitors.

“Gorthyn said that Eremon dreamed of ruling eastern Dumnonia before they drove him into exile,” she whispered.

The big man’s face was suddenly vivid before her. She could hear again the wind rustling in the leaves, even see the pattern of dappled sunlight on the forest floor when she had wakened that first morning in their company. She could see also Nai’s astonishment as he realized she expected them to ride off and leave her. That was what she remembered best about them: their unfeigned surprise that such a thought had even crossed her mind.

“You’re crying,” muttered Ceolric. “What is it?”

“Gorthyn. Nai.”

“Brave men.”

“Good men,” she said, and rubbed her eyes. “Gorthyn said Eremon’s rule would not have been a pleasant one.”

“He was right.” Ceolric’s voice was hard. “Judging by what Eremon did to your people.”

“And yours.”

“At least my father’s crew were warriors. If things had been the other way about and we had reached Porthyle first, we might have done the same to him. But your folk were peaceful, farmers and fishers. They meant him no ill.”

“Do you remember what Budoc did in the woodland sanctuary?” she asked, not expecting an answer, for neither of them were likely to forget. Nor was she likely to forget what had happened first, what had made it necessary for Budoc to act.

Among Eremon’s band was a Scotti druid, a magic man who had taken possession of the land around the sacred wood in a ceremony she had witnessed. He had debased the sanctuary at the heart of the wood, smashing the stone basin from which flowed the holy spring, filling the grove with the severed heads of those the Scotti had slain, set upon stakes like foul growths, her kin and the Saesons alike. Wearing a mask in the shape of a white speckled bird, the wings hanging over his shoulders, the druid had danced and chanted. She could still recall the words he had used:

“The land is empty; unknown the land. No name does it have: no people upon it. Empty the land; unformed its contours.”

Then, having declared the land a void, he had begun to fill it, calling it back into being:

“Land of the many stags, enfolded by the sea, shy deer in the woods ...”

It had been a powerful magic. She had known the wood and its surrounds all her life, had known the spirits of the place as beings to be feared and placated, loved and revered, had been familiar with the trees and the play of sunlight in their boughs. The soil was fertilized by the bones of her ancestors for generation upon generation; the fish in the sea fed upon the flesh of her drowned kin, were netted and eaten in their turn. She and her people were the land. They shaped it and it shaped them, the two so entwined they were one entity.

The druid had taken all that away from her. Suddenly she was a stranger. Even the great trees of the grove, once so familiar she could summon the patterns of their bark to her mind at will, were now utterly alien.

If Gorthyn and Nai had not come she would have withered away like a plant uprooted from its home.

But they had come, and the three of them had then encountered Budoc and Ceolric. Budoc had led them to the sanctuary. There, after the stakes had been pulled down and the heads buried, Budoc had raised his voice in prayer.

Raised his voice. He had done more than merely raise his voice. She had known the hermit since he had come to live in the hut by the cliffs three years earlier. She had carried him food from the villagers, had nursed him when he fell ill. And she had never known, never guessed, that such authority resided within him.

He had summoned something, wakened something very powerful from its slumber. The black birds had mobbed him – she could see it very clearly, the rooks and crows crawling over him as he stood with outstretched arms – shouting and crying, seeming filled with a desperate need to touch him. And when they had gone, in a flurry of dark wings, the druid's magic had been shattered.

Yet for her things had not been the same. Budoc – and she knew now that Budoc was Bedwyr, the last of Arthur's Companions – had taken back the land, undone the druid's foul works. But she could not forget that feeling of being a stranger in her own land, of being cast out; a bond had been broken, and though it might be repaired, it would never be as strong.

“Are you still with me?” asked Ceolric.

She dragged herself back to the present. “I was thinking. Remembering. I wonder where they are now, Bedwyr and Nai.”

“Do you think they are together?”

“Yes, I do,” she said, though she was not sure why. The last they had seen of Nai was when he was recovering from his wounds in the small town of Penhyle. He had told them that Bedwyr had ridden off into the darkness when Eremon's reivers were defeated, disappearing into the woods before the arrival of Gereint's men.

“He feared they would try to make a tool of him,” Nai had said from his sickbed. “The last of Arthur's Companions would be useful to an ambitious man.”

Nai himself had announced his intention to take Bedwyr's place as the hermit of Sanctuary Wood. Eurgain could understand his reasoning, and could see that in some ways he would be suited to the life – his silence, for one. But she did not think he would remain a hermit for long, not once he was fully healed of his wounds.

“Ah! They have agreed!” exclaimed Ceolric.

“I missed it,” she said.

He grinned at her fondly. “Our visitors. They have agreed we will need fighting men if we are to defy this new lordling. And that means men of our kind, from the Gewisse. Cerdic the king has spent the summer trying to subdue the Isle of Wectis. His land is filled with warriors eager for fame and fortune. Some will come to us, if we call.”

He rubbed his hands together in excitement. “The beauty of it is they will come as saviours not conquerors. Our neighbours will make them welcome, offer them land in return for their services. The Wermundings will grow and prosper. My brother is a cunning man.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

1

The hall was cold and damp when Bedwyr and Nai came in after finishing the horses. The stone walls glistened in the feeble light from the tapers. The fire sulked, and sullen wreaths of grey smoke clung to the rafters below the thatch.

The people however seemed friendlier now the decision to give them shelter had been taken. They gave the newcomers room around the long trestle table, and when everyone had eaten of the greasy broth, they pulled the benches closer to the fire – which was at last beginning to give some heat – and settled to listen.

“Now,” said the farmer, stretching in his chair and loosening his belt. “Who are you and how did you come to know my father?”

“I am Bedwyr mab Petroc. I met your father in my youth when my companions and I ...”

“Rescued him from life as a slave,” interrupted the farmer. “Yes, I heard him speak of it, often, and the more so as he grew older. Because of him and that tale Huw – ” he waved at an elderly man sitting to his left “ – and I even went to Camlann, though we arrived too late for the fighting.”

“Be thankful for that.”

The farmer sucked his teeth. “We are; we were. We defend our own if we have to, but we are not warriors.”

“Tell them about the new lord’s men,” said Huw.

“The new lord’s men?” The farmer poked the fire with his foot. “They do not want to hear about that.”

His wife coughed. A round woman with a careworn face, she had not uttered a word all evening. Now she spoke, her voice surprisingly strong in the high space of the hall. “Tell them. It will go some way towards excusing your lack of hospitality.”

“I would like to hear,” said Bedwyr, leaning forward on the table. “This is the new lord of Ynis Witrin, yes?”

“Glasdun, I call it. The old names are best.”

Smoke drifted from the fire, curled around the room. The farmer again stirred it with the toe of his boot. The damp wood smouldered resentfully, spluttered into brief flame and subsided. One of the farm dogs lying in a tangle in the corner yipped in its sleep.

“They arrived here not too long ago.” He turned to his wife. “When was it?”

She counted on her fingers. “Five days since.”

He nodded. “Yes, that would be about right. It was the morning we were relaying the hedge in the outfield.” He lapsed into silence.

“Go on,” said the woman.

“Half a dozen of them, there were, all armed like you with spears and swords and shields. One of the boys saw them coming from a distance, ran to fetch us, and we charged back here to the house, fast as we could. Lucky we were doing the ditches when you arrived today, else we’d have had to stop all over again.”

The fire puffed more smoke into the room. Bedwyr stifled a cough and wiped his eyes.

“Not what you are used to, I expect,” said the farmer. “You must take us as we are, here.”

“The men,” his wife urged impatiently.

“The leader said they had come to collect our tribute – dues, he called it. I told him I paid my dues to the City Fathers of Lindinis like my own father before me, aye, and his father too. The man laughed. Times had changed, he said. What had been good for my father and grandfather was not good for me. Lindinis could no longer defend me from raiders and wild men, he said, and as he spoke his men rolled their spears in their hands and stared nastily around them.”

“What did you do?” asked Nai.

“What could I do?” snarled the farmer. “We could not take six trained warriors with our hedge-hooks and knives. And even if we did, more would only come.” He kicked the fire viciously. “We quarrelled over the amount, of course. The man might be a fearsome fighter, but he knew nothing of sheep and cattle. He took what he thought were the pretty beasts, and the more reluctant I seemed to part with them the more eager he grew to take them.” He allowed himself a half-smile. “This time of year the herds need culling anyway.”

“What happened?” demanded Bedwyr.

The farmer sucked saliva through his teeth, swallowed noisily. The others in the hall were grinning at what was obviously becoming an oft-told story: the master putting one over the ignorant warrior.

“I knew he would be back before long. This time we had plenty of warning. When I was younger and my father was alive to keep the running of the farm, I answered Kynfawr of Dumnonia’s call for men more than once. As I said, Huw and I went to Camlann.”

The elderly man grunted. “That was a bad field. I dreamed of wolves and corpses for months after.”

“So when this fellow returned with his bully boys, all hot and sweating in their haste, complaining we had palmed him off with the oldest and toughest of our stock, I had the lads lined up behind the farm walls with their slings, and Huw and I out before the hall with our spears and shields, my father’s sword at my hip, very calm. ‘A bargain’s a bargain,’ says I. ‘You took them beasts of your own will, not mine. Tried to tell you otherwise, but you’d not listen because you thought I was cheating you.’”

“And?” prompted Bedwyr.

“Oh, we shouted back and forth a bit, and he sliced the air with his sword, but in the end he knew he was beat. Took his men and went away to bother someone else.” The farmer snorted contemptuously. He scratched his cheek, the rasp of fingernail on stubble loud in the hush of the hall. The fire spat and struggled.

“What of Lindinis?” enquired Bedwyr. “Will they still make their demands?”

“I expect they will,” said the farmer.

“We’ll have to pay,” Huw said gloomily. “We need their markets, see?”

“As to that, we shall decide when the time comes. He was not so far from the mark, that fellow, for all I did not like his way of doing things. The city cannot protect us from raiders and outlaws, not now, whatever it may have done in the past. They too lived

off our labour, those city folk, demanding a share of the harvest for which we had worked. Parasites, all of them, like the ticks that fasten on our sheep and bloat themselves with blood. The world is full of people who want something for nothing.” He cast a fierce gaze around the room. His people avoided his eye, looked at their feet or plucked at their clothes.

The farmer probed with a stubby finger under his shapeless cap, lifting it slightly to reveal grizzled hair cropped close to the scalp. “So that is why I do not welcome the sight of armed men in my yard, regardless of who they may claim to be. You said just now that you were Bedwyr mab Petroc. That is a name from the past, and frankly I had thought its holder long dead with the rest of Arthur’s men. Can you prove you are who you say? And who is this friend of yours, the quiet one with a corncrake’s croak?”

Bedwyr raised the ruin of his left hand. “There is this,” he said. “Your father may have spoken of it. And there is a tale, a tale of swords and great cruelty, and a band of wild men running east with their booty.” He shrugged. “But you have heard it all before, and no, I cannot prove I am Bedwyr. Believe me or not, as you choose.”

The hall was silent. The fire sputtered, sending smoke eddying across Nai’s face. He coughed, the harsh sound echoing among the rafters, and as it died away Huw spoke, glancing uneasily at his master.

“I believe you. Tell us.”

“Yes, tell us,” murmured others. “Tell us.”

“Tell us,” the farmer said wearily. “Tell us. What does it matter on a winter’s night whether your tale be true or not? Tell us.”

Bedwyr stood, drew a deep breath, shivered at the cold draught licking his legs, and began to speak.

2

I remember waking cold and stiff on the hard ground, to the sound of a lone bird singing. Swathes of morning mist clung to the trees. The heavy air smelled of mould and decay. My eyes were raw and gritty from lack of sleep.

A shape moved through the gloom, waking the others. All around us was the furtive rustle of leaves, as if the trees themselves conspired against us behind the cover of the mist. More birds joined the first, singing the same few insistent notes over and over. The greyness coiled around the trunks, slid between the branches. I shivered, stretched, licked my fingers and wiped my eyes.

“The scouts have them.”

Cei stood beside me. I had not heard him coming and his deep growl made me jump. He smiled down at me from his great height, his massive body swathed in a cloak so old it had lost all colour. “*We* have them.”

“Where?” My voice was a croak. I fumbled for my water bottle, wet my lips, poured a little into the crook of my hand and rubbed it across my face.

“A mile or so farther on. As we thought, about thirty of them, and their captives. You take half the men and strike from the right; I will do the same on the left. Make plenty of noise as you go in. Drutos will guide you.” He nodded to one of the scouts, a slim dark man leaning on a spear in the middle of the camp, watching the troop struggle up from the depths of sleep with the amusement of one who has been awake for hours.

I shook myself. “Mounted?”

“I think so. The enemy are in the open at the foot of a hill, though this is bad country for horses.” Cei gestured at the trees and thickets around us.

He was right. All the previous day we had ridden through land that grew less and less suited to horsemen: hilly and heavily wooded; a tangle of thickets and low hanging branches hiding sudden hollows and miniature ravines. Had we not known we were close behind the raiders we might have abandoned the chase despite our anger, but the signs they left in their wake kept our fury fresh: the bodies of those unable to maintain the gruelling pace discarded like unwanted rubbish under a thin concealment of leaves or bushes, their throats slit, the corpses still warm.

I looked into the woods. The sky had changed from pink to soft gold, and the birds had settled to their chorus. In the distance rooks crowded. Soon it would be full light and the mist would burn away, but for now it still hung above the ground, drifting around the legs of the men as they armed themselves or snatched mouthfuls of food.

“What?” demanded Cei.

“Foreboding.” I grinned, because one always felt like that before an attack. One time in ten it might be justified, and those are the occasions people remember afterwards.

“There is a risk,” he said slowly. “We can go on foot if you had rather.”

I thought for a moment, shook my head. “No, the men would only complain. I assume the enemy do not know we are here?”

“No. Or at least, if they do they show no sign of it.” He rubbed his chin. “They are ill-disciplined. Drutos says their camp is badly placed, exposed without giving good lines of sight. I do not think you need fear an ambush – though you will take the usual precautions.”

“Of course.” I clapped him on the arm and moved away to prepare.

It was two days since we had ridden into the burnt-out hamlet and found the few survivors mourning their kin. We were a routine patrol, part of the Army of Ambrosius.

Does anybody remember him now, or is he completely overshadowed by his successor? He was Master of the Soldiers of Prydein, *Magister Militum per Britannias*, when Arthur was still an unknown youth. Emrys, they called him in the hill country, but he was a Roman in the old style and never used that name himself. In his dress and personal habits he kept to the fashions of his fathers. Every winter dusk, for example, he would serve *calda*: a mixture of hot water, wine and herbs, not unlike our punch. I myself disliked the taste intensely, though I never had the courage to tell him.

Ambrosius was a dedicated man, but he was not one upon whom fortune smiled. What we were doing the day we found the hamlet was typical of what happened time and time again during those years. We were reacting rather than acting, responding to our opponents’ move rather than initiating our own. The problem was always the same: there were not enough men to defend the country adequately, and we would not attract enough men to our banners until we won a great victory, and we would not win a great victory until we had enough men. It was a circle, and Ambrosius, despite his honesty and his devotion to duty, was too austere and detached a character to inspire his followers. He lacked the fire which calls men to give their every effort, and then, as all hangs in the balance, reach inside themselves to find more where they had thought nothing remained.

Looking back, it seems now – though it did not seem so then – as if we were marking time, waiting for Ambrosius’ successor, and that everything we did was mere training, preparation for what was to follow. We rode our patrols every few weeks, sixteen men sweeping the countryside from here to the headwaters of the Thames, or southwards to the sea, varying our route on each occasion. In later years this stood us in good stead,

for at least we were familiar with the nature of the land, but then it seemed for the most part a waste. Usually we arrived too late, long after the raiders had struck, and unless they had laden themselves with the herds of their victims, we were rarely in time to catch them. As a consequence, we were not popular, either with the farmers and common people we were supposed to protect, or with the lesser lords of the land, upon whom we would sometimes quarter ourselves.

We would arrive at a minor dun and quarter ourselves on the inhabitants not because we were tired of living rough, as many claimed, but because we suspected them of cattle-raiding. Too often we were powerless to do anything about it, unless we caught them in the act. If we found a group of armed men a few miles from their home with a flock of obviously stolen sheep, they would tell us, with challenge and contempt in their eyes, of the great fight they had fought against a band of marauders out of the east or the north, and how they had put them to flight and forced them to abandon their spoils. Then they would tithe the flock – or sometimes halve it – for their trouble, and allow us to return whatever remained to its original owners.

People always blamed the Saesons, or the Scotti out of Ireland. You know as well as I do that when a man is burning down your house and driving off your children and sheep, you do not stop to ask him where he comes from. Let us be honest, my friends: the greater number of the forays that so ravaged Britain in those years were conducted by men who lived within a few days' journey of the place they were raiding – aye, there's an unpalatable truth few have ever wished to acknowledge.

What I am saying is that when we rode into the burned remnants of the hamlet we were a hardened and cynical crew, used to sights that would turn most people's stomachs. We had seen what man could do to man, or woman, or child, and if asked we would have said there was nothing left that could shock us. We were accustomed to accepting the inevitable, to being unable to change the way of the world.

Something touched us that day. Whether it was the poignancy of a small child still clutching a straw doll as she lay draped across a hurdle like washing hung out to dry, or whether it was the gaping slash wounds in the hands of an old man where he had sought to fend off his killer, or whether it was some trick of light or atmosphere that made the scene singularly vivid I cannot say. Perhaps it was because Ceí was newly promoted to lead our troop, with me as his second. Perhaps it was fury at our own helplessness. Perhaps it was because we had spent long evenings talking with our fellow officer Arthur, and had been infected with his anger at the state of Britain.

We were too late to save the hamlet, too late to offer anything other than false comfort to the few who had managed to hide from the attackers. Most of them seemed incapable of speech or action, unable to do anything save stare around them at the devastation as if their world had ended – and indeed, I suppose it had. What accounts we could gather of what had happened were muddled and incoherent, but as we listened we realized there were too few corpses for a hamlet this size.

“Slavers,” said Ceí.

We stared at each other while the wind stirred the cinders and filled the air with a scorched, ashen smell.

“What would Arthur do?” he murmured so only I could hear.

I did not need to think. “Go after them.”

The answer may seem obvious now – I can see by the expressions on your faces you find it unthinkable that we could have done anything else – but in those days most officers would have spent the rest of the day burying the dead and preparing a report.

Pursuing the slavers would have been deemed a waste of time: they had certainly come from the sea; the coast lay a short distance to the north; therefore they would be back at their ships by now. Better to make a report and recommend the establishment of a small garrison somewhere in the neighbourhood to prevent any repetition, rather than deviate from the planned patrol on what would prove to be a wild goose chase against a numerically superior force.

Perhaps I exaggerate, but we were bitter men in those days, bitter at our own ineffectiveness.

“Mount!” shouted Cei. “We ride!”

Cynon, my back-to-back man, was the only one who dared protest. “What? Do we abandon them in this too? Could we not at least help with the dead?”

“Not if we are to restore their kin.”

For a moment Cynon’s jaw gaped. Then he leapt for his horse with alacrity. The others too moved with renewed energy, their weariness and despair dissolving in the hope of action. For me, even all these years later when so many things have come unravelling and all those I rode with on that far off day are long gone to dust, it is in *that* moment, there among the windblown ashes of an unnamed hamlet, that Arthur’s Albion ceased to be an idea and began to become a reality.

Once the first euphoria was passed, we settled to what we feared in our hearts would be a brief ride to an empty strand with not so much as a glimpse of a distant sail to mock our failure. The raiders would be well clear, away to Ierne, or perhaps westward round the promontory of Penwith Point and so to the slave marts of Gaul.

At first the trail ran north, as we had thought, and one or two of the older men grumbled under their breath about the waste of time and effort. Then suddenly it turned east, along an old track that skirted the edge of the sea marshes: a hidden road, one that bent with the land to keep below the skyline. The track wandered away from the sea, still bearing always to the east, and after a while we saw smoke rising off to our right. While Cei led the main body onwards I went south to investigate with a handful of others, and so came to this farm – though it looked very different then. The source of the smoke was the still smouldering ruin of a barn, and we heard how on the previous morning a small group of raiders had fired the building as a diversion, then seized some of the workers from the fields. Tingyr the heir of the house was among those taken. I stood in the middle of the yard and vowed to bring him back, if he yet lived, and his father – your grandfather, it must have been – laughed sourly and walked away.

I had forgotten that part until just now.

“Not the full force,” said Cynon. He spat into the glowing embers. “The main body must have kept moving. I wonder if they know we are behind them.”

“I doubt it,” I said. “They would not have turned aside if they did.”

“Where do you think they are from?” he asked as we rode away to rejoin Cei.

I shrugged. “One of the eastern kingdoms?”

“You think they are of Prydein?”

“Yes,” I said. “Yes, I do. Or some of them are. They know the country too well to be strangers.”

He nodded. “That is what I thought.”

We caught up with Cei and the others in a wooded hollow. The Long Man had dismounted and was bent over something half buried in a drift of last year’s leaves.

“Look!” he snarled, his voice distorted, shifting aside to let us see. It was a woman and child. Their throats had been cut with quick efficiency: the woman’s face bore an

expression of incredulity, as if she could not believe this was truly happening, now, here, to her.

Cei cradled one of her feet in his big hand. “Blisters,” he said. “She could not keep the pace, so they killed her to spur the others.” Gently he straightened her legs.

I told him what we had discovered, that the attack on the farm had taken place the previous morning. He nodded, glanced at the sky, weighing his anger against the amount of daylight remaining.

“The horses are tiring,” he said reluctantly. “I do not wish to drive them so hard they are useless when we catch the raiders. We will camp soon.”

In a bard’s tale, of course, we would have galloped from the ruined hamlet and overhauled the slavers in a matter of a few lines. In real life it took us two days of hard travel, for in broken country a man afoot has the advantage. Had it not been for the coffle of prisoners, I doubt we would have caught them – but then, had it not been for the prisoners, we would not have pursued them. They led us across deserted heaths and through ancient forests, following a network of forgotten tracks that avoided settled areas, and rarely did we see a sign of human habitation, save once or twice the grey pall of a distant town.

And when we camped that second night we could smell their smoke, blowing down on the evening breeze, and we knew that at first light we would have them.

* * *

Drutos led us through a choking tangle of hazel and blackthorn into the trees. The last of the mist swirled around the hoofs of the ponies. The light changed, dappled the shadowed trunks with streaks of sun. Behind me a man swore as a branch dragged at his hair; I turned and frowned in reproof. We had muffled the harness, so we moved in an eerie silence apart from the occasional creak of leather, the ponies picking their way delicately across the woodland floor.

We reached a barrier of close knit firs. I expected Drutos to swerve aside, but he beckoned and forced his horse through. I followed blindly, my mount grunting as the needles whipped its muzzle, the boughs swishing shut behind us as firmly as any gate. After me came the others, Cynon in the lead, straightening in the saddle and brushing bits of twig from his cloak and hair.

The ground was lumpy and uneven, a mass of rotting windfalls buried under brown needles and moss. We waited for a moment, aware we were very close to the enemy and listening for sounds we had been seen, but all we heard was the chattering of a squirrel, far away in the depths of the wood. Off to our left faint shapes moved through the gloom: Cei and his half of the troop.

Moss was everywhere, carpeting the forest floor, clinging to the boulders, hanging from the branches. The very air seemed green, and so still we might have ridden into another world. Cautiously I steered the pony between the thin trees, picking a path between the fallen trunks, Drutos at my shoulder and Cynon at my back.

We came to a place where the ground cover thickened. Long dead alders leaned one against the other, draped in moss, or rose from the ferns like monsters breaking the surface of the sea. Light slanted between the spindly trunks, thick and liquid, and with it the sound of voices and a low groaning murmur that made my skin prickle.

Drutos touched my arm. “When we break cover, they will be to our left, about fifty paces away. Last night they had sentries about ten paces out; they may have withdrawn them.”

I waited until we had formed a ragged line: eight men, each paired with a partner. Cei would be doing the same further over. Then I raised the spear in my right hand, brought my shield forward to protect my left shoulder, and shouted:

“Now! We ride, we ride!”

We burst screaming from the woods. My horse swerved around a coil of brambles and thin spiky growths (tufts of dirty grey wool clinging to the briars), ploughed through the high grass. As we came clear of the trees a wind sprang up, nipping at our faces and cloaks like an unruly pack of hounds. I saw Cynon stretch and cast, followed the arcing flight of his spear as it dropped down into a group of men. Far away I heard Cei’s bellow, the crash of sword on wooden board.

A figure scuttled before me, running doubled over to present a smaller target. I threw and took him in his exposed side under the ribs; he folded and slid across the grass. Suddenly there was a crowd of them about me, grabbing for the reins, slashing at my legs. I slammed my warboard on to an upturned face. My pony danced, spun on his hindquarters, caracolled left and right as I pulled my sword free of its sheath. Fingers prised at the edge of the shield, dragged it down. I struck, struck again, blindly. Someone wrenched at my leg, trying to tip me from the saddle.

Then Cynon was beside me, screaming wordlessly, his blade slicing the air. The pony reared, hooves hammering, and I was in the open again, panting for breath. A man raced past me, shouting, and I saw Drutos turn, his expression distant, concentrated. The spear whipped from his hand and hit the man in the shoulder.

“The captives!” bellowed Cynon, waving his sword.

They lay under a stand of birch trees, arms bound at elbows and wrist, legs hobbled. Most were watching, calling encouragement, but a few simply stared listlessly at the ground. Half a dozen of the slavers were running towards the copse, long knives in their hands. We galloped in pursuit.

The first swung to face me, stumbled and lost his footing. The pony trampled him while my sword lashed about the head and shoulders of the next. I was aware of Cynon dealing with another, riding him down, and then I saw that the last of them had his knife to the throat of the nearest prisoner.

“No closer!” he shouted.

If I shut my eyes I can see his face even now, sweaty under its dark stubble, the nose flattened by an old break, a red scarf draped around his neck.

“Move and I kill him!” he cried.

“You are dead in any case.” My voice sounded unnaturally calm. Behind him a thrush lighted on a tree, and fled again as it realized the copse was full of people.

“Strike,” hissed the prisoner. “Strike and be damned.”

Cynon hurled a spear and the slaver twisted to let it pass him. I brought the pony bounding forward and struck hard at the joint of the elbow. The knife flew from his hand, tumbling in the air; the prisoner yelped in triumph and pulled away. I struck again, through the scarf, dyeing it afresh, and the slaver fell writhing into the grass.

We dismounted and set to cutting the captives free.

The fighting was almost over. Most of the slavers were down. Only four still stood, backed into the trees on the slope at the edge of the meadow, where it was hard for the horses to come at them. One was a big man, wearing mail and carrying a broad yellow shield of the Saeson type. Although I could not hear him above the groans of the dying and the sobbing of the prisoners as we released them, I could see his mouth moving.

“Thank you,” said the hostage, rubbing swollen wrists and arms. His face and hair were smeared with his captor’s blood. “I am Tingyr mab Oclos.” He gestured vaguely. “We had given up all hope.”

“Where were they taking you?”

He wiped his matted hair and looked surprised at the sight of blood on his hand. “I don’t know. Somewhere to the east.”

Cei’s great shout sent the most of the former prisoners cowering for cover. Even Tingyr flinched.

“What was that?” he asked, shaken.

“The Long Man exhorting his enemies to surrender,” said Cynon.

The three of us walked in that direction. Tingyr had acquired a long knife (probably the very one the slaver had held to his throat) and from the way his hand clutched the hilt he was eager to use it. We skirted the crumpled dead and the wounded twitching in the grass – I half expected Tingyr to turn aside and use his knife on some of them – and so came to where Cei stood scowling up the slope at the man with the yellow shield.

“He claims he was not one of them,” Cei said as we approached.

“He has been with them since they took me.” Tingyr was panting a little. “He killed a woman who could not keep up yesterday afternoon.”

Cei nodded, his face grim. “Yield or die,” he called to the four among the trees. “It is all the same to me.”

“I tell you I met them on the road,” shouted the big man. “I am Elesa, Eliseg in your tongue, son of Esla.”

His companions glanced at one another uneasily, not happy he was trying to arrange a private surrender. One of them edged deeper into the birch, perhaps hoping to slip away while our attention was on the yellow shield. Drutos yelped a warning and threw a javelin. At that range the man had time to see it coming: he stepped aside, and with almost the same movement swung the shaft of his own spear at the back of his companion’s head. The sound of the impact echoed hard across the hillside.

Cei ran forward as Eliseg folded. The others dropped their weapons and raised their hands in the air.

“Was he telling the truth?” demanded Cei. The Saeson lay at his feet, dazed but not completely unconscious, fingers scrabbling in the earth.

“No,” said the one who had struck the blow. He licked his lips nervously, looking to his fellows for support. “Since the spring, he has been with us. It was his idea to raid this far west.” He kicked out at the big man’s ribs. “His fault we are here.”

Cei smiled at him sweetly. “If you do that again I will cut off your legs. Where are you from?”

The man went pale, which was an effect Cei could have on people when he smiled at them in that fashion. “Duroliponte.” The man shuffled away from Eliseg.

“Good,” said Cei. He bent and lifted the Saeson’s body, mail shirt, shield and all, and held him upright with one hand. “Disarm him, Drutos,” he said over his shoulder.

Large though the Saeson was, Cei was larger. The Saeson wriggled feebly in his grasp while Drutos unbuckled the baldric and eased the yellow shield from the arm.

“Duroliponte,” Cei said thoughtfully. He waited until Drutos had finished then released the Saeson. Eliseg fell to his hands and knees, moaned, clutched the back of his skull. “What do we know of Duroliponte?”

I shrugged. “A trading town on the river Rhee, on the crossroads where the Via Devana meets the Great North Road.”

In its day Duroliponte had been a major commercial port. It lay at the head of the navigable waters of the Rhee, and was also the only convenient river crossing for miles. As the name suggests, there was a bridge once, though in our time the crossing was by a causewayed ford. It stood on the only sensible route for travel from the old lands of the Icenii to the middle and north of Britain that avoided the marshy Fens. Like most towns in the east, Duroliponte had suffered during the years of disturbance; one could see from the line of the walls it had been much larger in the past. But ships from Gaul still struggled up the river to trade, and there was always a market for slaves.

“What will you do with us?” one of the men asked fearfully.

Cei loomed above him. “I had intended to put a spear through you all” – the man cringed, glanced round at the watching faces in the hope of mercy and found none – “but that would be too quick. While I think on it, my comrades will bind you.”

He gestured to Drutos and the others, beckoning me to follow. “If they give you any trouble, kill them!” he called over his shoulder.

“What *shall* we do with them?” I asked as we crossed the meadow. The first crows were settling on the dead in a flurry of black wings.

“Let them have a taste of the misery they have wrought in others’ lives. They can go to one of the lesser lords as field slaves.” He paused in the middle of the meadow. “We did not lose anybody, did we?”

It was a rhetorical question. Both of us had already made a quick head count.

“No.” I nodded to where one of the men was having an arm bandaged. “A few minor wounds, nothing serious. The prisoners are the worst affected.”

“I despise slavers,” said Cei. He rubbed his face. “I am aware they are a necessary evil, but it is no fit occupation for a man. I want these filth to suffer.” A pulse beat at his temple; his fists slowly clenched and unclenched. “I can – just barely – understand why most of them take to the trade, even if I do not approve. But a man like the Saeson, a trained warrior, should know better.”

“You don’t believe him?”

“About being a stranger? No. Your friend, whatever his name is, said the Saeson killed a woman yesterday. I expect Eliseg would say he was showing mercy by giving her a quick death, but if he disapproved of the company he was keeping he could have pretended to kill her.”

He saw my expression and shrugged. “Come, Bedwyr. You or I would have found a way, or else refused to take part. Anyway, tell me this. If he was not one of them, why did they not seize *him* for a slave? They could have overpowered him while he slept.”

I grunted assent, and we set to work dealing with the aftermath of our attack: treating the freed captives, discovering where they came from and how best to return them; stripping the bodies of anything useful and gathering them together to be burnt (to the annoyance of the crows); and most important of all, caring for the horses, which had been hard ridden during the last few days.

Tingyr was a great help. He seemed the least affected by his captivity – perhaps he was of a tougher cast of mind than the others – and he had a knack of persuading his fellow prisoners to talk. They were afraid of us, who were men of violence like their captors, and would barely speak to us except to agree with everything we said.

“Like sheep,” Cynon muttered to me in exasperation. “They deserve to be slaves.”

Cei they found the most frightening of all on account of his great size. He towered above the tallest like a bull among calves, growing steadily more frustrated at their refusal to speak. (I loved him dearly, but all his life he never mastered the art of setting others at

their ease.) Eventually he gave up and sat on a rock instead, examining what we had taken from the raiders. After a while I joined him.

“Anything of value?”

Feeding and equipping the army was always difficult. Some of the rulers of Britain made contributions, but most made promises that were rarely fulfilled. Anything useful we would keep.

“Not really,” he said. “Apart from the Saeson’s sword.”

He passed it over to me. I had noticed it earlier, and thought it seemed a good piece of work. The blade was broad and double-edged, the sides running parallel from the hilt until close to the point. The metal had been lovingly fashioned from rods of twisted iron, creating a series of winding marks like the pattern in woven cloth. The hilt was wood, incised with lines to show where the fingers should grip, and a small bronze pommel covered the tang. Around the pommel were tiny scratches, obviously purposeful.

“What’s this?” I asked.

“Writing,” said Cei.

I frowned. “I did not know the Saesons had a writing of their own.”

Some of the shapes were familiar: there was what might have been an M, repeated several times, and a cross with its bar askew, and a thing like a bolt of lightning.

“Can you read it?”

“Yes,” said Cei, engrossed in studying a spear shaft.

“You never told me you could read Saeson writing.”

“Crooked, but the head will do,” he murmured, tossing the spear aside. “The matter has never arisen.”

I took a deep breath. “What does it say?”

“‘*Eic Elesa nemde*. This Eliseg named.’ Then another word, ‘*dyrstig*’, which I take to be the name itself: brave or courageous. I may have misunderstood, and the proper translation may be: ‘Brave Eliseg named me,’ or even ‘Eliseg bravely named me.’ Though I doubt it.”

“Where did you learn to read the signs?” I was genuinely curious.

“From some of the Saesons in the Army,” he said. “I thought it might be useful.”

“And has it been?”

He grinned. “Not yet. One day, perhaps.”

We had untied the surviving raiders and set them to work in the middle of the meadow, raising a pyre over the corpses. As you know, there is an art to this, otherwise all that happens is that the wood burns without touching the bodies. The pyre has to be built like a conical hut, with thickly woven walls rising to a point. That way the fire burns hot enough to ignite the corpses, and their body fats then fuel the flames.

The big Saeson was working by himself on one side of the pyre, keeping his distance from his former comrades. The guards were busy overseeing the construction, arguing noisily about the best way to place the larger branches they had gathered. Suddenly there was a shout.

Eliseg had used a tree limb to trip one of his guards. Now he grabbed the man’s spear and started to run, racing for the cover of the trees.

For a moment none of us reacted. The shout seemed like part of the argument. From behind, the running man could easily have been one of our own, especially as he was carrying a spear. Cei stood, peered over the heads of the others. “The Saeson!” he exclaimed.

“What?” I still did not understand the commotion.

“He’s free!”

Then Cei too was running, his long legs striding across the grass. The sword was still in my hand. I was about to follow when a smaller figure shot past me, arms pumping furiously, first drawing level with Cei and then overtaking him.

By this time Eliseg had reached the edge of the pine wood. A sentry, quicker witted than the rest of us, stepped from cover to halt him. Eliseg thrust with the spear and our man parried with his shield. They fought for a few moments until the Saeson swung the spear like a staff, felling the other in the same fashion he himself had been felled earlier. The delay cost Eliseg dear, for the small figure was upon him even as the sentry staggered, launching itself at his knees in a flying tackle.

The Saeson stumbled, regained his balance and tried to shake the figure loose, lifting his legs like a man running through water. The figure slipped slowly down until it was clinging to his ankles, refusing to relinquish its grip. Eliseg roared with frustration, shortened his hold on the spear and made to stab, but before he could strike Cei tore the weapon from him and hit him full on the jaw with a clenched fist.

When I arrived Cei and the sentry were helping Tingyr to his feet. The Saeson was stretched on the ground for the second time that day.

Cei glanced down at him. “Not a lucky man,” he commented, and turned back to Tingyr. “That was brave,” he said gruffly. “So brave it was foolhardy.”

Struggling for breath, Tingyr grinned. “I knew you were close behind.”

“Such courage should be recognized.” Cei looked at what I was holding and smiled.

I reversed the blade and held the hilt out to Tingyr. “Take this,” I said. “Its name is *Dyrstig*, which means courage in the Saeson tongue. It belonged to the foe you have vanquished, so it is rightfully yours.”

Tingyr’s face lit with wonder as he reached tentatively for the hilt.

3

Bedwyr paused. He gazed around the hall, catching the eyes of his audience one by one until at last he came to his host.

“That sword, named *Dyrstig* by its original owner,” he said, spacing his words, “is the very blade you wore when you faced down the new Lord of Glasdun’s men.”

There was a moment’s silence while Bedwyr found his place at the bench.

“What use is a sword to a farmer?” Tingyr’s son asked sourly when Bedwyr was settled. He stretched and yawned. “Well, well. Another world, it was, and one which will not return. But we must rise and work on the morrow.”

One by one the household rose to their feet, shuffled past Bedwyr and Nai and shyly bade them good night before departing to their huts.

“You can sleep here,” the farmer said gruffly. “Build the ash over the fire and it will stay in. Some of the dogs will spend the night in here but they’ll not bother you.”

Nai set to work on the fire. The farmer watched for a moment, then nodded curtly and followed his wife out into the darkness of the yard. “More rain coming,” they heard him say, and then they were alone, apart from the dogs curled in their corner.

“I liked him better this evening,” said Nai. “I could see him standing off the Abbot’s man. Did you notice how his accent thickened as he told the tale?”

Bedwyr grunted. He paced about the room, the dogs staring at him suspiciously. “I do not think they use this hall. It smells of damp and neglect.” He touched the moisture streaming down the wall. “How dry is the floor?”

“Not very.” Nai straightened, brushed the ash from his fingers.

“A glorified dog kennel!” Bedwyr slapped the wall with the palm of his hand, and one of the dogs rumbled deep in its throat. “What are you laughing at?”

Nai schooled his face. “I was considering the other places I have seen you living: a hut on a clifftop and a ruin in an abandoned hillfort. This is not so bad.”

The older man drew himself up very straight. A muscle twitched in his jaw. Nai readied himself to duck. “At least the fire is warm,” he said mildly.

The dog growled again, louder this time, lips pulling back from long yellow teeth. It stood, casting aside two of its smaller brethren with which it had been entangled.

Suddenly Bedwyr laughed. He clicked the fingers of his good hand. “Be still,” he said. The dog eyed him doubtfully, then lowered its ears and retreated.

“I think,” said Bedwyr, lowering himself to a dry area of the floor beside the fire, “I think I expected to be thanked.” He chuckled. “Perhaps it’s all part of seeing Gwenthwyvar again after ten years. I have reverted to being Bedwyr the Companion of Arthur, as opposed to Budoc the humble monk and hermit.”

Nai snorted. “Not so humble when I met you. Telling Gorthyn he was a fool ...”

“Did I?”

“It was the first thing I heard you say.”

“Poor Gorthyn.” Bedwyr closed his eyes in memory of his great-nephew, Nai’s foster brother, slain during the struggle against Irish raiders who had come seeking the Chalice of Sovereignty. “A bold and powerful man. He reminded me of Cei.”

“I miss him yet.” Nai pulled his cloak around him, and scuffed at the cinders to make a cleaner patch before lying down. “What did you do with the surviving slavers?”

“The slavers?” Bedwyr dragged a bench forward until he could rest his back against it. “Do they never clean this hall?” he muttered, examining with distaste the slimy mess trapped under the bench legs, the remains of the rushes long ago spread to keep the floor smelling sweet.

When he had arranged matters to his satisfaction he said: “We sold them in one of the little towns along the road south of Aquae Sulis, which we thought far enough from their home to make escape difficult. We kept part of the proceeds for Ambrosius’ war chest, and shared the remainder among those we had freed. It was not very much. The only one who fetched anything was the Saeson.”

“And that was the end of it?”

Bedwyr looked at Nai in surprise. “The end? No, no. That was the beginning.”

* * *

Nai half woke in the depths of the night to the sounds of movement. He stirred and hot breath tickled his cheek. “What?” he murmured through a mouthful of hair, and came fully conscious with a start.

The dog jumped away into the darkness of the hall. There was a faint shape on the other side of the fire, a gathering of shadows. As Nai’s sight adapted he saw Bedwyr had abandoned his attempt to sleep on the floor, and was sitting very upright in the farmer’s chair, his hands pale blurs on his knees. The wind gusted and roared, rattling the ill-fitting door like a late visitor demanding entry. Rain dripped from the thatch, but whether it fell outside or in a corner of the room Nai could not tell.

“Now you see why I do not want Gwenhwyvar to travel until the weather improves.”

Bedwyr’s voice was hard and dry. A dog whined, yipped as it dreamed of running, then was still.

“She is not well, is she?”

“No.” Bedwyr shifted his legs, adjusted his cloak to cover his hands. “No. Not well.”

He was silent for so long Nai thought he had drifted back into sleep. “I love her. Not in the sense you love Seradwen, but in the same way I loved Arthur or Cei. With her the circle was complete. What the likes of Regin or his father Vortepor never understood was that without her Arthur could not have held the sovereignty, without her there would have been no Albion. She was the heart of it all.”

Nai propped himself on an elbow. The fire smouldered, smelling of smoke though it gave no heat. Buried deep in the bank of ashes was a red glow. He puffed, coaxing it into life.

“When Ambrosius led the Army of Britain we were constantly on the march. He talked of establishing permanent quarters, though for one reason or another it never happened. We moved around the country, wherever we were needed. Sometimes we might stay in one place for a year or longer, but we never had a home.”

The leaping flames cast red flecks into Bedwyr’s grey hair. The cloak fell open as he changed position, and his belt buckle winked at Nai. His left hand rose to stroke his chin – a habit he had not lost when he shaved his beard – and the thickened ridge of scar tissue running from the base of the thumb to the base of the little finger sprang into prominence.

“Arthur gave us Caer Cadwy. It was hers first – indeed some joked that was why he married her, to gain the hillfort as his dowry.” He smiled at the memory. “It was not a joke anybody made twice in the presence of a Companion. He gave us a headquarters, but she gave us a home.”

The wind rattled the latch so fiercely Nai expected the farmer to enter, demanding to know why they were wasting his fuel in the middle of the night.

“She saved us – or between them they saved us – from degenerating into a warband. Becoming a larger version of the creatures from Ynis Witrin, Glasdun, whatever, that our host claims to have defied.”

His voice trailed away. Nai struggled to catch his words above the roar of the wind.

“We did our best, all those years, to rescue something from the ruin of our country. We alone even thought of it as one country, one patria, a single entity bounded only by the sea. And even there our notions were vague: was the far North, beyond Bannog, truly part of Britain? For the rest, someone like Vortepor or his father Agricola – who as you know was a very different man from his son – thought only in terms of their district, of Dyfed not of Britain. At the end we failed, and our version of Britain, Albion, fell apart.”

The firelight leapt around the walls. The dogs snuffled in their sleep.

“It was never the Saesons that were the danger. We fought them, just as we fought the Scotti out of Ireland and the wild men from the far north. But our true enemies, the ones who were our eventual downfall and undid all we had achieved, were the Princes of Britain. Our own kind.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

1

Eurgain shivered in the cold wind. The newness of the three halls was obvious, even from a distance. She could see the scars where the timbers had been dragged across the wet ground, and the buildings themselves did not blend with their surroundings, but sat on the skin of the earth proclaiming their presence.

The Saesons lived oddly: neither like the great lords of legend, in fine palaces of many rooms; nor like her own people, in a collection of small houses, one to each family. Instead they lived all jumbled together in a single hall, as if they feared to be alone, Wermund the lord and his lowest bondsman sleeping and eating under the same roof. The two lesser halls were used for storage and as workshops; as she watched, she could see figures leaving them and making their way across the yard to the main building.

She turned away to the shelter of the trees and the ruin, still shivering under her borrowed cloak. All the garments she was wearing were borrowed, if the truth were told; her own clothes had finally become so ragged even she had been forced to admit they were fit only for reuse as patches.

That was another difference between her people and the Saesons. Both gown and undergarment were longer than anything to which she was accustomed, and though she had done her best to hitch them up with the belt, the hems dragged along the ground. It did not strike her as sensible clothing: good enough if you had nothing to do except wander around the hall, giving orders to the thralls, but cumbersome and restricting if you wanted to work outside. She had not come far, only from the hall down to the ruined villa with a basket of supplies for the old woman, yet she had twice nearly tripped over her skirt. Hildeburh's clothes were more practical, but then hers were in a different style (as befitted, no doubt, a descendant of the great hero Hengist), a style Ceolric had told her was that of the Half-Danes, or Ytes.

“What are you thinking?”

Eurgain frowned, opened her mouth to speak, closed it again. The old woman waited patiently, hands clasped around her knees. The shadows from the tiny fire cast the hook of her nose into prominence.

“I was thinking – ” Eurgain hesitated, afraid of seeming foolish, then let the words tumble out. “I was thinking of how my life has changed and yet not changed at all. Half a year ago I lived with my family and carried food to the hermit in the Sanctuary Wood. Now I live among strangers and carry food to you.”

The old woman rocked back and forth on her haunches, laughing soundlessly. “The old witch. That is what they call me, eh?”

“Some of them.”

“The Saeson women. I have heard them, child. Witch, crone, hag, and worse things than that. Yet Wermund their lord sends you to me with food and rags of clothing, and not I think because he fears me.”

“No,” said Eurgain, picturing Ceolric’s brother.

“Why then? His women do not like it. They would be happier if he drove me away.”

“I do not know,” Eurgain said honestly. “Perhaps because he is a kind man?”

The old woman cackled. “Kind? I have seen his bondsmen working in the fields, child. They welcomed him when he came, thinking even a Saeson master was better than no master at all, but they had forgotten how hard a master could be. They would run away, if they had anywhere to go.”

She prodded the fire with a foot wrapped in rags against the cold. A stick fell, burst in a shower of sparks.

“Are you hungry, child?”

Eurgain shook her head.

“No, not for food,” the old woman muttered, barely loud enough for the girl to hear. “Tell me, do the Saesons teach you their tongue?”

She nodded. “Wermund does not like to hear the language of Prydein. The bondsmen and house-slaves are supposed to talk only in Saeson, even amongst themselves.”

“And do they?” the old woman inquired with interest.

“Sometimes.” Eurgain shrugged. “To me they use the true speech if none of the Saesons are in earshot. But their accent is strange, and I do not know a lot of their words.”

“Stranger than mine?”

“Different.” Eurgain stared, the idea striking her for the first time. “You do not come from here, do you?”

The old woman smiled. “No. You come from the west; I come from the north, though in my youth I wandered widely through Prydein.”

“You did? By yourself?”

“Sometimes. Other times in company. Once I rode with an entire army as my escort.”

“An army?” She was not sure if the old woman was joking.

“An army on its way to war.”

“Did you go with them?”

“Not to the war, no. Not even so far as I intended.” The old woman poked the fire again, patted the rock beside her. “Come, sit. It will stay light for a little while. I would be glad of the company. These ruins are lonely and the forest is dark.”

The woman had built herself a simple shelter in the corner of what had once been a small room. Some of the roof timbers were still in place, although badly blackened by the blaze that had destroyed the villa. She had laid more beams among and across them, then added a thick covering of ferns. Despite her small fire the camp smelled of damp, and a wet patch against one wall suggested the roof was not particularly waterproof. There was no doorway, just a large opening at one end looking out upon the black trees of the forest.

The Sallow Wood, the Saesons called it. Perhaps in certain lights the trees had a yellow tinge, but to Eurgain the forest seemed a place of darkness. The thralls called it Coit Mor, the Great Wood, and said it was haunted – but then they said the same about these ruins, and she had yet to see a sign of a ghost. Unless of course ...

“You are not a ghost, are you?” she said.

The old woman froze, one hand suspended above the pile of sticks from which she fed the fire: a long bony creature with a cloud of grey hair, lines of strength and sorrow furrowed deep into her face.

“A ghost? Nobody has ever asked me that before. Child, there is more to you than there seems.” She chose a stick and broke it over her knee. “I do not believe so, but I suppose it is possible. How would one tell? And if I am, would it matter? I mean you no harm.”

She grinned and one by one poked the pieces of wood into the fire.

“If I were a ghost, I do not think this is a place I would choose to haunt. Somewhere drier and warmer: in an old city, perhaps.”

“Why do you live here?” asked Eurgain.

“Live? You admit I am alive then?” The old woman’s face grew quiet. “Many reasons. I am waiting for someone, or something to happen. And I do not live here all the time. I would not like to test Wermund’s generosity too far.” She glanced up suddenly and met Eurgain’s eyes with a curious, measuring gaze. “Why do you live here?”

“Because of Ceolric.”

“So? The woman who used to bring me supplies, whose name I have forgotten, babbled of your coming. She said you were from the west. Mind you, she was so terrified of me she would have said anything. Why did you leave the west?”

“Do women not usually leave their homes to be with their men?”

“Do they? Not among my people.”

“Who are your people?”

There was a flash of yellow teeth. “I will make a bargain with you. We will trade knowledge.”

“Very well,” agreed Eurgain.

“You are the younger, so you must go first,” the old woman said with satisfaction. She clutched her bony knees tight to her chest, and waited.

Eurgain told her story as quickly as she could, aware of the light fading outside the shelter. The old woman listened intently, occasionally interrupting to demand more detail. The Sanctuary Wood: how was it kept and who looked after it? This hermit, Budoc, was a Christian, yet he tended a pagan sanctuary? Eremon and his Scotti – surely their true purpose was not conquest?

“You are holding back,” the old woman said when Eurgain had finished. “Perhaps because it is not your story to tell?” Eurgain shook her head, not knowing how to answer. The woman’s brown eyes were sharp, even through the gloom of the shelter.

“You say the Scotti attacked you all a final time at the hermit’s hut. The big man Gorthyn was killed and his friend Nai knocked half senseless. You and the Saeson boy did your best, and somehow the Scotti were driven into retreat? Come, child. A part of the tale is missing. Where was the hermit?”

“In the hut.”

“On his knees and praying, no doubt,” the old woman said drily. “He was not a fighting man, then?”

“He was very old,” said Eurgain.

“But hale and hearty, by your description. He had two arms and legs did he not? Two strong hands to wield a weapon?”

Was it Eurgain’s imagination, or did the old woman lay a heavy emphasis on hands?

“And this Eremon. Clearly he was seeking an object of value – a sword or a cup, I daresay: it usually is. Just as clearly he was wary of the hermit. I wonder why?” The old woman leered at her across the fire.

“I should go back,” said Eurgain. “It grows dark.” She picked up her basket, struggled to her feet and made for the entrance to the shelter, feeling something rip as she trod on the hem of her gown.

“Aye, very dark, very dark. Yet a flame burns, child, a flame burns and not everything is lost within the night. Go back to your man and speak sweetly to him while you may.”

“What do you mean?” she said, turning and staring at the woman across the fire.

The old woman’s head was down, as if she were studying the flames. Gradually it lifted. Eurgain swallowed a scream. The old woman’s eyes had rolled right back until only the whites were visible, peeping through the swollen slits of the lids.

“It may be your seed will have dominion,” the old woman said, her voice hollow among the flickering shadows of the fire.

Eurgain fled into the dusk, and not until she had reached the safety of the hall did she remember that the old woman had not kept her side of the bargain.

2

“Which way?” Moccus demanded of the pig.

In the cold bright light of the snow-clad morning last night’s vision on the hilltop seemed distant and unreal.

“I think it was that way,” he said, waving an arm in what he thought was the direction of the glow he had seen. “It would make sense, you know. Hard against the forest. I remember going there once. A ruin of old walls, like a maze, with the trees encroaching upon them. One of us asked why the old ones had built among the trees. I was glad it was not me, for the same question was going through my head and I felt such a fool when it was answered. Whoever replied was very kind. I can hear their voice now, though I cannot see their face. ‘The trees were not here when the villa was built,’ they said. ‘Look, you can see none of them are more than half a century old.’ To my shame I could not, but I believed them. A curious thought, that a wood might grow, might overcreep its bounds, dropping a seedling here and a sapling there, till suddenly one frosty morn the dwellers in the villa might wake and find the forest all around them.”

He laughed, loud in the stillness. The pig ignored him, wandering away in the direction he had indicated.

Moccus stood for a while, contemplating the thin sheet of white across the valley. His footprints, with those of the pig beside them, were clear to see. Otherwise the snow was marred only by the delicate tracery of the birds that had foraged in evident bewilderment at this change to their world. The larger creatures were not out yet, for which he was thankful. One of his great dreads was wolves; not on his own behalf, for they rarely if ever attacked men, even such a remnant of a man as himself, but on behalf of his friend.

The brightness hurt his eyes. As he looked, the scene became a luminous, dazzling sea of beauty. Shafts of light danced and sparkled wherever he turned his gaze. Blind, he stumbled forward, shaking his head to clear his sight. The pig grunted. He rubbed his eyes, then turned and hurried after his companion.

The pig did not care for the snow. It stopped periodically to shake its trotters, the movement oddly delicate in a creature so clumsy, trying to dislodge the ice jammed in the split between its toes. When they reached the shelter of a small knoll crowned by a knot of gnarled and twisted trees, Moccus brushed the snow from a log and sat thankfully. He clucked his tongue.

The pig regarded him suspiciously. The huge ears had fallen forward over its eyes like a blindfold, but the snout was twitching.

“Let me clean them for you.”

The pig snorted, sidled close, then lowered itself cautiously to its side, like an old man testing the waters. The front legs waved coyly in the air.

“Steady then,” he murmured. The splits were filled with balls of ice and the feet themselves were freezing cold beneath his hands. He did the best he could, and the pig seemed pleased. After a time it grew bored, jerked a hind leg from his grasp and struggled to its feet.

Suddenly he realized how hungry he was. A brief search through his layers of clothing produced his pouch and a handful of dry oatmeal, which he mixed into a paste with a dash of water from his leather bottle. The pig watched the proceedings with interest, waffling with enthusiasm the taste he offered.

The sun came out and the snow began to melt, shrinking before his eyes. What had been an unbroken expanse became a series of islands linked by bridges and causeways, which in turn dwindled to mere streaks of white. All around him the ice slithered from the branches of the trees, and when a particularly large shower fell beside him he decided it was time to move.

The sense of urgency had gone. He knew where he was going but was in no rush to arrive. At his present rate of travel it might take him a few days to reach his destination, or it might take him a few weeks. His only lack was food, but there were bound to be farms where a beggar would be given a few scraps. The pig was perfectly capable of fending for itself. Wolves remained his biggest worry, apart from his fellow humans, not all of whom would be friendly. Years ago, when he had known these lands well, they had been too thickly populated for the wolf packs to survive. He hoped the same was still true now, though looking around him at the emptiness he found it hard to believe.

* * *

It was raining when he found the road, raining hard. The outline of the hills across the broad valley was a grey blur, and the trees around him tossed and strained against the wind. Any trace of snow was long gone, washed away by the change in the weather.

The road was tempting. The going had been treacherous since the rain began. The ground was already wet from the snow, and the torrential downpour had sent streams sluicing down the slopes, turned earth to mud. He was soaked, even through his many layers, and his flanks were smeared with filth. One fall had been a bad one. For a moment he had feared his ankle was broken, or at the least seriously sprained. It still ached: a dull steady pain.

The road. A solid surface, despite the years of neglect. With his new shoes he could stride out, perhaps find decent shelter for the night, which was not far off.

Although it curved with the contours of the land, the road gave an impression of straightness. It was a made thing, a measured thing, laid out by military surveyors armed with rods and staves; a frightening, implacable affair to a man accustomed to the wilderness, to deer paths and sheep tracks.

As a child he had been taught that the Roman Army built the great roads. They laid a base of logs and stones, then on top of that put layers of variously sized stones or broken tiles mingled with mud and sand, fixed with cement. The surface sloped so the water would drain into the ditches on either side. The roads cost – he remembered this because it was an easy calculation to recall – 10,000 sesterces for every thousand paces, the mille passuum or Roman mile, a price so high it could only be afforded by the emperors themselves. He had no idea what 10,000 sesterces was worth but it sounded like a lot.

To walk the road was to court danger. He would be visible for miles, and so would the pig, if it agreed to join him which he very much doubted. The animal had too much sense, and so should he, standing here in the pouring rain hankering after what he could not have. Besides, there was a feeling of wrongness about the road, a wrongness not close but not far away either; a half formed notion of something being ill, as if he had seen a sign without properly registering it, a movement where no movement should be or something of the kind. The wind rose, tuneless in the bare branches. Cold water ran down the back of his neck. He shivered, sneezed. He would walk along the ridge, keeping to the cover of the woodland, using the road as a touchstone for his direction, just as he had done elsewhere.

Before he moved away he looked back at where the road came over the gap in the hills. A solitary figure was striding toward him through the grey rain. He stared, trying to decide whether this was the source of his feeling.

There was something familiar about the shape, about the walk. He frowned, studying the hump of a pack on its back, the hooded cloak shrouding its features. A man for certain; no woman would walk so blithely down the middle of the road. He waited a while longer, until the figure was directly beneath him, and then he shouted.

In his ears the shout was tremendous, like the great shout with which the ancient hero Cadwy scattered the forces of his enemies. The shock of it deafened him, sent him staggering into the branches of the trees. The man on the road ignored it, marching along his course as if nothing had happened.

Moccus gathered his strength and called again. The man stopped, peered about him. The cowed head swung this way and that, everywhere but the right direction. Moccus waved, to no avail.

“Bolanus!” he shouted.

The man started, pushed back his hood, still searching.

Cupping his hands to his mouth, Moccus called: “Leave the road!”

At last the man looked up the slope to where he stood in the shadow of the trees. Moccus beckoned. The pig returned from wherever it had been, attracted by his antics, and pushed against his leg.

“You?” shouted the man. “You? God has smiled upon me today! Well met, well met!” He leapt across the ditch and scrambled up the hill.

“Uncle! What a pleasure to see you!” He laughed with delight, gripped Moccus’ shoulders and gently rocked him. “I was thinking about you earlier, wondering where you had gone, hoping I might have a chance to apologize for my father.”

“No need,” said Moccus. “Not your doing.”

“Ah, I can almost understand you. Did you say my name just now?” He shook his head chidingly. “You must shout louder than that to disturb a man at his prayers. That is what I was doing, you see, praying while I walked.” He coughed, looking mildly embarrassed. “In fact I was talking to God. Have you ever done that? I began by asking Him to keep me safe, both on the road and where I am going, and then I realized what I

was doing. I was trying to bargain with Him, do you see? I was saying ‘You keep me safe and I will do Your work among the heathen Saesons,’ and He was answering, telling me His will would be done, not mine, and I would either be safe or not. God does not make bargains, uncle, that is what he was telling me. Isn’t that a marvellous thing?”

Moccus pulled him back into the cover of the trees. Bolanus glanced down, noticed the pig, and stifled a gasp of surprise.

“Is he yours?”

“No,” said Moccus. “You might as well say I am his. We travel together. He is a good guide. We should move. We have made a lot of noise.”

Bolanus stared at him, head on one side. “You are worried by something. The road, yes? You think thieves may loiter near the road?” He allowed Moccus to draw him below the skyline. “The rain is easing. Which way are you going?”

It was very like having a child with you, Moccus thought as they came to the end of the trees. The man had no woodcraft at all. He himself was made clumsy by his injuries, but Bolanus seemed to have been born clumsy. Already the man had fallen twice, and the smart cloak was stained with mud. He talked incessantly as well, though at least not loudly. Moccus did not remember him being this bad in the city. Brought on by loneliness, probably, and the usual townsman’s fear of the country.

“After my father had you thrown out by Prisco – you were not hurt, I hope? – I remonstrated with him. We argued long and hard. He mocked my commitment to my faith – I think the mockery started while you were still with us. In the end he challenged me to go forth among the Saesons.” Bolanus smiled sourly. “Of course, the moment I agreed he was after me to change my mind. It was too dangerous. I was a fool who would be murdered on the road before I even reached the Saesons.”

Moccus restrained him with an arm. They stood on the rim of a large hollow filled with thorn bushes. There was a faint smell of smoke on the air. The pig, whose nose was much better than his, had already caught the scent. It pushed beneath the thorns, moving with surprisingly little noise for all its bulk.

“What?” said Bolanus.

Moccus raised a finger to his lips. He led Bolanus around the hollow, hoping the bushes would screen them from whoever was below. The smell of smoke grew stronger, and suddenly Bolanus seemed to grasp what was happening.

“A campfire?” he whispered.

They were downwind of the hollow now. The bushes on this side were taller, with larger gaps between the ground and their thin black branches, passages leading down into the darkness. Staring into a tunnel, Moccus was seized by an impulse to show Bolanus the danger of these lands outside the city.

When Bolanus saw what Moccus intended he gave a moan of protest. Moccus ignored him, dropped to a crouch and slid beneath the bushes. After a moment the other man followed, making more noise than was necessary, but not enough, Moccus hoped, to arouse suspicion.

He crawled through the gloom, thinking how much easier and less painful this was than walking. He kept low to the ground until he could see the gleam of the fire. Faintly voices came to him, wavering on the wind:

“Missed him ... On the road ... Camp ...”

“Growing late ... Stib spot him ... Cut him slow.”

He moved closer, aware of Bolanus puffing behind him. The voices grew clearer.

“Cos he’s a townboy. Never gone hungry in his life. Soft, I tell you, soft in the head. An easy mark, that’s what Prisco said, and he should know. Loves beggars, he does, so he should like us.” The voice sniggered.

Bolanus slid forward beside him. Moccus could see the other’s profile in the half light, and a muscle quivering under the skin of the jaw. He remembered where he had heard the name before, remembered the hint of affection in the porter’s voice when he spoke to Bolanus, and he sorrowed for the temptations of mankind. He could see it all: the porter overhearing the father telling Bolanus he would die upon the road, and deciding if this were so a man might at least make some profit from a death.

“Talking of cutting, we should cut Prisco’s share,” grumbled a voice. “We’re cold and wet, and the man has not come.”

“He will. And when he does ...”

“Snickety snick.”

“Not till Stib’s had his fun. Deserves something for keeping watch, he does.”

Moccus tugged at the younger man’s sleeve. Bolanus seemed frozen, and for a long instant Moccus feared he would not move. Then he slithered backwards, with more care this time, sliding under the groping branches as if at last he had realized his life depended upon remaining unseen.

The pig was waiting for them on the rim of the hollow. They went quickly, the three of them, with many a backward glance to see if they were being followed, putting as much ground as they could between them and the hollow before full darkness fell.

“Do you think they will search for me?” Bolanus asked when they stopped.

Moccus shook his head. The men would be too idle to hunt far, and besides, there would be other victims.

“They would have killed me,” said Bolanus. “And Prisco! I thought he liked me.”

He was silent for a long time; then he said shyly: “God did answer my prayer after all.”

CHAPTER NINE

1

The wind dropped towards dawn. Bedwyr stirred in his chair at the first signs of life outside: a door slamming, voices calling sleepily across the yard. Nai was snoring softly on the floor, surrounded by dogs, but he came awake at once as Bedwyr shifted.

“What?”

“Nothing,” said Bedwyr. “Sleep a while longer.”

He opened the door a crack and slipped out into the damp darkness. There were shapes moving in the shadow of the wall encircling the huts. Metal clattered on stone, and a voice cursed. Somebody yawned loudly, was hushed; another tried to stifle a cough.

A shadow came towards him, and stopped suddenly when it realized it was not alone.

“Who’s there?”

“Bedwyr,” he said softly.

The farmer grunted, moved closer. “You rise early. Did we disturb you? We make an early start on these short days.”

He seemed friendlier than before, as if the night had softened his distrust.

“I was awake. I do not need much sleep. The penalty of age.”

The farmer took Bedwyr by the arm and drew him around the side of the building. The outline of the surrounding hills was very black under the paler sky.

“Last night,” the farmer said gruffly. “My father. It was true?”

Bedwyr leant against the cold stone of the hall. He could hear birds crying somewhere over the brow of the hill. The wall was running with damp, and the mortar was soft beneath his fingers.

“Allowing for an old man’s memory, yes, it was true.”

“I was never sure.” The farmer sniffed. “My father had a streak of the storyteller in him. His mother was from the Levels, and they’re a funny lot down in the marshes. I never doubted he was once taken for a slave, nor that he was rescued. But it was typical of him that if he were rescued, it would not be by some warrior nobody had ever heard of, but by the most famous of them all. And not one, at that, but two: by Bedwyr and Cei. He was always one to embellish a tale. ‘Makes a better story that way,’ he’d say. I never knew what to believe and what not.”

“In this he spoke truly,” said Bedwyr. “I liked him, you know. I came back to visit a few times.”

The farmer laughed. “He told me that too, but I never altogether believed him. It was half the reason Huw and I went to Camlann.”

“And the other half?”

His host scuffed his toes in the dirt. The sound of the stream at the foot of the valley was suddenly very loud.

“It wasn’t right, was it?” he mumbled. “Not that they should bring Arthur down. Always out for themselves, that lot, and no thought for the rest of us. He cared, the Amherawdyr did.”

“He did,” said Bedwyr, remembering Arthur.

“Well then,” said the farmer. He shook himself. “We were too late. By the time we had decided to go, and found the men of Dumnonia so we could join with them, it was all over. Just as well, probably, since I expect all we would have done was get ourselves killed along with the rest, but sometimes ... Sometimes I feel ashamed. Ashamed that we let it be destroyed, the Empire, the golden days, and did nothing.” He coughed, swallowed quickly. “Then I stand in a muddy field on a wet cold day like today will be and tell myself not to be a fool. This is my world, not the world of warriors.”

He was silent a moment. Behind him the stream brimmed with light, while the ground beyond was wreathed in a low river mist. The tops of the withies rose from the mist frosted and sparkling. On the rim of the valley something metallic caught the glint of morning.

“Tingyr was a bad farmer. His head was always full of dreams. He brought down that big Saeson, and you rewarded him with a sword, the weapon of the well born. All our stock, all our sheep and cattle, could not match its value. You meant it kindly, I know, but you did him no service. His life was ruined by it. He was never afterwards content with what he had, always hankered after more. And it was nearly my death.”

He shuddered, his weathered face grim. “Without the sword I would never have dared defy the men from Glasdun. If they had chosen to fight, we might have killed one or two of them, but they would have had us in the end, no doubt about that.” He sucked his yellow teeth. “I was boasting last night, letting you know that we were hard men too. When you told your tale I got to thinking about how easy they would have found it to slaughter us.”

“But they did not. By standing firm you made them think about the price,” said Bedwyr. “And once they had started to do that, you had won.”

“They will be back,” the farmer said darkly. “And what then? Next time they will not come all casual down the track by the stream.” He waved an arm at the rim of the valley. “This is a farm, not a fortress. We cannot watch every possible approach.”

Bedwyr shrugged. “You have a choice. You can give them what they want, or you can be willing to fight. It does not sound as if Lindinis can protect you, and I know of nobody else who can help you.”

“But don’t you see?” said the farmer, and he was almost pleading. “I have angered them now. The next time they come, their demands will be outrageous.”

“Yes.” Bedwyr sighed, rubbing his chin with his damaged hand. “I have no easy answer. You must endure until times change. I do not think this Abbot’s rule will last long.”

“Abbot!” spat the farmer. “He’s no abbot!” He pounded the wall with a fist as words failed him. “I cannot fight. Somebody will be killed. Huw and I, well, we have a little training, but the others? They barely know which end of a spear is which. I cannot ask them to stand with me again. Anyhow, they’d run away if someone made a face at them.”

“The Abbot is no friend of mine,” Bedwyr said slowly. “It may be that what I am about over the next few months will cause his downfall.”

“I thought as much.” The farmer’s eyes gleamed. “I knew it could not be chance that brought a man rumoured long dead to my door so soon after Ynis Witrin had fallen to

a stranger.” He hesitated. “But the old lord, Pabo mab Melwas. He was no great friend to you either, was he?”

“Not a great friend. But unlike his father, he was not our enemy.”

“Take the sword,” the farmer said abruptly. “Take the sword with you when you leave. I’ll not be tempted again.”

* * *

Wind and rain came together, driving down the valley into their faces as they made their departure, half blinding them. The sound of the stream grew more urgent as the waters rose. Bedwyr and Nai tugged their hoods down and kept their heads low, squinting through the deluge. The ponies plodded miserably through the puddles, constantly pulling to one side in search of shelter.

When they were out of sight of the farm – which was not long, considering the conditions – Nai signalled a halt. He swung himself from the saddle and squatted as close to the stream as he dared, shivering. Bedwyr averted his gaze and listened to his companion’s mutterings and curses with a smug sympathy.

“It tasted all right,” Nai growled as he straightened. “And you seem unaffected.”

“These things take people different ways. Besides, I did not eat as much as you.”

Nai hauled himself gingerly into the saddle, face set, and they resumed their journey. The path had been muddy on the previous day: now it quickly became a quagmire, sucking at the horses’ hooves, muddying the animals to their hocks and splattering the riders. The fields beside the track were empty and forlorn in the grey light.

“We would do better to abandon the path,” shouted Bedwyr when they rounded a bend and saw the stream had burst its banks.

Nai waved a hand in acknowledgement and swung his pony towards the higher ground on their right. The animal balked at the slope. Bedwyr caught a glimpse of his companion’s face under its hood, gaunt and angry, then Nai set his heels to the horse’s flanks and drove it up the hill.

At the top the full force of the gale struck them. For a moment Bedwyr could see nothing but the sheeting rain and the bare boughs of a thorn tree tossing wildly; he felt as if he were drowning in the depths of the sea.

“Have to stop again!” called Nai. He flung himself from the saddle, tugging at his breeches as he landed, and hurled himself into the meagre shelter of the tree.

There was a slight slackening of the rain. Bedwyr brought his horse round so its bulk would offer Nai some protection from the wind. Nai pushed back his hood and raised his face to the rain, gasping. He looked genuinely ill, and suddenly Bedwyr ceased to find his friend’s predicament amusing.

“It was that greasy broth, I’ll swear to it,” groaned Nai. “Did you see those shrivelled white things floating under the surface?”

“I thought they were parsnips.” Bedwyr dismounted, tossed the pony’s reins over its head.

“I’m not so sure,” Nai said darkly, shivering as another spasm seized him.

Water streamed down his face. His hair was matted, any shape given it by Seradwen’s cut (and despite her protests she had done a good job) now lost. It was difficult to tell in the rain, but Bedwyr thought the younger man was sweating heavily.

“Should we go back?” he asked dubiously.

“No!” said Nai. He shook his head. “Not there! I’d sooner suffer than be poisoned afresh.” He wiped his brow. “Give me a moment and I’ll be able to move, as long as I can stop when I need. Walking might help.”

When he was ready, they turned their faces to the wind once more and led the horses along the ridge. Rivulets of rainwater ran down the slope to their left. The track at the foot of the hill was already under a sheet of water, and the fields beyond lay wet and sullen. To their right was rough ground, tussocks of coarse grass and stony soil, and Bedwyr felt a spark of pity for Tingyr's son. Even in summer this would be hungry land.

The rain slowed and the wind dropped. Twice more Nai dashed for the cover of a bush or tree, returning each time insisting that he could manage, was well enough to continue. The sun fought its way through the heavy cloud, briefly illuminated the hills around them, then vanished again. The ridge bent away from the track below, beginning almost imperceptibly to melt back into the valley.

They halted at the point where they could no longer fool themselves that they were keeping to the high ground. The fields had disappeared, giving way to scrub woodland. Brittle bushes of upright sallow and curved buckthorn grew among willows and alders. Sedge and golden reeds marked pools or slow-flowing streams. The ground itself was sodden, treacherous.

"Are they still with us?" asked Nai.

"I fear so." Bedwyr examined his companion. The younger man was sweating heavily, and his normally dark skin was an unhealthy colour. "They were waiting for us when we left the farm."

"I know," said Nai. He grinned ruefully, holding out a hand. The tips of his fingers quivered. "I do not think I can be much help to you."

"It may not come to that."

With an effort Nai controlled the tremor in his hand. "Do we wait here, or go forward? I do not like the look of what lies ahead."

"Neither do I." Bedwyr pulled himself into the saddle so that he could see further. "I doubt they are Angus' men. They know the land too well."

"You assume the locals do not serve him?"

"Not yet," Bedwyr replied absently. "Too soon. He would not trust them yet." He looked at the mist creeping between the trees and bushes ahead of them, at the barren ridge behind them, at the surrounding hills. "Let us wait here awhile, and see what befalls us."

"If we went into the woods we could light a fire to dry our clothing," grumbled Nai.

"We could," Bedwyr said gravely. "And we might summon more than just our present watchers."

He dismounted, sniffed the air. "It will rain again soon. Perhaps that will hasten their decision." He indicated an outcropping of grey stone. "Let us sit. You should drink plenty of water to flush whatever is wrong through your body. Sit, and I will tell you how I went with Cei to Ynis Witrin, and what we wrought there."

Arthur stole Gwenhwyvar verch Ogrvran Gawr from her wedding feast, spiriting her away from the assembled company with the collusion of Glewlwyd her father's gatekeeper, whose true loyalty was given to Gwenhwyvar and her mother.

The man she should have wed was Melwas, Lord of the Summer Country. It was a dynastic marriage, an alliance of convenience. The territory ruled by Melwas marched alongside that of Ogrvran Gawr, and Gwenhwyvar was Ogrvran's only heir. Any child of the union would inherit a great tract of land.

Instead she married Arthur, at that time an officer in the Army of Ambrosius. We knew, those of us who were close to him, that one day he would do great things, but to Ogrvran Gawr Arthur was a nobody, an upstart who had stolen his daughter. In time the older man became reconciled – what is done is done, after all, and it is no use chasing after might-have-beens – and when Arthur succeeded Ambrosius as commander of the Army of Prydein the past was forgiven and forgotten by Gwenhwyvar's family. Indeed, in later years Ogrvran Gawr was heard to boast of his connection with Arthur, and although the two men were never friends they were allies.

But Melwas neither forgot nor forgave.

Ynis Witrin is a strange place, one of those which sits upon the bounds between the elements, not land, not sea, not lake, but a mingling of the three. You will recollect that the wood in which we first met lay upon the boundary between two portions of southern Dumnonia, a part of neither, and was thus a place of great power. That power is magnified a hundred, a thousand times at Ynis Witrin.

It lies at the heart of a world of marsh and lagoons, of flooded rivers and forgotten roads, hard of access and dangerous unless you know the hidden byways. For that reason the people of the Summer Country are a secretive folk – some would say furtive – who keep themselves to themselves and dislike strangers. Our host of last night is unusual in having a grandmother from the Levels; they rarely marry outsiders. I would guess his links with the people of the Summer Country are strong, and that we have him to thank for the fact that we are being watched.

So on the one hand the Summer Country is isolated from the rest of Prydein, a kingdom unto itself, where many of the old beliefs and customs have survived untouched. Yet on the other it has access to the ocean at the mouths of the various rivers which roll sluggishly to the Severn Sea, and thus is open to trade from Gaul and the Middle Sea. The Lords of the Summer Country became rich over the generations – another reason that Ogrvran Gawr considered Melwas a good match for Gwenhwyvar.

So Melwas was wealthy, independent, proud, steeped in the old traditions. I think he would have found the experience of having his bride stolen away humiliating enough – what man would not? – even if the thief had been one of the great lords of Prydein. That it was a mere soldier made matters far worse. Arthur was a man of no great lineage or lands, a warrior in an army that was seen as old-fashioned and ineffectual, a slavish imitation of its Roman forebears (and the Roman army had famously failed and deserted us in our grandsires' day, when the Saesons broke from their lands in the east of the isle, and only Categirn son of Vitolinus held them from overrunning all Prydein).

The Summer Country broods, breeds men who brood, turning over every slight in their minds until the insult grows to unbearable proportions. Melwas did not dare challenge Arthur to personal combat, nor did he dare move openly against the Army of Ambrosius, which men still called the Army of Prydein however much they might despise its efforts or begrudge their contributions to its upkeep. To have done so would have marked him as irrevocably outside the circle of Prydein, seen him cast out from the councils to which in those days all the greater rulers were invited, even some of the Saeson lords – though they rarely attended.

Instead he turned to other methods.

Arthur and Gwenhwyvar wed in the midsummer; later in the same year the Saesons broke out of their eastern reservations and ravaged west nearly to Aquae Sulis. The scandal of the elopement faded in the midst of other concerns. That late summer and autumn made Arthur's reputation, restored men's faith in the Army of Prydein. He was promoted to

command the cavalry following the death in battle of his predecessor, and for the first time in a long while the Army enjoyed a string of solid victories instead of the usual inconclusive skirmishes. By early winter the two of them were a golden couple: he was the undefeated commander, the hope of the isle, already spoken of as the obvious heir to Ambrosius; while she was our Luck, our Lady, a blessing from Heaven.

If Melwas had hated them before he must have loathed them now, when their names were upon every lip.

The first message arrived in winter. (At least, so far as we knew it was the first. Gwenhwyvar never said she had received any others, and we never asked her.) Cei intercepted the messenger, recognizing him as one of the marsh men and reckoning no good could come from that quarter. I returned to the house we shared one chill afternoon and found him sitting by the fire, turning over a small object in his huge hands.

“What?” I asked.

The Long Man explained his meeting with the messenger, and gave me the object to see for myself. It was a lead tablet, with letters lightly inscribed in a flowing script. I puzzled over it, for the words were written backwards, and Cei came to my aid, closing his eyes and reciting from memory:

“Dis Manibus. To the Divine Shades. May the union of Gwenhwyvar and Arthur evoke the displeasure of the gods. May they outlive all that springs from their union. May nothing they make achieve maturity.”

I remember how the fire seemed suddenly cold. I shuddered involuntarily. My spine tingled as if I were coming down with a fever. The room blurred around me and my ears filled with roaring, and the sound of distant voices wailing.

We agreed to say nothing to either of them. Cei destroyed the tablet, crushing it between his great hands into a shapeless lump, the writing stretched then squashed until it was illegible. The remnants we gave to the metalworkers to be melted down into something useful.

The two of us swore an oath then, a private pact between us and God, that we would defend Arthur, Gwenhwyvar and their unborn family against any who wished them harm; that we would strive to keep them safe.

How well we succeeded you may judge for yourself.

That was the first tablet. Five or six more came during the course of the winter by the same messenger, who was so terrified of Cei that he delivered them all either to the Long Man himself, or if Cei were absent to me. I suppose there may have been others that slipped past us, though our man insisted he alone was in his master’s confidence, and we had told the gate guards that any message from Melwas to Arthur or Gwenhwyvar must be seen by us before it was delivered.

For a time the matter remained like that. I had small faith in curse tablets, though many people – even devout Christians – used them to denounce their enemies or to demand the return of stolen goods if they thought they knew the thief’s name. Usually they were cast into water, or displayed at a wayside shrine, not sent to the subject of the curse – though to my mind half the efficacy springs from the person knowing that they are being cursed. Sometimes at night I wondered what ceremonies had been performed under the shadow of the strange tor, what other tablets might have been buried in the hillside or cast into the slow-flowing streams. In daytime any doubts receded: Arthur and Gwenhwyvar were far too young and alive for such nastiness to work.

That was how I thought of the tablets. Not as evil, which had been my first reaction, but as nasty: spiteful and malicious, wretched rather than dangerous.

With the coming of spring things changed.

It had become something of a joke that Arthur had only wed Gwenhwyvar to acquire the old hillfort of Din Cadwy. The two of them had met when Ambrosius sent Arthur on an embassy to Ogrvran Gawr, hoping Ogrvran might agree the establishment of a fortress for the Army of Prydein somewhere in his territory. Understandably, Ogrvran was reluctant to allow a thousand trained men under someone else's command to build themselves a stronghold on his land, and the embassy failed. However, Ogrvran did allow his daughter to act as Arthur's guide while they travelled the countryside searching for the best site. (Always with a suitable escort, of course, but even so I have often wondered whether the old man was quite so committed to the marriage with Melwas as he appeared; perhaps he could not think of a way of extricating himself from the contract without mortally offending his neighbour.) The couple soon settled upon Din Cadwy as the ideal site for the stronghold, and much of their wooing was done upon its slopes, with the shadow of Ynis Witrin always there in the distance.

Although it would be several years before work began upon Din Cadwy, work which would transform an abandoned hillfort into the great citadel of Caer Cadwy, the two of them retained a great fondness for the site. Whenever he passed nearby Arthur would detour to the hill, and those of us who rode with him came to know the country around Din Cadwy well.

Early in the spring Arthur led the greater part of the cavalry out on a massive training exercise, pitching one wing against the other in a sequence of complicated manoeuvres. One by one he removed the senior officers, announcing that they were dead or sorely wounded, and so forced the juniors to take command. Every evening the army met to discuss the decisions taken, to think of alternatives. He taught the men to think for themselves rather than rely upon a senior; to have an opinion and not be afraid of voicing it at the right moment; to act on their own when it was necessary. At the same time he enforced discipline and the endless repetitive drills that are the backbone of any army, that are what enable it to move as one rather than a series of disparate groups.

At the end of seven days we were all exhausted and exhilarated. As a final gesture Arthur told the juniors to take the army home without us. Again and again he had told them that all country is hostile, however safe and familiar it may feel. They were to march as if they expected an attack at any instant.

“And you, sir?” said one of the youngsters, braver than the rest.

“I shall be watching.”

“With respect, sir, will you be safe?”

Arthur flung back his head and roared with laughter. “I shall have Cei, Bedwyr, Cynon, Mael, a dozen others. I will be safe. But it was a good question, all the same.”

As you know, the larger the party the more slowly it moves. Although Arthur intended to shadow the army on its way home, we had time and aplenty to detour to Din Cadwy.

It was a different place in those days. The ditches were silted, the banks grassy and dwindled. Trees grew thickly on the lower slopes, gnarled and bent, menacing even in the full light of a spring afternoon. The plateau was a huge field behind the inner rampart, scattered with old delvings and broken stone. The head of a heathen goddess smiled enigmatically from the tumble by the south-west gate. Cattle grazed among the ruins, and from the summit one could see the surrounding country, peaceful and prosperous in the sunshine. Even then many of the nearby holdings were owned by Glewlwyd's kinsmen, and they were canny farmers.

“Good source of leather,” said Cei, being practical.

We walked among the lower ramparts, discussing what could be done.

“Too much to rebuild it all,” remarked Cei, looking at the vast extent of the outer defences.

“If we deepened the ditches,” said Cynon, “felled the trees and left the stumps to rot where they stand ...” He bounded up the slippery bank, balancing precariously on the summit. “Put brushwood there and there, where the slope is easier. Do you see? It would channel an attacker. That must be what the original defenders intended. You could never have manned this length of wall.”

“Even the inner rampart is too long,” Mael said softly, so Arthur would not hear him. “The other Din Cadwy, where Congar founded his monastery, is so big they divided the space in half. I do not see how we can ever defend this great hilltop.”

It was an obvious comparison to make. Congar’s monastery lies between the Mendips and the sea – indeed, according to legend the sea once washed the very ridge upon which it stands. It too is an old stronghold of the hero Cadwy from the days before the Romans, refortified by Congar’s family when the troubles began. Mael’s point was that Congar’s Din Cadwy was considered too large to be easily defended, and this Din Cadwy was twice the size again.

“I was not planning on standing shoulder to shoulder along the rampart,” said Arthur, who had heard him after all. “That may be how the Saesons fight from behind walls, four men to every three Roman paces, but we are not Saesons. Sentries up on the battlements, yes, and holding forces sheltered down below, ready to move where they are wanted. You would need nearly nine hundred men to hold this place otherwise, and while they were nicely occupied here the attackers would be away ravaging the countryside.”

There was a pause while Mael and the others digested this.

“What then is the purpose of this place?” Mael gestured at the hilltop. “Why build on such a scale?”

“Three reasons,” said Arthur. “First, the Army of Prydein needs a secure base, somewhere to keep remounts without danger of them being driven off by marauders, stocks of food and weaponry without fear of them falling into the hands of the enemy.”

We grimaced and nodded. There had been a famous occasion a few years earlier when the Saesons had seized one of the army’s major grain stores. What they could not carry off they burnt, and the smoke from the pyre had signalled a winter of hardship none of us would forget.

“Second, we need smiths, metalworkers of all kinds, tanners, leatherworkers, shoemakers, carpenters, potters – list them for yourselves. For every man we put in the field to fight the enemy, we need more sitting somewhere safe producing equipment and supplies. Easier to put the craftsmen together than scatter them and waste days gathering their produce.”

“You still have to fetch them their materials,” Mael said doubtfully.

“True. But most of them will choose to come anyway.” Arthur’s face lit with enthusiasm. “Think how many cling to the skirts of the army as it is, living in hovels for the sake of our patronage. Think how much better it could be.”

“You are talking about building a town,” Cynon said slowly, as if the idea had only just occurred to him.

“Exactly!” exclaimed Arthur. “A new town, not a decaying ruin like Lindinis down the road. A place fit to house our women and our children, a place that will draw the finest craftsmen of the island.”

“And the third reason?” said Cei.

Arthur grinned at him. “The third reason. Perhaps the most important of them all. For too long the Army of Prydain has been mocked and despised. *Ambrosius’ folly*, men call it.”

“Not in my hearing,” growled Cei, who was the oldest of us and had already given many years of service.

“Glory,” continued Arthur. “Prestige. To show publicly we are a force in the land, a power not subject to any ruler. Ambrosius is Magister Militum, Commander of the Armies of Britain: no man’s servant, though many would make him theirs. For too long we have been beggars, given the scraps from the tables of the great lords. When they are endangered, they shout for us and praise us as mighty warriors and heroes. When the fighting is over, we are parasites stealing their best men and horses for our own use, living on the fat of the land at their expense.” His face darkened. “We are the guardians of Britain, the wardens of this isle against all foes, from within its bounds and without.”

“A city,” said Cynon, still mulling it over. He stared at the hilltop. “A city fit for a warlord. What shall we call it?”

“We shall keep the old name to honour the past,” said Arthur. “Caer Cadwy, it shall be called.”

We spent a while longer wandering among the ramparts, seeing how the ditches had been shaped to the slope of the hill, how easily the site could be made defensible once more. Then we mounted and went south and east, in pursuit of the army wending its way homewards; at first riding fast to make up the lost ground, then slowing lest we run into the rearguard, who would be watching for us.

This was open country, lightly wooded with low, wide hills, good ground for grazing rather than growing, and indeed sheep and cattle roamed freely across the land. We halted to rest the horses on the brow of a hill, and I looked back the way we had come, at the rolling vale spread before me and the humped back of Din Cadwy blue in the distance. Cei came to stand beside me.

“Do you see the cattle?” I said, pointing.

We had ridden through the herd at the foot of the hill, solid placid beasts in a meadow by a stream. They had watched us go by with the usual curiosity, but had shown no signs of fear. Now they were moving, breaking down the banks of the stream and struggling into the field beyond.

“Something startled them,” said Cei after a moment. “Something hidden in those trees.”

We rode down into the valley on the far side of the hill, where we found the grassy track of an old road, overhung with elms and beeches. Great black birds sat in the high branches, and greeted us as we passed along the hollow way. Arthur laughed aloud and saluted them, crying: “See, cousins? They know the hands that feed them!”

The avenue wound with the slope of the land. To our right the ground rose in a brown tangle of fallen trees and undergrowth, the earth torn where the roots had been ripped loose, the trunks buried under brambles. To our left the ground fell away to a river flowing fast along the foot of the valley, flashing in the afternoon sun.

Arthur led us at a fast trot to where the road curved down to the river. The edge of the ford was paved with old stones of Roman work, but the river was in spate, the water white and turbulent, and we could not see what lay under the main current.

Cei had been holding back, watching our rear. “I don’t know,” he said when he rejoined us. “It may be nothing.”

“We could await them here.” said Arthur. He studied the river. “If we cross, they will find it hard to come at us.”

“It may be nothing,” repeated Cei.

Arthur smiled. “Listen!”

The birds were shouting again, but this time it did not sound like a greeting. Rather they were angry, and as we looked we saw them lift in a swirl of dark wings like burnt leaves floating on the heat of a fire, circling over the treetops then settling, still crying their displeasure.

“May it not be some of our own, hoping to catch us unawares?” asked Mael. “A patrol, sent to swing behind us and make us seem fools?”

“No,” I said. “These are no friends of ours.”

“We cross,” said Arthur.

He led the way. The horses faltered when the cold water covered their fetlocks, slowed again when it reached to their knees, fighting the pull of the current. Cynon’s mount slipped from the firm footing of the ford, fell into a hole, and struggled free while I rode round them with the others in my wake. My own horse slid sideways, shouldered into another, half swimming.

Behind me Cei called: “Quick! They are upon us!”

Something hissed past me and vanished in the white water. A stone rebounded from Arthur’s shield. He was free of the river now, wheeling his mount to face our enemies, spear in hand. The sun shone on his auburn hair, making jewels of the droplets showering from his horse’s belly. He looked like a champion out of legend as he snarled defiance at his foes, his long shadow stretching across us while we battled up out of the water, like Llew at the Ford of the Shining Water withstanding the warhost of the Peryth.

He threw, and warded off a second slingshot with his shield. I came out of the river with the others, and we fell into formation around him, three open ranks of five with two flankers to guard our backs.

Our attackers reined in on the far side of the ford. They were many, perhaps twice our number. Their shields were unmarked, and they wore leather caps pulled down over their hair to hide their faces, but we could see enough to tell they were neither Saesons nor Scotti raiders. They were our own kind, men of Prydein, and their horses did not look as if they had been ridden any great distance.

“Declare yourselves!” shouted Arthur.

Cei nudged me. “They are not far from home.”

They milled back and forth along the river bank, calling and jeering, while they summoned the courage to enter the water.

“Who are you?” Arthur shouted again.

They made him no reply save a rough volley of spears and slingstones that bounced harmlessly from our shields.

“It is you they want, Arthur,” I said from the corner of my mouth. “Better if you went back among us rather than standing at the front.”

He grinned at me. “Too late!”

They had at last found the spirit to cross, plunging into the river in a muddle of horses, pushing and shoving each other in their eagerness to keep to the paved ford. Two were thrown by their mounts baulking at the fast flowing water, and the loose horses prevented some from joining their fellows, so that already their advantage in numbers was diminished.

“Steady, steady!” said Arthur, raising his voice. “On my word, two volleys. Now! And again!”

As he spoke, we threw, picking our targets as we were trained to do. Thirty spears fell upon them, the second flight in the air before the first had landed. Men were plucked from the saddle, horses thrashed the water. In the confusion more were forced from the ford and swept downstream, struggling furiously. The attack was reduced to a shambles. Four or five made it to the bank and were quickly dealt with; I traded blows with a sobbing stranger, slipped under his guard and killed him with such ease it felt like murder.

“A volley for the far shore!” commanded Arthur, and we threw again at those who had not managed to enter the river. At that range we did little damage, for they had time to see the spears coming and avoid them as their fellows in the water could not, but it was enough to put them to flight.

“Well, well,” said Arthur. He dismounted, turned the nearest body till he could see the man was beyond help, straightened and looked me hard in the eye.

“You know something of this.” It was an accusation, not a question.

“They underestimated us,” I said, playing for time. “Badly.”

“Who are they and what did they want?” demanded Cynon. “They knew who we were, and they attacked without so much as a parley. I thought we were at peace.”

“We are never at peace,” growled Cei.

“You know what I mean,” said Cynon, unabashed. “Who were they, Bedwyr?” He glanced from me to Arthur, and back again, aware of the currents between us and not understanding. “Why does Arthur say you know something of this?”

“They are men of the Summer Country,” said Cei, coming to my rescue. “They were the vengeance of Melwas for the theft of his bride.”

He slid from his horse and came to stand beside me, a giant of a man with long fair hair. I could feel the anger coming off him like the heat from a burning brand.

“This is enough!” he said. “With your permission, Arthur, some of us will pay Melwas a visit. Four will suffice, I think: me, Bedwyr, Cynon and Mael.”

“This was not the first time then?” Arthur frowned. “What have you kept from me?”

“Till now there were only messages, curses aimed at you and Gwenhwyvar. We saw no need to bother you.”

“We?” Arthur’s voice was sharp.

“Bedwyr and I.” Cei ran a hand over his face, his anger lessening though it still simmered below the surface. “We are the Companions, Arthur. We are your men, now and always. Your troubles are our troubles. This one seemed so minor we did not wish to worry you: nothing save the malice of a little man thwarted in his desire. It would pass, we thought. I was wrong. Let me make amends.”

“I should go myself,” said Arthur.

“No!” we all chorused at once, and then laughed at the sound of our own voices. Something of the grimness went out of us.

“No,” I said. “If you go to Ynis Witrin, to Glasdun, you will be in his power. He has sought your life already. This attack was in earnest; they had no interest in taking prisoners. Let us go. Melwas might be so maddened by jealousy that he is willing to kill you and risk the consequences, claiming it was an accident, but he can hardly explain away four deaths.”

Arthur nodded slowly. “Is four enough?”

“I think so,” said Cei with a calm confidence. “More and it begins to look like an attack; less, and as Bedwyr says, any misfortunes are too easy to pass off as accidents. We should go now, so we arrive on the heels of the news his assault has failed.”

For a long moment Arthur thought. Then he bowed his head. “Go then, with my blessing and my thanks.”

* * *

We crossed the ford as soon as we could, leaving our comrades to deal with the dead and wounded, and rode in pursuit of our attackers. This time the black birds along the avenue were silent when we passed beneath them.

Dusk turned to night when we were near Din Cadwy, still following the tracks our foes. At last Cei halted, and we agreed we should wait out the darkness in comfort rather than press on blindly. We made camp, lighting a small fire, ate from the provisions in our saddlebags, and sat talking while the moon rose high above us. I was on watch when the scream came. At first I thought it was a vixen, or a night bird, the sound distorted by the surrounding hills. Then I realized there were words behind the anguish: simple words, old words.

“Ah, ah, Mam, Mam!”

It was one of the wounded, crying for his mother. The noise went on without end until near dawn, when they say men’s strength is at its lowest ebb. Though the shrieking had been bad, the quiet was worse. All of us were grey with lack of sleep when we mounted and left, steering in the direction from which we thought the cries had come.

We found him leaning against a tree where his comrades had left him: a boy on the cusp of manhood, with a gaping wound in his stomach and his face and hands much bruised and grazed as if he had fallen from his horse more than once.

“They abandoned him,” Cei said angrily. “Had I known I would have gone out to him myself.”

“They were afraid,” I said. “And there was no hope for him, even if they could have got him home.”

“They should have stayed with him,” said Cei, his face tight. “Or eased his passing for him. Not left him alone in the night.”

We came to Ynis Witrin from the east, having abandoned any attempt to follow the survivors into the fens. We kept to the high ground until we struck upon the track that branches off from the Roman road to Aquae Sulis, travelling openly without trying to conceal ourselves. Twice we were challenged by the wardens of the Summer Country; each time the name of Ambrosius allowed us to pass. Four men were no threat to the peace of their land.

Distance becomes deceptive as you approach Ynis Witrin. We seemed to enter a broad valley reaching away into the mists that hung above the fens. To our left were far hills; to our right were three tall peaks, well wooded on their lower slopes, towering above us as the track descended to the level of the marshes and became a mossy causeway with the smell of mud and reeds clinging to it. That smell of damp decay was to become familiar over the next few days.

The first of the three peaks was the tor itself: curiously-shaped even in that country of oddly-shaped hills. It rose from the fens like a cone, too symmetrical to seem natural, its upper slopes terraced by a giant hand. Smoke drifted from its shoulder, where the hermits lived, and from the summit, where Melwas maintained a watchtower. The second peak was softer and rounder, and the third a long low ridge blurring down into the waters beyond. As we came closer the impression of enormous height receded, and what

had seemed mountainous from a distance became just a range of hills, remarkable only because the surrounding land was so wet and level.

Yet a certain sensuousness remained: a feeling one was looking at the grass-clad body of a giantess who had lain down for a few moments of her time – though it might be centuries for us. The tor was her breast, the round hill her hip, the long ridge her thigh. Often I have felt something similar on the chalk plains to the east, where every grassy swell seems to hide some part of a goddess, but here it was strong with the sense that she might wake at any instant.

Soon the house came into view. I had heard tell of the old villa under the hill, not least from Cynon who had been born not far to the south, but even so it came as a surprise.

Originally it had been a country house, built for some ancestor of Melwas in the days when the ground was drier. Nestling in the shadow of the tor, the villa probably seemed pretty to its Roman owners. A fire had destroyed most of the old bath house a hundred years before our visit (they still talked of the disaster) and that end of the house had been abandoned to stabling and storage. The western wing collapsed soon after – perhaps weakened by the fire and certainly undermined by the rising water level. The then lord built a new section at the eastern end, closer to the tor, as a replacement, robbing the ruin of stone for the new foundations. Other generations had added more since, always at the eastern end, so the whole building was creeping sluggishly toward the tor, like a wounded beast dragging itself to cover.

Approaching from the main entrance, you were faced with granaries and stables to your left, solidly built but much patched. Next to them was a series of broken walls, some head-high and others barely showing through the grass, and here craftsmen and serving folk had erected a few rough huts for their families, like squatters in the ruins.

Then came the main house, what remained of the old Roman work: a long three-storey building with a portico along its frontage, the supporting pillars formed in the shapes of warriors with spears and curved oblong shields of ancient design. Stone steps led up to double doors of dark oak, scarred by time but still mighty, twice the height of man and intended to impress.

Beside the main house were the new sections: timber halls thatched with reed, such as one might find in any town, the work of lesser generations. We were conducted to guest chambers in this part while retainers went to warn Melwas of our coming.

We had time to wash before the retainers returned and led us deep into the oldest section of the house, down dark passages where daylight never came, the smell of damp and rot growing ever stronger.

Melwas received us in a hall of pillars lit by smoking tapers. His warriors stood round and about, hidden by the columns, while he sat upon a great seat in the middle of the room, a brazier smouldering beside him, a ceremonial whetstone on his lap and a heavy silver chain around his neck. Our footsteps echoed on the hard floor, and as my eyes adapted to the gloom I saw that it carried a mosaic design, much cracked and faded: a great white sow lying under a fruit tree with her young about her. The ceiling was lost in the shadowy vault, but the upper walls had been painted with portraits of black eyed men or gods, though the plaster had bubbled so they seemed leprous now, who must once have been fair of countenance.

“What is your business with the Lord of the Summer Country?” demanded a herald from beside the chair, speaking to the room rather than to us.

“We bring him a warning,” said Cei. He did not raise his voice, yet his words echoed from the high ceiling.

Melwas flinched a little on his seat. He was a thin man, not unlike the portraits on the wall. In the half light his skin seemed heavily lined; more so than one would have expected in a man of his age.

“A final chance to mend his ways,” added Cei.

The herald glanced at his master, found no help there, and blustered: “Who are you to threaten the Lord of the Summer Country in his own hall?”

“You know who I am. So does he.”

One of the warriors drew near: a burly man, swaggering with menace. Without taking his eyes from Melwas, Cei reached out a hand, and the other gripped it without thinking. After a moment the challenger screamed and sank to his knees.

“Do not pit your strength against mine,” said Cei.

There was a long silence. The burly man staggered to his feet, moaning softly, and disappeared into the shadows. His comrades shifted uneasily among the pillars.

“What do you want?” said Melwas.

“No more tablets engraved with curses. No more attempts at ambush. Gwenthwyvar has wed Arthur, and there is an end to it.”

Melwas gathered his courage. “You sound like Arthur’s man. I thought you served Ambrosius.” He smirked, and some of his retainers chuckled.

“I serve the Magister Militum, with honour, a word you seem to have forgotten.”

“Was it honourable to steal my bride?” burst out Melwas. He leant forward on the seat, the tarnished chain catching the dim light.

“Arthur did not steal her. She went of her own will.”

“Her father promised her to me in marriage.”

“Gwenthwyvar is not a horse or a hound, to be bestowed by another,” said Cei.

“And a fine world it would be if all women chose their partners!” sneered the herald.

I bit back the first response that came to mind and spoke directly to Melwas himself.

“You would not have been happy. You would have made each other miserable.”

“Happy?” he said. “We are not put upon this earth to be happy. Nor do we marry to be happy. It was an alliance between two great powers, and your man, your Arthur brought years of planning to nothing.”

“It would not have worked,” I repeated. “Gwenthwyvar will hold her lands by her own right, not by her father’s, or by her husband’s.”

This was true enough. For several generations the women of that house had produced only daughters, and although their husbands were permitted to rule, they did so as the spouse of the Lady, not as the lord in their own authority. Ogrvrn Gawr was a refugee from the east, driven from his ancestral lands by the Saesons, not a native-born ruler with a lineage stretching back into the mists of time, like Melwas.

“Besides,” I added, “what is done is done. We live in the world as it is, not as we would like it to be. She would not marry you if Arthur died tomorrow – nor, I think, would you have her now.”

“You are right. I would not.”

“Then where lies our quarrel? We are not enemies, Melwas. If you attack us we will fight back, but we will not strike the first blow.”

Melwas sighed and leant back in his chair. His men stirred, and it seemed to me there were two factions in the room: one which wanted vengeance for the sullied pride of the Lord of the Summer Country; the other which had counted the dead and wounded from yesterday's fight and reckoned enough was enough.

He looked at me with heavy-lidded eyes. "You are Bedwyr mab Petroc. I have heard of you, though you are not so famous as Cei, not yet. I suppose I should be honoured to have two such men in my hall, even if one comes to threaten and the other to reason. We should mark the occasion with a feast, with entertainment of some kind." He ran a hand through greying hair. "Let me think on your words. They have some merit. Leave us now, and we shall meet again this evening."

The retainers led us back to our quarters. They offered to lend us fine garments for the evening's feast, but we refused, not wishing to be beholden. Instead we passed the afternoon doing whatever we could to improve our own clothes – unmistakably those of soldiers out on campaign – and talking softly for fear of eavesdroppers.

"He will agree," said Cei.

"But what is his agreement worth?" demanded Mael. "I too might agree to be rid of us. Once we have gone his malice may return."

"We could make him swear a great oath," suggested Cynon. "What does he hold sacred?"

"You know more of him than we do," I said.

Cynon frowned. "Well, he is a Christian in name if not in practice. We passed a chapel at the mouth of the compound. He allows the hermits to occupy the tor, and they are said to be devout men."

"You sound doubtful."

"I am. Many people claim to be Christians, but would not hesitate to break an oath sworn before God if it suited them."

"The tor," said Cei. "Is it not said to be an ancient shrine?"

"Yes." Cynon shrugged. "A place of sacrifice and devil worship, according to the priests. That is why the hermits live upon the shoulder, to purify it with their prayers. It is also the last redoubt of these people, the fort to which they would retreat if all else failed. Beyond that I know little, except tales to frighten children – aye, and grown men sometimes."

"The floor of the audience chamber," I said suddenly. "The white sow."

"She is in the tales." Cynon shuddered. "A flesh eater, beloved of the Grey Man."

"By the Sow and the Shrine," mused Cei. "It has a good ring to it."

"Henwen, Old White, was her name," said Cynon. "I would not swear an oath on her name, not unless I were certain I could keep it."

Dusk came early under the shadow of the hills. The retainers brought us to a different part of the house, a hall filled with trestle tables on which the drinking horns and goblets glittered by the light of the hanging lamps. A fire of apple logs crackled merrily in the middle of the space, scenting the whole area, so that at last we were free of the smell of damp.

Before the feast was served – and a fine feast it was as I recollect, with many local delicacies like salted fish and eels – Melwas rose and spoke to us.

"The afternoon I have spent closeted with my advisers, taking counsel. After deep thought, I have reached a decision. I have been swayed by many considerations, not least the words spoken by Bedwyr mab Petroc. The Lord of The Summer Country must not think of himself alone, but also of his people. It is true that his honour is their honour, his

pain their pain, his sorrow their sorrow. Naturally they wish to avenge what they see as a slight upon his reputation. But there are times when a man must cloak his pride for the sake of the greater good.”

I glanced around the hall and saw several sitting there with bandaged heads or arms. Most avoided my gaze, but a few stared back angrily. Beside me Cei smiled.

“I have made my point,” continued Melwas, “that I am not to be cast aside lightly like an old shoe. Your master – and I mean your true master, not Ambrosius – should understand that now. Yet for all our sakes I am prepared to forgive and forget. No longer shall my ill will trouble the sleep of Arthur and Gwenhwyvar!”

Cei snorted, rather too loudly for good manners, then rose to his feet. He towered above the table, a giant of a man, his hair burnished by the lamplight. “You speak fairly, Melwas of the Summer Country. Let there be friendship between us again. Let us swear an oath, here in this hall before all these witnesses, that we shall not strive against each other but work together for the good of Prydein.”

So the two of them swore a solemn oath, by the Gates of Heaven and the Blood of Christ, that there would be friendship between Melwas and Arthur. Then Cei said, dropping his words casually into the silence that followed:

“Is not the sign of your house a white sow? Let us swear by her also.”

“A white sow?” said Melwas. He tried to laugh. “Long ago, perhaps, in the old heathen days.”

“Her image still adorns the floor of your chamber. Come, it will do no harm, and it will help bind those of your people who still follow the old ways.”

Melwas glanced about him, searching for some means of escape. “I am a good son of the Church,” he protested.

“Why, so am I, so am I,” said Cei with great good humour. “But God will bear with us this once, I think.”

So Melwas swore by Henwen the Old White, though he did not like it. We could see it was not his religious scruples which made him protest, but the fact that this oath was more binding upon him than the other.

Once the business was over we settled to the feasting. When the eating was done the men shifted their seats, moving to be closer to their friends, gathering in groups, and the serious drinking began. In those days I had a hard head, as did the others, but it was soon clear most of those in the hall intended to drink themselves insensible. Cynon and I used what tricks we could to refuse refills without giving offence, emptying our goblets on the floor whenever we thought nobody was looking, yet the drink still took its toll. My vision was blurred by the time Mael fell asleep in a corner.

Cei remained sober. He had the natural advantage of size, and he was older than the rest of us, but above all he had learned never to let down his guard in the presence of enemies.

At last the talk turned to feats of strength. “We have a slave,” said one of Melwas’s men, “a Saeson. Saw him shift a cart stuck in the mud once.”

“The pigherd, you mean?” said another. “Yes, strongest man I’ve ever known.”

“Nasty brute. You remember how he tried to run once? Llywri brought him back from the marshes. Took a dozen of them to subdue him.”

The shout went up for Llywri to tell the story. He joined us at the trestle, a short, dark youth with broad shoulders like so many of the marsh dwellers, and began a long involved tale about this Saeson slave and his frequent attempts to escape, thwarted for the most part by Llywri’s excellent night vision.

“Only slipped by me the once,” he said proudly. “What a hunt we had that day!” He leant forward, tapping the side of his nose. “No better quarry than a man. Gives you a better run than any boar or hind, and better sport at the end. Hounds are useless in the marshes you see: too much water to break the scent. You have to find every trace of spoor yourself, hunt your prey through the fens by your own efforts. And wily? Back and forth they lead you, laying false tracks and little traps, lying low while you pass over them then doubling back when you’ve passed.”

He continued in this vein for a long time. My attention wandered, and when I listened again he was saying triumphantly:

“Never seen a man so strong, and after three days in the wilderness.”

“What do you say to that?” demanded one of his cronies, thrusting a jug in my direction. “Did you ever hear the like?”

“Cei’s a strong man,” I said foolishly.

“Yes, for one of us. But these savages, they’re something different. They’re like animals, the way they’re brought up.”

Llywri choked on his drink. “Don’t let the swineherd hear you say that. He’s touchy on the subject. Claims to be well-born, the son of an ally of Ambrosius. I tell you lads, it’s no ordinary slave that keeps the pigs of Ynis Witrin!”

“Cei, yes, he’s strong, I grant you that,” persisted the other. “But against this Saeson?” He shook his head. “No man born in Prydein could match him for strength.”

“Cei could,” I said obstinately.

They scoffed at the idea. I began to lose my temper, as one does if contradicted when drunk. How could they be so wilfully stupid? Had they not seen how Cei’s grip had crushed one of their fellows? If they had witnessed what I had witnessed they would not be so quick to doubt. Was Prydein not the Isle of the Mighty? Was Cei not the mightiest of all?

They had planned it from the beginning, of course, though whether it was their own idea or came from Melwas I do not know. The argument raged for a while, and then Cei, who had been sitting aloof at the far end of the table, was brought into the discussion. Some sort of contest, a trial of strength, was mooted. The two giants could shift heavy weights, boulders or laden carts. At first Cei smiled. He was a warrior, not a labourer. Deftly he parried the suggestions, making us all laugh. Finally, Llywri came up with the idea of a wrestling match.

“You are reputed to be a wrestler,” he said. “No loss of dignity in that.”

“With a slave?” Cei raised an eyebrow.

Ah, but this was no ordinary slave. Again Llywri told of the Saeson’s claim to be well born, to a family long in Britain. This was no pirate-raider, but a man of good family gone to the bad, captured and sold into slavery as a punishment. The slave himself denied any wrongdoing and said he was the victim of a great injustice, but didn’t they all?

We laughed. The discussion began again. Still Cei demurred. By this stage I wanted him to fight the Saeson, if only to prove what I had said was true, so I added my voice to those of Llywri and the others.

“Why would the slave want to wrestle me?” asked Cei. “What does he gain, apart from hard blows if he loses?”

“He won’t lose,” said Llywri.

Cei looked at him and smiled thinly. “You must make it worth his while.”

Llywri waved a hand. “His freedom.”

“And for me if I win? I risk as much. If I lose, I become a laughing stock.”

“Anything within reason,” said Llywri. “But you will not win.”

Cei nodded slowly. “Very well. Tomorrow. After all, we must allow time for the wagers to be laid,” he added, and winked at me.

* * *

I thought he would be angry when we reached our quarters, but he was not, only amused.

“If not through you, they would have found another way. Put as much on me as you can. They should give good odds.”

The contest was set for noon. I spent the morning wagering all our possessions, both those with us and those at home – the locals were willing to trust me to settle any debt – and discovering anything I could about the Saeson.

They told many tales of his size and strength, grinning at me knowingly. He had made several attempts at escape, though lately he seemed to have resigned himself to life as a slave, settling with the woman he had been given. They had two children, a boy and a girl, both under five, of whom he seemed fond. Some thought he was merely biding his time, lulling his masters into relaxing the watch on him; others that he had genuinely given up all hope of escape. Several thought him more trouble than he was worth. All agreed he would fight like a fury for the promise of freedom, and all were confident he would win.

“I wonder why they are so sure,” said Mael. “You had best not eat or drink, Cei. Perhaps they plan to poison the food or wine.”

Shortly before noon we made our way to the appointed place, outside the main entrance doors to the house. Melwas was already waiting, seated in a carved chair under the shelter of the portico. The slave was beside him: a brawny, blond man stripped to the waist to show his heavy muscles. He was big: not so tall or broad in the shoulder as Cei, but heavier in the chest and limbs. His hands were huge. In terms of weight there was not much to choose between them.

The Saeson saw us coming and grinned. He bent and whispered into Melwas’s ear. Cynon gasped at my side. “Isn’t he the slaver?”

I stared at him blankly, thinking I had misheard. “The slave? Yes, obviously.”

“No, no. The one we captured several years ago. When you rescued that farmer. El-something, he was called.”

“The farmer?”

“No, fool. The Saeson. He said he was nothing to do with the slavers, had just fallen in with them along the road.”

“Eliseg,” I exclaimed, suddenly remembering.

“He has thickened since those days,” Cei said judiciously. “Put on muscle. They have trained him hard, I would say, for all their talk of him being a swineherd.”

We stood before the Lord of the Summer Country. His men gathered round in a loose ring, still laying wagers. The conditions were quickly agreed: no weapons of any kind, otherwise anything went; the fight to last until one was unable to continue for whatever reason. Throughout the Saeson grinned at Cei.

“Do you remember me?” he demanded, when Melwas had finished his recitation of the rules.

“I do,” said Cei. “You were not much trouble then; I doubt you will be now.”

“You have met before?” said Melwas in feigned surprise. “How strange. Is this perhaps a grudge match?” He snickered.

When Cei stripped off his tunic the onlookers gasped. His body was scarred with old wounds, and he was not so obviously muscled as the Saeson. But he looked dangerous, a mountain of a man, massively strong. Some of the wagers began to flow the other way.

Melwas gave the signal and the fight began. The Saeson came forward, feinting and jabbing with his fists. The pair closed, fell apart, closed again, Eliseg jabbing all the while at Cei's stomach and belly with short powerful blows.

"He's weakening him!" Llywri said gleefully from by my shoulder as they separated. "Your man's a wrestler, not a puncher."

The Saeson danced in again, striking for the stomach. The crowd roared with excitement. Some of the blows Cei caught on his arms but a few slipped through, punishing his body. Little by little he gave ground, then shifted to counterattack. The Saeson saw it coming and slipped away, grinning. Cei's face was impassive.

"He has the edge on him for speed as well," gloated Llywri. "When will you deliver my winnings?"

Before I could reply the Saeson bounded forward and the pattern began again, Eliseg using his speed to deliver powerful weakeners while Cei defended where he could, doing small damage in return.

"The Saeson hates him," whispered Cynon. "He is fighting for more than his freedom."

Watching, I saw what Cynon meant. Eliseg was hitting the scar tissue whenever the opportunity presented itself, punching to cause pain as much as to weaken his opponent.

Then Cei moved. He flowed across the ground like a man suddenly tiring of the game, seized the Saeson by the arm and threw him down hard. A gasp went up from the crowd.

"What happened?" complained Llywri. "I missed it."

The Saeson shook his head, rolled though Cei had made no attempt to follow through, and came gracefully to his feet. Cei applauded mockingly, opened his arms wide and invited the other in. Eliseg attacked, driving great punches into Cei's belly. Cei stood like a rock, laughing, then shoved Eliseg away. The Saeson hurled himself at him, fists flying, and once more Cei pushed him aside as one might push aside a fractious child.

"Is this your champion?" Mael cried in triumph.

The Saeson's face flushed with rage. He came close, and again Cei moved too quickly for us to see, pinning the man's arms and lifting him from the ground. Eliseg kicked and struggled, trying to break the hold, but Cei's strength was too much for him. Slowly the Saeson stilled, until he hung limp with dangling head.

Cei raised him higher, cast him down with an impact we all felt, and set a foot upon his throat.

"Yield," he said.

Eliseg's chest jerked as he fought for air. One hand fluttered feebly.

"Yield!" Cei pressed harder.

The crowd was silent. Eliseg tapped three times on Cei's leg. Gradually Cei released the pressure and stepped aside. The Saeson made no attempt to rise, but lay on his back with his chest heaving.

"Now," said Cei, turning to Melwas. "My prize."

He was not even breathing hard, though his body was covered with reddening welts where the other had struck him.

"Take him away," commanded Melwas, gesturing at the Saeson. "He has cost us much, this day."

“Wait!” said Cei.

To me, who knew him well, it was obvious he was angry, barely holding his fury in check. “This man,” he said, the words coming thick through his rage, “was promised his freedom if he defeated me.”

“So Llywri tells me,” Melwas answered calmly. I think he took Cei’s rage for exhaustion, or he would not have been so calm.

“And his woman and children?”

Melwas glanced at Llywri, who shrugged. “We made no promise concerning them.”

“Did you not?” said Cei.

“No,” said Llywri.

“And my reward was anything within reason, yes?”

“Yes,” Melwas said cautiously.

“Then I choose this as my reward: the freedom of Eliseg, and his woman, and his children, all of them to accompany us when we leave.”

There was a moment’s silence. They had expected him to demand gold and silver for the war chest of Ambrosius, or horses, or a tithe of grain – anything except the freedom of a family of slaves.

“This is your wish?” said Melwas. I could see his mind working, wondering what he had missed. “The man hates you,” he added, then coloured, as if he had said more than he intended.

“It is.”

“Why then, it must be honoured.” Melwas shook his head, disturbed by his inability to grasp Cei’s motive. “See to it, Llywri.”

“We will leave in the morning,” said Cei, staring hard at Llywri. “Have them ready by then.”

“Do you not trust me?” Llywri spread his hands in appeal.

Cei smiled thinly and stalked away through the crowd, which parted before him. The rest of us followed in his wake, and behind us we heard the excited muttering begin.

* * *

“They are fools, these people,” said Cei when we were safe in the guest rooms. “Like children. They have found something new to them, so they think nobody else will have seen it either. But God that man can punch! I have never been hit so hard.” He grinned at me, wincing as he adjusted his position. “That’s why I brought it to an end so quickly. I had intended to spin it out a while longer, make more of a show.”

“Nothing broken,” I said, completing my examination. “You will bruise badly though.”

“I know!” He took the mug of water and laughed incredulously. “Whatever made them think I had never met a man who used his fists? Have they forgotten it was a Roman art?”

“I think it was the power of his blows in which they put their faith,” said Mael from the far side of the room. “Not the novelty of the idea.”

“Ah, perhaps you’re right.” He rubbed at a scar on his chest, groaning softly to himself. “As well they cannot see me now, eh?”

“Never mind,” said Cynon, patting him on the shoulder. “You have added to the legend. Before long the bards will have a new song, telling of how the Long Man faced a Saeson giant in a fight that lasted three days and nights, and cast him down at the end.”

“One thing I do not understand,” I said after a pause. “Why did you demand Eliseg’s freedom?”

“It was his family’s freedom that puzzled Melwas,” said Cynon.

“That I can see. Given one, the other must follow. But why Eliseg?”

I stared at Cei. He lifted his head and gazed back with a kind of defiant shame, like a child to its father. “Because it pleased me.”

“Why did it please you?” I pressed. “Surely you have not forgotten how we took him in the first place? We agreed then that he was worse than the other slavers, for he at least was a trained warrior.”

Cei made a small gesture, cutting me off. “I know, cousin, I know. But it was an ill thing we did. It would have been kinder to have killed him outright. A warrior should not become a slave. And he is a warrior, even now. He deserves better.”

“He hates you,” I said, echoing Melwas.

“So?” Cei shrugged. “What has that to do with justice? I did him a wrong, and now I would right it.”

“And if in a few months’ time we catch him slaving again?”

“Then we strike off his head.” Cei stretched his arms above his head and winced. “But it may be that now he has learned what it is to be a slave, he will not return to his old ways.”

“You pity him,” I said.

“Yes, I do, not least because he makes me wonder what I might have become without Ambrosius and Arthur.”

We left the next morning with six spare horses among our winnings and the promise of more to come. Two we gave to the Saeson and his wife when we parted from them on the old Roman highway – which we reckoned was far enough from Ynis Witrin for them to be safe from the risk of recapture. The woman was grateful, but the man was not.

It was twenty years before I looked upon his face again.

As for Melwas, we kept a close watch on him until we decided he was no longer any threat. He would never be Arthur’s friend, but he did not oppose him so far as we could see. In due course he married and fathered a number of children, of whom only Pabo survived to adulthood. After about ten years we relaxed our watch, convinced he had made a new life for himself and forgotten his old resentment.

CHAPTER TEN

“What did you mean, last time, when you said my seed will have dominion?” asked Eurgain.

“Ach, child. Forgive me. I play games sometimes. You had pricked my vanity, asking if I was a ghost. I was just trying to frighten you.”

They sat with their backs to the forest, enjoying the winter sunshine. Although the wind was cold they were sheltered here, down where the stream clucked prettily on its way into the trees. The sheep grazing on the hillside were heavy with their young, promising well for the coming year. For once Eurgain was warm and content. That morning she had seen the first traces of catkins on the hazels. Even her new clothes did not seem as restrictive: one of the Saeson women had shown her a better method of hitching the gown over the belt so she was not constantly treading on the hem. Life was good, and spring was coming.

“They build well, your new friends,” remarked the old woman, staring up the slope to the farmstead.

It was true, reflected Eurgain. Whatever their faults, however odd their customs, the Saesons did at least build well.

The main hall ran east to west. Two lesser buildings in the same style stood some distance to the east, like a pair of ducklings trailing their mother. A wattle fence joined one building to the next, so that the ground between them was protected from wandering animals. This was where the Saesons grew their vegetables and herbs.

Beyond the fence the ground was still scarred where the great trunks had been dragged from the forest to make the wall plate and roof timbers. The men must have chosen carefully: bowed beams of the right curve and size to frame the roof, and straight planks for the tops of the walls. These planks were in turn supported by timber buttresses on the outside, wedged between the ground and the wall to stop the weight of the roof pushing out the sides.

The walls themselves were made from a frame of oak planks, split from the trunk with axe and wedge. The planks were jointed and pegged, the spaces between them filled with panels of whitewashed wattle and daub to create a checkered design of bare wood and white wall. The lesser halls had only one entrance, but the larger, where everybody ate and slept, had a door in the middle of each long wall, protected by a porch.

But the greatest source of wonder to her was the roof. It was covered in scales, like a fish, like a dragon; golden shingles, the more exposed already faded to a mellow brown, cleverly arranged in staggered rows. She had tried to count them once, and had given up when she reached a hundred. She had thought they must have taken for ever to cut and shape, but Ceolric had said there was a knack to it.

“The life of a man; the life of a hall,” the old woman murmured in the Saeson tongue.

“Why do they always talk about the life of a man?” asked Eurgain. She plucked a stem of grass and chewed idly.

“Because the life of a woman is a chancy thing,” said the old woman.

The stalk was bitter. Eurgain spat it out. “Do you know what Hildeburh said?”

“Hildeburh is the large one?”

Eurgain nodded then imitated the Saeson woman’s guttural speech: “Two years work by us all, endless labour, and now it has taken on a seemly shape.” In her own voice she added: “Hildeburh likes things to be seemly. She does not approve of you, because you are not; nor me, although I show some promise.”

“Ah, I am a wild woman, beyond all hope of redemption. Should you not be working?”

“Yes.” Eurgain wriggled, and lay back more comfortably. “You promised to tell me about your people.”

The old woman grinned. “So I did. I wondered whether you would hold me to it.”

“Well?”

“Well. Where to begin?” She pushed back her grey hair and stretched her long limbs. “Among my people women hold the rule at home, around the hearth, while the men busy themselves with vital matters like raiding and the taking of slaves. They are great raiders, my kinsmen, for our land is poor and our herds are small. I say my people: it would be more true to speak of us as a grouping of families. When all else fails we fight each other.”

She smiled at a memory. “We rarely stay in one place for long. In the autumn we live by the river, when the salmon are running. In the spring we go into the high country and hunt deer. In the winter we put aside our differences and gather by the sea, for the fish and the seals. Our houses are not intended to last, unlike those – ” she waved at the Saeson halls “ – or the stone palaces of the Romans. A house is a shelter for a season; when we need a new one we build one.

“Even as a child I could see that our people were dwindling. The north is harsh, unlike these soft southern lands. Few of us lived long lives: the women died in childbirth or of fevers, worn out by the hard life. Our men went raiding and were slain, one by one, or were taken by the sea. Too many of our children died before they reached full growth.

“As a baby I was pledged to our gods, the gods of sea and land and sky, of the trees and stones and waters. They were powerful once, but like us they have dwindled now. The old tales told of mighty deeds, of beings like fire who walked among us and bestowed their blessings. No longer.”

She was silent for a while, contemplating the wind in the grass. Eurgain waited.

“When I became a woman I determined to save us from our doom, whatever the risk and whatever strange paths I must walk. Better to perish in fire and blood than fade away into nothing, I thought, for in those days I found all choices simple. My clan had been important once and the memory of that importance lingered on, so that if any man could be called the leader of our people it was my father. In my vanity I thought myself chosen for this task: the princess who would make her people great again.

“I was always curious, with a love of learning. If I could have found the Pool of Segais, over which grow the nine hazels of wisdom, I would have eaten the flesh of the salmon of knowledge that feeds upon the nuts the hazels let drop into the water. Then, perhaps, I would have been satisfied.

“So I travelled far and wide, sometimes alone in the guise of a man, sometimes in the company of others – even once, as I told you, with a great army on its way to war –

always seeking wisdom. I studied the marks cut into the standing stones of the north and west. In the ruins of our towns I discovered scrolls so ancient they crumbled as they were unwound, so that to read them was to destroy them. I talked with monks and nuns, with learned philosophers who believed in nothing, with the simple folk of the fields and the high lords in their palaces.

“My father was angry that I dared leave, furious that I dared dream of – Of what? To him it was foolishness, the fancy of a child who had never become an adult. The old ways would save us. When I returned home from one of my journeys he cursed me and threatened to cast me out.”

She raised a face filled with sorrow to the sun. The winter light was cruel, illuminating every line and wrinkle, every blemish of age.

“I thought to make a bargain with him. One last time I would travel south, and I would bring to him a man he had a hankering to meet. Then I would settle as a dutiful daughter and serve the gods as I had been pledged to do. I did not lie to him, but I did not tell him all the truth. This meeting was to be the fulfilment of my plans to restore our people.

“My father agreed, but he did not trust me. He pursued me, became tangled in the net I had woven, as did others, as did I myself. I have often wondered what would have happened if I had told him everything, instead of keeping back the vital part.”

She was silent. After a while Eurgain said: “What did happen?”

The old woman sighed. “I brought death upon us all, child. My father, my brothers, even my people in the end. After my father and brothers were gone I was given the rule for a time. I stopped the raiding, formed alliances with the neighbouring tribes. For a while I fooled myself into thinking I had succeeded, saved us however high the price. But I grew old. My powers ebbed. The young men were restless. The old men resented me. The women continued to die and too few children were born. Our neighbours saw our weakness and took to raiding us, who once had raided them. And so my people cast me out.”

The breeze ruffled the grass. A cloud passed over the sun and suddenly the air was chill. Behind them the great trees of the forest groaned as the wind took them. The sheep cried to one another on the hillside, moving down towards the farm.

“You should go,” said the old woman. “They will say you are shirking.”

“I am.” Eurgain stood reluctantly. A few heavy drops of rain fell about her. She glanced at the sky and saw how black it had become in the east, over the forest.

“Go quickly.” The old woman rose with surprising ease and walked swiftly away in the direction of her shelter. “It is going to rain, and hard!” she called over her shoulder.

The sheep also were moving fast, bunching in a long line on the white path they had worn down the hillside, jostling and shoving, tails quivering.

Eurgain went towards them. They seemed to be calmer now they were over the brow of the hill. The foremost had left the path and were browsing peacefully. Perhaps it was only the wind that had disturbed them. She clambered up the slope, giving the sheep a wide berth so she did not set them off again. Halfway up she paused to catch her breath, and glanced back at the settlement, quiet in the valley below.

It was a long way down, a long way if she needed to run.

She peered up the hill, doubting the wisdom of what she was doing. If something other than the weather had frightened the sheep, she was not being sensible to explore alone. Some of the younger thralls should be here somewhere, keeping an eye on the flock,

but they would have hidden or run away at any sign of danger. It might be this Angus everybody seemed so worried about, come to demand his tribute.

The rain was falling in earnest now. She pulled her hood up over her head and climbed towards the skyline. The wind blew strongly. If she opened her arms it might pluck her from the ground and waft her like a leaf down to the farm, or carry her on over the hills to other lands. She could become a wanderer like the old woman in her youth. But that had led to trouble and grief, as her mother might have said, so she bent over and used her thighs to push her up the slope.

She had not asked the old woman why she had chosen here of all places to live. The grass was slippery and the rain stung her face. A gust ripped the hood from her head. She straightened, defiant, feet slithering out from under her, and a hand caught her elbow.

“Careful!” said a mild voice. “Oh! Do you understand this tongue? I am a friend. Friend!”

She shook herself, wiping the rain from her eyes. A thin man was holding her arm: a man as wet as herself, though his clothes were of better quality and he had a smart pack on his back that looked new.

Not a warrior, she thought, but not a poor man either.

The hand on her elbow was long and pale, as if not much used. There was a softness to him, an air of youth though his hair was thinning and his face was lined. ‘A child who had never become an adult,’ she thought, remembering the old woman’s phrase. Perhaps he too was a seeker after knowledge.

“I understand,” she said. “This is my tongue too.”

“Oh!” he said again. “You are not a Saeson then?” A blush spread over his face. “Are you – are you one of their slaves?”

“No,” she said, guessing what he was thinking. “I am betrothed to one of the family.”

“Ah!” He hesitated, realized he was still clutching her elbow and let go. “Of course. I see. Tell me, are they friendly?”

“Friendly?” she said, honestly puzzled. “Yes.”

“I mean, if I go down among them –” he cast a glance down the hillside at the farm, half hidden in the driving rain “– will they make me welcome?”

“They will not eat you.”

“Do they?” He stepped back. “Surely not! Not the Saesons. I have heard the Attecotti used to eat people, but I have never heard it said of the Saesons. Sacrifices, yes, I have heard they sacrifice captives to their heathen gods, and I believe it true. That is why I have come.”

He was terrified; terrified and elated at the same time.

“You want to be sacrificed?” she said. His accent was strange and he used several words at whose meaning she had to guess, but she thought she had understood.

“No, no. I am about my father’s business.”

She stared. She was cold and the rain was running off her cloak. “Your father has business with Wermund?” Perhaps he was part of the new alliance the Saesons were building.

“He is your father as well, child,” the man said in his soft voice.

The man was mad.

“My father is dead. Murdered by Scotti pirates, along with the rest of my family.” She swung on her heel.

“A moment!” he cried behind her. “May I come with you?”

“Yes, if you think it safe,” she said without looking back.

“I have come this far,” he muttered to himself. “I must put my faith in the Lord. His will be done. If they slay me, they slay me.”

He was either a coward, or –

As the thought struck her she turned. The man was standing in the rain, his lips moving, his gaze fixed beseechingly on the black cloud above.

“Has somebody told you the Saesons are savages? That they are cruel to strangers? Are you afraid of them?”

He nodded, swallowing.

“Then you are very brave to come here,” she said. “You need not worry. They are like us.” She intended to comfort him. Not until after she had spoken did she realize it was true, the Saesons were like her people: suspicious of strangers, bound up in their own concerns, yet not at bottom unfriendly. Perhaps they were more outward looking than her kin, but that was true of others besides the Saesons. “They will make you welcome, give you food and a warm place to sleep.”

“Will they listen to me?”

He was clean shaven, of course, which was partly why his face seemed so innocent, as if he had not lived in it. All the Saeson men, even the thralls, wore beards, and she was not used to seeing a naked male face.

“Why would they not listen, if you have something interesting to say?” she asked.

The man smiled and looked a little less worried. The rain eased and a shaft of sunlight broke between the clouds, playing along the valley.

“My companion!” he exclaimed in dismay. “He was behind me. I had forgotten him!”

He scrambled up the hill and disappeared over the skyline. A moment later she heard a noise like an animal protesting against an injustice: a long, rumbling snorting that verged upon speech. She waited, and when the noise came again her curiosity won.

The Saesons had told her tales of trolls and woodwoses, of misshapen creatures living in the deserted fens and forests, on the high moors and windswept headlands beyond the lands we know. The stranger was struggling with one now, something bent and awkward with a grey muzzle, that threshed and moaned in the stranger’s grasp.

“Calmly, uncle, calmly,” the stranger said.

The creature was wrapped in rags. As it fought to free itself the rotted cloth tore. The creature wailed, was quiet.

“What is it?” asked Eurgain. There was a quaver in her voice.

“My friend,” said the stranger, breathing heavily. “Through him I am here. I call him Moccus.”

“Moccus?” she repeated. “Pig?”

“I think it is his name.” He glanced over his shoulder, recognized her fear. “He is quite harmless. He has lost the power of speech, but not of understanding. Come, uncle, see the fair lady who will lead us to our hosts!”

The creature raised its head, and she saw that what she had taken for a muzzle was a tangled grey beard, and that under the dirt and hair was a face, lined with suffering and sorrow.

“Oh, you poor man!” she exclaimed.

He looked at her. After a long moment in which the world stood still he smiled, a smile of such unbearable sweetness that she felt her lips part in response. He made a sound, deep in his throat, then another, grunted “Moch, moch,” and she understood how

the stranger had named him. Then his mouth opened and he said with perfect clarity and great dignity: “Eurgain.”

She took a step back and almost slid down the hill. The stranger leapt forward to catch her – again! she thought – and Moccus took advantage of the diversion to shamble away toward the forest.

“Are you all right?” demanded the stranger.

She nodded and he released her. Moccus moved fast, despite his lopsided gait. He was already twenty or thirty paces distant.

“He truly does not wish to come with us. Perhaps I should let him go,” said the stranger.

“I should,” she said shakily. “Who is he?”

“One of God’s poor. I met him at the gates of my city.” He shook his head. “I have not told you my name. I am Bolanus, from the civitas of Cunetio.”

“Kiwitas?” She stumbled over the unfamiliar word.

“A city state to the north of here.” Bolanus looked abashed. “Well, I think it’s the north. I have lost my sense of direction. These last few days I have been guided by Moccus, and he is a trifle erratic.”

“My name is Eurgain.”

“Eurgain? But that’s what – ” Bolanus frowned. “I thought he meant your hair, or was following on from me calling you a fair lady. Golden fair, splendid fair, something on those lines. Either of which would be true,” he added, and blushed.

“I think we should go the hall,” said Eurgain.

Bolanus talked. Although it was pleasant to hear her own tongue from someone other than the thralls – who had little time for conversation – and the old woman, he talked without stopping.

In part, she supposed, it was relief in discovering the Saesons were unlikely to kill him on sight – and the more she thought about it the more courageous his behaviour seemed. All the same, she wished he would draw breath occasionally. His accent was odd, and he used a great many long words at whose meaning she had to guess, but she caught the gist of his story.

He lived in a city, and his father was an important man. Bolanus was a Christian, as were all his family, but unlike them he took it seriously. He considered it his duty to care for the poor, often taking them to his father’s house, feeding them and giving them cast-off clothes. (That proved he came of a wealthy family. Only the very rich could afford to throw away old clothes.)

This annoyed his father, who saw no reason why he should be expected to support a crowd of beggars. Moccus had been one too many, and the father had had the old cripple thrown out. Bolanus and his father had quarrelled. Harsh words had been spoken on both sides. The father had accused him of skulking in familiar surroundings, of being generous with other people’s possessions, of being a coward acting for show. Why did he not start a mission to the Saesons, if he was so devout?

“So here I am,” said Bolanus. He stared at the three halls on the hillside below him and swallowed doubtfully. “I met Moccus on the road and we travelled together. He was not alone.”

“Not alone?” said Eurgain, since some response seemed to be expected of her.

“No. He had an animal with him. A wild pig.”

“Where is it now? If the men see it, they will take it for the pot.”

“It went off towards the forest.” Bolanus waved vaguely in the direction of the trees. “I think that’s why Moccus wanted to go there.” He dropped his voice. “To tell you the truth, I think the pig guided us here, not Moccus. We passed several farms on the way, but it wouldn’t stop.”

“How odd,” she said.

Several people had seen them descending the slope, among them Hildeburh, who did not look pleased at Eurgain’s long absence. However, the woman could hardly make a fuss in front of a guest, and at the sight of the stranger she disappeared into the hall, presumably to make things ready.

Bolanus slowed as they approached the main door. The thralls stared, and he licked his lips.

“Are you sure they will be friendly?”

“Sit on the bench by the door,” she said. “I will tell them you are here.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Afterwards, what Nai remembered of that day was perching uncomfortably on the damp rocks, his limbs still shaky with the fever weakness, chewing a dry piece of bread and washing it down with the water Bedwyr insisted he drink, listening to the sound of the older man's voice and all the time wondering when the watchers would make their move.

Towards noon it began to rain again, a penetrating drizzle that mingled with the mist, hiding the scrubby woodland and the long spine of the ridge they had descended. Soon their world was reduced to a little pocket round the rocks, bounded by the dark shapes of the grazing horses.

When Bedwyr fell silent Nai sat for a while watching droplets gather and roll down the folds of his cloak. The grease of the wool kept the beads moving: he was fascinated by the way they fattened till one thought they must burst, then slid with ever increasing speed to their doom. If one tilted one's knee – so – one could arrest them, or even send them shooting back in the opposite direction ...

A pony nickered.

Bedwyr laid his good hand upon Nai's leg, careless of the droplets he destroyed.

Suddenly the mist was alive with movement and the weight of horses.

"Are you lost?" demanded a voice.

Bedwyr glanced up from under his hood, his hand still resting on Nai's leg. Nai was very aware that the older man was gambling on his knowledge of these people, and that his knowledge was several years old.

"No, merely waiting for you to summon the courage to join us." Bedwyr released Nai's leg.

Somebody laughed back in the mist. It was meant to sound carefree and confident, but succeeded only in sounding nervous.

There was a muttered conversation. A rider loomed through the haze, swung stiffly from the saddle, limped towards the rocks, but halted before he came too close.

"Push back your hood."

Bedwyr did as he was told, baring his head. The newcomer drew in his breath sharply.

"And you," he said, pointing at Nai. The newcomer was short and broad shouldered, with thick white hair pulled back in a bun. At some time in the past a blade had ruined the right side of his face: the cheek was hollow and shiny, and his beard grew patchily around the scar that stretched from his jaw to his temple. From the way he spoke, Nai guessed he had lost most of the teeth on that side.

Nai shook himself free of the hood. The air was cold and clammy.

"You I do not know," said the man. He turned to Bedwyr. "But you, you I might. I am not certain." He rubbed at his beard.

"Llywri, Llywri," chided Bedwyr. "You disappoint me."

The man stiffened, and leant forward to peer at Bedwyr – though he made sure he kept a safe distance between them. After a long pause he whistled softly to himself.

“It *is* you! I thought it was some rogue, spinning a yarn to a gullible farmer. You were supposed to have died at Camlann,” he said petulantly.

“Not quite,” said Bedwyr.

Llywri’s face turned sly. “We could soon remedy that.”

“Could you?”

Bedwyr met the other’s gaze without moving. Nai tensed, ready to leap, but after a while Llywri straightened, grinning uneasily.

“Half the night we waited for you; all day we followed you.”

“I know,” Bedwyr said calmly. “The farmer summoned you.”

“You are clever,” hissed Llywri. “As always. But you are alone now, apart from your silent friend. No Companions to keep watch turn and turn about through the darkness. And in the dark are many dangers.”

“Did your master send you?”

Llywri bridled. “My master is dead, his heir driven out. Whom should I serve now?”

The horses shifted impatiently behind him. A breath of wind stirred the mist, and Nai saw the men who waited there: hard of feature, wearing leather under patterned cloaks, with small shields on their arms and long spears in their hands.

“Four of you?” Bedwyr said incredulously. “Did you think to take me with only four? I am not even alone!” He came swiftly to his feet, and though he was not a tall man he towered above Llywri. “Have you forgotten who I am?”

“We could have taken you had we wished,” Llywri said defiantly. He indicated Nai with a lift of his chin. “We waited until this one’s bowels had stopped running. No point in having a prisoner who cannot move without fouling himself.”

“Prisoner? Be careful, little man. Age has not made me patient.” Bedwyr stepped forward and Llywri, without thinking, stepped back.

Nai stifled a smile.

“You will escort us to Pabo,” commanded Bedwyr.

Llywri swallowed, then recovered something of his poise. “Why? He has no reason to love you.”

“Because Pabo mab Melwas is yet your lord and master, regardless of who may squat among the ruins under the tor. You were never a good liar.”

“I did not lie,” the other said with dignity. “I merely asked whom I should serve. An old question, not without meaning in these times.” He waved a hand at his followers, half concealed in the haze. “Their loyalties are not in doubt; neither is mine. But yours, that is a different matter.”

He limped away from the rocks, his squat form dissolving into the mist. Nai could hear him whispering to his friends, but not what was being said.

Bedwyr shifted on the rock. He spoke very softly, out of the corner of his mouth. “I may have miscalculated. I think Llywri is loyal to Pabo – he was certainly loyal to his father – but it’s possible he belongs to Angus.”

“There are only four of them,” Nai answered lightly. “A trifle to a hero like yourself.” But he checked his sword and long knife all the same.

Llywri reappeared, scratching the ugly scar on his cheek. “I will risk it. If you play us false – ” He broke off, remembering that he was speaking to someone unlikely to be

moved by threats, and continued awkwardly: “Whatever else people said of you, they always agreed you were a man of honour.”

“I shall not betray you.” Bedwyr’s voice was level.

Llywri nodded slowly. “We must travel in silence, at least at first. Sound carries in the marshes, and the usurper has men out exploring his new kingdom. I will tell you when it is safe to speak.”

The ground under the trees was soft and treacherous. Nai did not have the faith in his borrowed mount that he had in his own pony, and although much of his strength had returned whilst they sat upon the rocks, his arms soon began to ache with the effort of guiding the animal around the welter of broken branches and muddy holes. The mist curled among the trees, drifted like smoke across the clearings to twine around the horses’ hooves, disguising the dangers.

They rode in a loose file: one of the younger men acting as scout and guide, then Llywri with Bedwyr and Nai at his heels, and lastly the remaining pair of warriors. The scout moved cautiously, without haste. At times he stopped for no obvious reason, signalling a halt with an upraised hand, and sat listening until he was satisfied it was safe to continue. The woods were strangely quiet. Nai had never been to this part of Prydein before, but everything he had been told had led him to expect it to teem with life, even now in the dead of winter. The Summer Country was famous for its wildfowl: geese, moorhens, grebes, divers, rails, herons and cranes. The silence was disconcerting. All he could hear was the creak of the riders’ leathers and the steady drip of water from the branches.

He waited until they had gone some distance and the rhythm of their journey was well established, then gradually dropped back, widening the gap between himself and Bedwyr. At first nobody noticed: the pair of riders behind him were too intent on scanning the bushes around them to worry that the line was becoming strung out. When one did realize how far the gap had opened he gestured angrily with his spear. Nai looked abashed, as if his attention had wandered, and made a token attempt to close with the leaders before once again slipping back. The nature of the terrain helped: the tangles of brushwood and patches of mire were time consuming obstacles, and by not following exactly in Bedwyr’s track he was often able to take much longer skirting them than was truly necessary, while appearing to be making every effort to maintain the pace.

Every so often he caught the man glaring at him menacingly, and urged the pony forward until the other’s suspicions seemed allayed. The escort was a cold faced man with dark eyes that from a distance seemed utterly dead, like the cinders one might find in the ashes of an old fire. He was bare-headed, his black hair pulled into a thick knot, from which dangled several long grey feathers. Nai watched him warily, knowing that if the need to act arose, this one would have to be dealt with first.

Occasionally the mist lessened, and Nai caught glimpses of rough pasture or meadows with the long grass left standing. Sometimes it thickened into fog, and they rode beside reed beds that for all he could tell might mask either a small pond or a great lake. The land seemed limitless, unchanging. Had it not been for the fact he knew they were travelling in a generally north-easterly direction, he might have thought Llywri and his friends were taking them round in circles.

The escort made less and less effort to disguise the fact he was staring at Nai. Now when he caught Nai’s eye he grinned, revealing a mass of pointed yellow teeth.

During the late afternoon they came to a line of ancient oaks and alders marking the channel of a stream. The scout waited for Llywri to reach him, and the two held a whispered conversation on the bank while the others held back. The tree branches were

furred with moss, and the pair were bathed in the greenish light that hung over the stream. Nai shuddered, and reached without thinking for a spear from his quiver.

The escort brought his horse in close. Nai turned, expecting an attack, relieved that it had come at last, but the man held out both hands palm uppermost and shook his head frantically, then laid a finger against his lips. His smile widened into something that reminded Nai of the way a dead eel might grin before being flung into the pot.

Ahead, Bedwyr moved to join the scout and Llywri. The scout pointed across the channel. Bedwyr nodded, beckoned to Nai, who went forward with both his escorts close behind.

The water rushed white and strong through the channel, carrying with it rafts of vegetation and old branches that surfaced for an instant like the arms of drowning men, then tumbled away. The ferns along the bank shivered in the force of the current, and even the trees seemed to dance.

“We cannot cross,” said Bedwyr. “The level has risen since this morning. In any case, the scout reckons some of Angus’ men are on the far side.”

Nai peered, trying to determine what lay beyond. The trees and mist made it hard to see: there might have been a hillock floating above the greyness, or it might have been a trick of the light. The river spoke, crying and gurgling, and he could not be sure whether there were truly men out in the mist, talking in low murmurs, their voices carried to him by the soft air, or whether it was all the stream.

“We must go left,” Llywri said decisively.

The scout nodded reluctantly. “We can cross at the old bridge. I doubt they’ll have set guards on it yet. Too far from the Isle.”

The accent was so thick it took Nai a moment to work out what the scout had said. While he sat preoccupied the shadow of the escort fell across him, and he knew, absolutely knew, the treachery he had been expecting all afternoon was upon them. Forgetting he was not on his own mount and expecting greater obedience, he pulled his pony roughly aside and cocked his arm to throw the spear. A voice screamed in his head: “This is it, this is it! They’ve trapped us against the river bank!” He saw Bedwyr regarding him with a puzzled expression, mouth open; saw the man rushing towards him, and already it was too late to make a cast; all he could do was shift his grip on the spear shaft and drive it home under the man’s ribs ...

The man leant forward in the saddle, fixed Nai with his dead gaze. “I can blow bubbles from my eyes,” he whispered confidentially. “Watch!”

He held his nose. His face turned pink then puce with effort. The corners of his eyes glinted, and there, sure enough, were bubbles: sparkling, crystal, with rainbows at their hearts.

* * *

The scout led them downstream to a wooden bridge so ancient it looked as if it might collapse under the weight of the horses, and then along a track that became a causeway through the marsh. They travelled faster once they were on the causeway, partly because the going was easier, but also because there was no possibility of hiding if they were seen.

A cold wind sprang up, blowing from the north, bringing with it the tang of salt and sea. The mists dispersed, revealing a landscape that seemed to Nai as desolate as any he had ever seen, including the high moors of his own country. Vast beds of yellow reeds and green rushes stretched into the hazy distance, the monotony broken by the occasional hummock fringed with twisted trees. A smell of rot and decay rose from the black water

lapping the foot of the causeway. Now he could see some of the birds he had expected: long-legged waders flapping majestically under the grey sky; ducks weaving through the still waters. Something with long trailing legs flew overhead, uttering a harsh cry that startled the ponies.

“The Summer Country,” Llywri called with satisfaction. “None save the lords of the land dare enter it in winter. We are safe now.”

At the words Nai felt a shiver pass through him. This strange realm, this place which was neither land nor water but a mingling of the two, was the subject of many stories, and few of them were pleasant. The rational part of him knew the name meant nothing more than that this was the kind of country whose use was seasonal: in summer, sheep could graze the sedge wastelands; in winter, flooding made the marshes impassable. Even now, he and his fellows were not so much journeying through the wastes as over them: their passage was only possible because they were keeping strictly to the raised track.

That was what the one part of him thought: the sensible, Christian side which believed in God and Judgement and Heaven. But the other side, the side which loved listening to fireside tales, the side which more than half believed in those tales, believed in heroes standing against the monstrous dark which comes in many guises and threatens to engulf us all – that side of him remembered that the Summer Country was another name for the Land of Youth, for the Otherworld, for the abode of the unchanging dead.

There was a tale once told in *Caer Cadwy* by a woman bard from the far North, a tale that set Arthur on the road to empire and his doom. It was a tale with as many versions as there were tellers, but in her version (which she claimed was the oldest and truest) it was to this land, this Summer Country, that Teyrnnon the Lord who was Lover of the Lady had come to beget the child called Gwair, the Awakener. Here the child had been born, in a cave on a hillside, the child who in later life would be known as Peredur or Pryderi. From here the child had been stolen by the Grey Man, hidden away under the earth, and from here (because such is the nature of the Otherworld) he had been rescued by Teyrnnon his father and six companions.

If Gwair or Pryderi was the lifespring of Prydein, then this place, this waste of land and water, was its heart.

And at that thought Nai began to have some inkling of what Bedwyr and Gwenhwyvar might intend.

The causeway ended abruptly at a broad channel choked with mud and winter-yellow reeds. Nai dismounted, walked to the edge to ease the stiffness in his legs. His bubble-blowing friend grinned his eel grin and pointed at the cut stones of the embankment. The stones were marked with trails of rust like streaks of dried blood where iron rings had wept in their long decay.

“This was a wharf,” said Bedwyr, the hint of a question in his voice.

“Long ago,” answered Llywri. He waved an arm at the channel. “In those days this was kept dredged.”

Nai turned to look back the length of the causeway, wondering where the road had once led.

“Here we go in single file,” said Llywri. “You must keep exactly to my steps.” He smiled thinly. “The marshes are hungry. Those who stray from the path vanish without trace.”

He eased his pony down the side of the causeway in a shower of spray and struck off at an angle to the road, twisting and veering through the water. One by one the others

went after him. Waiting on the bank, Nai thought they looked ridiculous, as if they were performing some complicated dance for horse and rider, but when his turn came he found they were following a ridge of solid ground. Once the bubble-blower's pony slipped, and they all heard the suck of the mud that clung to its hooves.

Sometimes Llywri stopped, searching for landmarks in this flat landscape. Once he waved the scout forward, and the man dismounted, probing the route with the shaft of his spear until he was confident they were still on the correct path. Twice they had to swim the horses across channels, forging through the smooth water in a compass of ripples, soaked to the thighs.

Dusk came, seeping slow and heavy from the marshes. Llywri looked worried, and the others sensed his fear that they would be caught by the dark in this featureless wilderness. Yet they could not hurry, for haste would bring disaster.

"Soon we should find the posts of the sea road," said Llywri. "If not, we shall have to pass the night as best we can."

Nai glanced at the sky, thick with cloud, the lower levels moving fast.

"What would you have done if the farmer had not told you of our presence?" Bedwyr asked curiously.

Llywri shrugged uncomfortably. "Stayed out another day or two. We were hunting for signs of Angus' movements. Nothing of any great urgency."

Bedwyr would have said more, but the scout shouted in triumph.

"There! Do you see them?"

A double row of posts reared above the water to their left. Llywri heaved a sigh of relief, and sent white wings in his wake as he pushed his mount through the flood.

"The sea road?" Bedwyr said quietly to Nai before following Llywri.

"I can smell it," Nai murmured. "Growing stronger all the while."

They were travelling due north now, with the freshening wind of dusk in their faces. Although under water, the road surface was firm beneath the hooves of their ponies, and with the posts to guide them they were able to move at a fast trot.

Gradually the ground began to rise and the road heaved itself clear of the flood. Llywri reined in at the head of a slight promontory and gestured for the others to join him.

Ahead of them stretched a lake or lagoon, its grey surface ruffled by the wind. In the middle of the lake was a long low-lying island, lightly clad in trees. Even at a distance and in the growing dark, they could see the ridge of a thatched roof with other shapes clustered around it.

"There sits Pabo with what remains of his household, bewailing his fate," remarked Llywri. "Now, Bedwyr. Once I make the signal to summon the boats, there can be no turning back. Are you certain you would continue, you and your silent friend here? Like as not Pabo will kill you out of hand. You will remind him of his father's humiliation, and his own failure."

"Make the signal," said Bedwyr.

Llywri shrugged. The bubble-blower reached into a pack and produced a horn lantern; his companion made a tent of his cloak to keep the wind off him while he struck a spark and lit the candle within.

"Will they see that?" asked Nai.

Llywri feigned astonishment. "He speaks! I had thought you mute!" He gazed across the water. "They have seen us already."

Three black specks had put out upon the lake. Quickly they grew in size, and Nai saw that they were flat-bottomed barges, propelled by poles and paddles, each large enough to carry as passengers two horses and their riders.

The bubble-blower opened the side of the lantern and let the wind extinguish the flame. “Now you’ll see the Lord,” he said triumphantly. “The Heron Lord we call him. Creyr Tigern.” He touched a hand to the bun at the back of his head. “These feathers are his mark.”

The barges came to rest in a ripple of silence. The steersmen beckoned, and the travellers walked their horses aboard, hooves hollow on the wood. Nai had feared that he and Bedwyr would have difficulty with their untrained mounts, but the animals were docile and resigned, weary from their long afternoon.

The crossing also was made in silence, apart from the grunts of the men as they poled them free of the mud. Nai let a hand trail over the side; the water was warmer than he had expected. When he lifted his fingers to his lips he tasted salt. Evening mist curled from the surface, blurred the black outline of their destination. Sparks of light glimmered, seemed to float above the lake. He smelled woodsmoke, faint on the wind, mingled with the decay of the marshes and the cleaner scent of the sea. Beside him he felt Bedwyr adjust his sword belt.

They came in darkness to the land. A voice called roughly. Llywri led his horse ashore, and handed it to one who waited. “Give him your ponies,” he commanded. “We have little space and they must be hobbled. Your belonging will be brought to you later.”

Nai debated keeping a spear, but in the end he allowed the full quiver to go with his mount. He still had what had once been Bedwyr’s sword hanging from its baldric, and his own well trusted war-knife was at his waist. His shield he left tied to the saddle, reckoning it would be more hindrance than comfort.

Llywri started up the slope, his three companions falling in behind him like an honour guard. Bedwyr glanced at Nai, grimaced and followed.

There were small fires everywhere. Each fire had its own complement huddled around it, men, women, children and dogs, every group distanced from the rest. Few bothered to raise their heads as the newcomers passed. Those that did showed faces haggard and despairing in the firelight.

Soon they came to a collection of leather tents, so closely packed there was scarcely room to walk between the guy ropes. Beyond the tents was the building they had seen from the shore: a low lodge with a reed thatched roof that reached almost to the ground.

Without knocking, Llywri pushed open the door.

The air inside was damp and stuffy. At first Nai thought the space crowded, then realized that they themselves were the crowd. A single lamp dangled from a rafter, casting high shadows. The end wall was made from unfinished planks, some with the peeling bark still upon them, the chinks between them stopped with mud. Panels of interwoven willow, like crude basketwork, formed a partition dividing off the far third of the room. The uneven floor was of beaten earth, over which somebody had long ago scattered rushes: a slimy pulp clung to the hollows.

Squatting on the floor in a welter of sharp elbows and knees was a man. His head was bowed, showing a line of white scalp under the mop of coarse grey hair, and he seemed engrossed in a pattern he was drawing in the earth with a stick. He gave no sign that he was aware of their arrival. Llywri cleared his throat.

“My lord?” he said. “Pabo?”

Pabo lifted his head. His muddy skin was an ugly pink around a bony nose, and his eyes were pools of deep sorrow, like the eyes of a dog beaten for no reason it can understand. His gaze passed over Llywri and his companions without interest, paused for an instant upon Nai with a faint frown of failed recognition, fastened despairingly upon Bedwyr, then fell to the floor and the pattern scraped in the dirt.

“I did not think to see you again,” he said listlessly. “Have you brought me an emissary from Angus with his terms? What is it to be? Life for my household if they deliver up my head upon a pole?”

“Pabo,” repeated Llywri. He glanced helplessly at Bedwyr. “The night is often darkest – ”

“ – before the dawn,” finished Pabo. “Here is another old saw for you: woe is wondrous clinging. And I am buried in woe, smothered in woe. All is lost.” He frowned, shook his head, added without any great interest: “I had thought you gone to take service with the new lord of Ynis Witrin. What changed your mind?”

“I met a dead man on the road.”

“A dead man?” There was the faintest gleam of curiosity in Pabo’s mournful eyes. He tilted his head at Nai. “This one, you mean? I did not think he was one of mine.”

He tossed the stick aside, unfolded his legs and stood in a long-limbed shamble. He moved jerkily toward Nai, towering above him so that for a moment the warrior felt like a child again. Pabo stopped a few paces short, turned his head on one side and examined him through his eyelashes.

“Feeder of crows, glitter of ravens. Would things have been different if you had been with me that night? I trusted him, you know – good company, well-born, amusing tales. I liked the one about the great love affair between Gwenhwyvar and my father, even if it wasn’t true.” Pabo blew out his cheeks and the patches of red around his nostrils became more pronounced. “He said you tried to kill him over a woman, but succeeded only in breaking his harp. It was you, wasn’t it? He described the scar upon your throat.”

“Yes,” said Nai. “But it was not over a woman. Or at least, not that woman.”

Pabo jerked at the croak of his voice. “You even sound like a crow. They call me the heron.” He bared small teeth in a smile. “Regin said you were a killer, that you slaughtered his companions without mercy. Is that true?”

“Yes,” said Nai, seeing again the trapped and squirming mass of men and horses into which he had flung spear after spear. “Yes.”

“No,” Bedwyr said firmly. “No. It is not true.”

“Aha!” Pabo held a long finger in the air. The sleeve of his tunic slipped, revealing the skin stretched over the lumpy bones of his wrist. “A disagreement! Regin warned me about you also, with your wild claims.” He frowned, and swung at Llywri so suddenly the scarred man flinched. “Or is this the dead man you meant?”

“My claims are not wild,” said Bedwyr before Llywri was sufficiently recovered to reply. “I am Bedwyr mab Petroc. Once I was Arthur’s man.”

Pabo’s face moved a little. “Bedwyr died at Camlann with the rest of them, the ones who had not already gone. The crows picked his bones clean long ago.” His voice changed. “I sent men, you know, though I did not go myself. None ever returned. Perhaps they ran away, or were attacked before they ever arrived, or perhaps they were lost in the chaos. Sometimes I think I should have gone as well, to be there when the world ended.” He wrinkled his brow. “I was never much of a warrior.”

“The world did not end,” Bedwyr said gravely. “It changed, but it did not end.”

“My world has ended!” Pabo shouted. “My world has ended! I trusted Regin. Beauty was in his voice, his movements. We gave him a harp to replace the one this dark man had destroyed – so dark I took him at first for one of my marsh dwellers – and the bard sang to us, sang of love and hate and fear and courage, songs that glowed like jewels in the night, and I thought at last here is a man who understands, one with whom I might share the weight of the world.” His arms waved wildly in the air as his voice rose to a screech. “And what happened? He plotted against me, bribed my men with rings of gold and the promise of more to come. He himself, whom I had thought a man of peace, took up a sword and slew my champion Aniel, my childhood friend.”

“But you escaped,” said Bedwyr.

“I ran away.” There were tears on his sallow cheeks. “I ran away. I never thought to see Aniel defeated in fair fight, and it was a fair fight, despite the confusion around them as the monks came rushing into the house. I did not understand what was happening. Aniel was roaring ‘Treachery’ with all his might, hacking at my new friend with his blade, the great doors were wide open and these strangers in brown robes with tonsured heads were flooding through, cutting down anyone in their way, and all I could do was gape. Llywri dragged me out and brought me here.”

“What have you done since?” asked Bedwyr.

“Done?” Pabo looked at him in puzzlement. “Done? What should I do? I let my friend die in my place. Poor Aniel. He deserved better, deserved to follow a greater lord. He practised with his blade every day for hours, and when it came to it, Regin cut him down like an unschooled peasant.”

Bedwyr stepped to where Pabo had been squatting when they entered. He gazed down at the floor, bent and used the stiffened fingers of his left hand to trace the outline scratched in the dirt. Slowly he straightened, and stared at Pabo.

“If you do not act, your followers will melt away.”

“Like Llywri.” Pabo bared his teeth in an unpleasant smile.

“Llywri saved you once. And he is here now.”

Pabo tilted his head and examined Bedwyr afresh, seeing him properly for the first time. “Old man, who are you?”

“I have already told you. Whether or not you believe me is no concern of mine. Do you understand why Angus and Regin seized your home?”

“No.” Pabo spoke defiantly, but Nai caught a hint of uncertainty in his eyes.

“I think you do.” Bedwyr’s voice was steady.

Nai joined him in the middle of the room. Scraped on the floor was the outline of a spiral, like those the Children of Menestyr wore tattooed upon their cheeks. Seven times the spiral wound about its own heart in a single coiled path, meandering in and out to create a long, twisting, devious approach.

“Remember Teleri’s tale of Teyrnnon?” Bedwyr muttered from the side of his mouth so only Nai could hear. “Teyrnnon stood at the foot of a terraced hill and danced his way up to the entrance of the cave where his son was held prisoner.” Bedwyr traced the pattern with the tip of his boot. “Three paces forward and a sunwise circuit. One pace back and a widdershins circuit; one forward and another sunwise circuit. Do you see it?”

Nai nodded.

“The crane dance, some call it. I have seen it performed at Caer Cadwy in the spring, before Arthur in his glory. And its meaning, or one of its meanings, is this: what is truly holy cannot be approached without preparation. No priest should offer up the sacraments unless his thoughts are unsullied by other concerns. The fact that many do so

is one of the great failings of the present Church. Our ancestors may not have known Christ's mercy, but they did recognize what was needful when they approached the spirits of the land. This – "his boot scuffed the pattern" – obliged them to think about what they were doing."

"What are you plotting over there?" Pabo demanded petulantly.

Bedwyr's face hardened as he stepped forward, the light from the lamp turning his white hair to gold.

"Angus cannot be permitted to hold Ynis Witrin. He must be removed and you restored to your rightful place."

"And in return?"

Even at a distance, Nai could see the glint of cunning in Pabo's eyes.

"In return?" Bedwyr's voice deepened, sounding more as it must have done in the days when on Arthur's behalf he commanded the Army of Britain. "In return, you will allow me and those with me free access to the tor."

Pabo licked his lips. He raised his arms to the lamp (none of the others could have reached it) and tapped it so it swung back and forth on its chain, sending shadows streaming wildly across the room.

"Who?" he said.

Despite his height and size he gave Nai the impression of a man without any great strength. His bones were large but there was little flesh on them, as if he had not eaten properly for a long time.

"Who?" he repeated when Bedwyr made no answer.

"Nai will be one."

Pabo touched the lamp, held it in one long hand until it was still. "Nai," he said, speaking to the flame above his head. "Nai: nephew, champion. That is what it means, isn't it? Will he be your champion, old man, or will he be somebody else's? He could be mine." He cast a sly glance from under long lashes. "Not all my treasures were lost to Angus."

"I do not think you can buy him," Bedwyr said levelly, "but you are welcome to try."

Pabo laughed. "And you. Who are you really?"

"Ask Llywri."

He released the lamp, turned slowly to Llywri and his three companions, waiting forgotten by the door. "Well? Who is he?"

The scarred man shrugged apologetically. "Lord, he is who he says he is."

Pabo flung back his head and bellowed with a laughter that to Nai rang false. "Bedwyr is dead, along with Arthur and the rest," he said at length, dabbing his eyes. "Dead and gone. If you think otherwise you are deluded."

"Of all your men, Llywri should know me," said Bedwyr.

For a moment Pabo stood motionless under the lamp. Outside in the makeshift camp a baby was crying. A dog barked, then yelped with pain and surprise as it was silenced. The lamp flickered and the room grew darker. Something rustled in the thatch above, dislodging a shower of dust.

"The woman is alive," said Pabo with astonishment. His gaze fixed upon Bedwyr. "She is indeed alive. Regin said as much, but I thought it part of his tale. Bards are never good at truth without embellishment."

He lowered himself to the floor and sat like a huge spider, angular limbs folded about him, all elbows and knees. “My father hated her, loathed her, despised her. I was raised to do the same. Why should I help you?”

Nai frowned, and saw his expression mirrored on the faces of Llywri’s companions. Only the scarred man and Bedwyr himself seemed to grasp Pabo’s meaning.

“I am your last chance,” said Bedwyr, and smiled.

“Llywri?”

“You have nothing to lose,” said Llywri.

Pabo drew a deep breath. “Except my soul,” he murmured. “Except my soul.”

He waved a hand. “I must think on this. Llywri, find our guest a place to sleep.” His head lifted and his gaze challenged Bedwyr. “Will you allow your champion to stay awhile?”

Bedwyr tapped Nai’s shoulder. “He can decide for himself.”

“So he can,” Pabo said softly.

* * *

“I am so weary,” Pabo said when the door had closed behind the others.

“Have you eaten?”

“I have no taste for food.”

Nai raised an eyebrow, and glanced around the empty room. The lamp was nearly out of oil, the flame shrunk to a fingernail. The darkness pressed in upon him, and he thought that he too would be despondent in these surroundings.

“What lies behind the screen?”

“My bedchamber. A few stores. This was a hunting lodge, a place we used occasionally. It was an adventure to come here, to live rough for a day or so.” Pabo laughed without humour. “Different when you find yourself exiled and no hope of return.”

Nai crossed the room and pushed open the door in the partition. He could see the outline of a large couch, its coverings a jumble of furs and blankets. One wall had been shelved, and there by touch and smell he found bread and cheese, and a jar of oil.

“Will you fill the lamp?” he called.

“I do not fear the dark.”

“No,” Nai said patiently, “but I like to see what I am eating.”

He placed the jar beside Pabo and returned to the bedchamber. After a moment the light through the doorway grew brighter, and he was able to assemble a platter of food. Many of the jars held delicacies, pickled eels and dried fish in some kind of sauce, but he thought it wiser to avoid anything that might disturb his stomach again.

“He takes pleasure in killing,” remarked Pabo when Nai re-entered the room carrying the platter. “I do not think you do – not yet. If you stay with him it will grow upon you as well.” The cheese was good, of a kind he had not tasted before. After the first bite Nai realized how hungry he was, and fell ravenously upon the bread. Pabo watched with a detached amusement.

“The first duty of a lord: to feed his men.”

“I am not your man,” Nai said around a mouthful. “And it is not true, what you said.”

“Come. You have seen him fight.” Pabo broke off a corner of the loaf, crumbled a morsel of cheese, and chewed reflectively. “I know him of old.”

“You admit that he is Bedwyr?”

The bony shoulders rose in a shrug. “Yes. If Llywri accepts him, it must be true. Where has he been all these years?”

“First in a monastery in Lesser Britain, then a hermitage in southern Dumnonia.”

“And now he has returned and the killing will begin again.”

“Did it stop?”

“The heron and the crow.” Pabo tugged an earlobe. “What happened to your voice?”

Nai tilted his head to show the scar on his throat. “It was put there by a man named Eremon mab Cairbre. Angus is his kinsman.”

“Angus,” said Pabo. “This is a family affair.” He smiled at some inner joke. “Is Eremon still with us?”

“No.”

“No,” repeated Pabo.

Nai studied his face in the lamplight. The red flushes around the nostrils were less pronounced now. Despite the shock of grey hair and the white stubble in the furrows of his jaw, Pabo was younger than he seemed, probably only a few years older than Nai himself.

“Why did you want me to remain behind?”

“Ah,” said Pabo. “A misjudgement on my part, perhaps. I was serious about needing a champion, a man of reputation to stand behind me.”

“I have no reputation.”

The sorrowful eyes widened in surprise. “Oh you do. You have a reputation. Among my surviving warriors the name of Nai mab Nwython is more highly venerated than that of Bedwyr – who is after all a hero of the past. You are a living man, who slew Regin’s allies by the score. When we thought Regin our friend you were a villain, but since we were driven from Ynis Witrin” He gestured expressively.

“Overblown,” said Nai.

“What of it? Whose reputation is not?”

Curious, Nai asked: “How did Regin explain the fight at Caer Cadwy?”

“You were thieves, outlaws, who had attacked a band of innocent travellers. Discovered in your crime, you fled to Caer Cadwy, taking with you your female accomplice who had been secreted among the travellers. They determined to track you down, bring you to justice. You ambushed them, you and the deluded old man who claimed to be Bedwyr. He was very convincing. You hated him especially because the woman, who was your lover, had more than half fallen for him.”

“He has charm.”

“A great deal of charm. He is also witty, learned, urbane – all those things one does not often find outside the Church in these dying days, and even within but rarely.”

Pabo nibbled a morsel of cheese, and leant forward. “He deceived me utterly, because I wanted to be deceived. You say your reputation is overblown, and clearly you are not comfortable with it. I suspect we have something in common. I am Lord of the Summer Country because I was born to it, but I have never found it easy. You are a warrior because you too were born to it, but I would guess you look upon killing not as a joy but as an unpleasant task.”

Reluctantly, Nai nodded.

“I myself had a thousand times rather be a scholar. I would even settle for being a monk – I mean a real monk, not a man masquerading as a monk like Angus – though my ideal would have been to live in a city like Rome in her heyday, with free access to her libraries.” He smiled sadly. “A foolish daydream. Yet Regin seemed to promise some part

of that, an escape from the wearisome burden of ruling the Summer Country, of being the Heron Lord.”

He took a lump of bread and rolled it between his fingers until he had made a pellet. “As a boy I saw the body of Gwydawg mab Menestyr. You know that Bedwyr slew him in vengeance for Cei’s death? Well, he did not kill him quickly.”

“I know,” Nai said harshly.

“Do you? Do you truly?” The sorrowful eyes brimmed with tears, and his voice choked. “It was Aniel, Aniel my friend, who wanted to see the body. Even then he intended to become a warrior. Llywri had brought it back – I remember him with his face gashed open, unable to speak, scarcely able to stand, cutting the corpse loose from a pony and letting it flop to the ground at my father’s feet. He walked away without so much as a gesture, and my father, who normally would never have allowed such a slight to pass unpunished, spoke not a word. My father, you see, had been part of the plot. Even as a child I knew that, though it was a secret. They put the body in a shed for the other northerners to collect, and forbade us to go near.”

“And?” prompted Nai.

“We waited until evening. Aniel wanted to look at the wounds – he had some idea he might be able to tell the order in which they had been inflicted and thus how the strokes had been delivered. Do you understand? He thought there was some great secret to being a swordsman like Bedwyr, and that examining the corpse would give him the clue. I think he dreamed of serving Arthur, even then, though it was not a dream one dared express aloud in the Ynis Witrin of my childhood. Poor Aniel. He deserved better than Regin.” He popped the bread pellet in his mouth and chewed hard.

“We had heard from the survivors what Bedwyr had done. To me it was obvious Aniel’s idea was ridiculous, but I was curious. Llywri’s face, yes, that was horrible. But a dead man? That was fascinating, and besides, Gwydawg was a stranger. I had never seen a dead person properly, not up close.” He made a face. “I sound like a ghoul.”

“Most boys are,” said Nai, surprising himself.

“Probably.” Pabo smiled, and swallowed. “We waited till evening, crept to the shed. It was an old hut, the plaster fallen from the walls, the wicker frame half rotten. We broke a hole through the back and wriggled inside. Aniel went first. It stank.” He wrinkled his nose at the memory.

“There were flies everywhere – foul, dirty things, crawling on the floor, the walls, the roof. And the body. The body was black with them. It seemed as if Gwydawg were not dead at all, but lying in his shroud humming an incantation to restore his strength.” He shivered, rubbing his eyes. “Aniel pulled back the shroud. Flies leapt and twitched and buzzed. I would have screamed but I was too frightened.”

His fingers tore another shred from the loaf, and began to model a boat. “Aniel’s whole being mirrored his disappointment and disgust. I peered over his shoulder, saw the tattooed face smeared in dried blood, the expression of agony and anguish, the gashes across the chest and ribs. Bedwyr had carved him as one might carve a joint of meat, taking a slice here and a slice there. We could not tell in what order the blows had been delivered, nor whether they came from the front or the back, nor whether Gwydawg had been standing or lying on the ground as they fell.”

The boat became a tube. Pabo put it in his mouth and bit off the end. “Do you see now what I am trying to tell you? If you remain with Bedwyr you risk becoming like him, and I do not think you are the kind of man who can survive that. You seem to me to have a gentleness about you.”

“Really?” said Nai. “Not long ago you called me a glitter of ravens.”

“The same person can be both fierce and gentle. Is it not the mark of the hero, that he be forward in battle and retiring in the company of maidens?” He spat out the lump of bread, continuing eagerly: “Bedwyr will help me not because he has a noble heart, nor because he approves of my rule, nor for any other reason but that he wants, needs, something Angus will not give him. Join me. I do not ask you to betray him, or the woman who was once Arthur’s Queen, though I admit her fate is a matter of indifference to me. Join me. We will overthrow Angus and his brigands, and live in peace. That is what I am offering you, Nai mab Nwython: peace, the one thing you will never find in Bedwyr’s company.”

“I am already sworn to the service of Gereint mab Erbin.”

Pabo smiled. “And Gereint knows where you are now and what you are doing?”

Nai shrugged.

“Quite so. You abandoned his service last summer when you chose to take Bedwyr’s place in the hermitage at Porthyle.”

“How do you know ...?” began Nai, and cursed himself as he saw the triumph in Pabo’s eyes .

“Regin spoke of you a great deal. Too much, at times, but enough to rouse my curiosity. As I said before, you have become a man of fame. Alone, I cannot rally my household. They have no faith in me now. With you as my supporter I can do great things.”

“Bedwyr will aid you and I will aid Bedwyr.”

Pabo shook his head. “You are being foolish, Nai. Your usefulness to Bedwyr will come to an end once he and the woman have achieved their purpose at Ynis Witrin. What will you do then? I do not think you can go home, not now, not after all you have seen and done.”

“I thank you for your hospitality.” Nai stood.

“Wait!” said Pabo. He paused, struggled to his feet, and laid a hand on Nai’s arm. “Will you stay?”

Nai looked down at the bony wrist and the big fingers clutching his sleeve. He opened his mouth to refuse, said: “I thought you did not fear the dark?”

“It is not the dark I fear.” Pabo’s eyes were luminous in the lamplight. “Angus offered a reward for my head. These people – ” he indicated the world outside the lodge “ – have nothing. Not even hope. There is nobody else I can trust.”

In the silence of the night Nai heard a baby crying. He could not tell whether it was the one that had been crying earlier. To him it sounded hungry. The thatch rustled and more dirt fell from the roof as whatever small creature lived up there took advantage of the quiet to move.

“Do you have any spare bedding?” he asked. “I slept in my cloak last night.”

* * *

“I never thought we would find ourselves doing this,” said Llywri, raising the wooden goblet in a toast.

Bedwyr saluted him, tasted the rough wine. Llywri chuckled at his expression.

“We are a household in exile,” he said. “The good wines belong to Angus now.”

The fire flared. Llywri stirred it with a stick, the scar on his cheek shining red and slick. Bedwyr could see how the damage had been done: one blow with the edge of a blade to lay open the flesh; a second blow with the flat to smash the bones. Llywri was fortunate to be alive.

“Times change,” said Bedwyr, swilling the wine around the rim of the goblet. “Will you stay with him now?”

Llywri eased himself back on the soft ground, wincing as his joints cracked. “Angus has no need of me, not in the long term. In the short term my knowledge of the marshes would be useful, but once his hold upon them is unassailable – which will not be long if anything happens to Pabo – who trusts a traitor?”

“If you had not found us this morning?”

“Who knows?” The scarred man kept his gaze on the flames. “I had no clear plan. I only knew I could not abide *this* – ” a circling arm indicated the cramped island “ – any longer. It stinks of defeat. The farmer and I are kin, and we have kept in touch over the years. He is a dour man, no fool. I had hoped he might have news of Angus’s movements. Instead one of his boys warned me off.” Llywri gave an elaborate shiver. “It was a cold night on the hills.”

“What did he tell you?”

Llywri smirked lopsidedly at the fire. “That you were interesting, uncommon. That he did not think you had come by chance, but he had no idea who you were.”

“You did not see him this morning?”

“Yes. He told me you claimed to be Bedwyr. I thought him credulous. We followed you, though as it proved we need not have worried. Your companion’s illness made it easy.”

“We were not trying to travel unseen.”

“As well,” said Llywri. “You left a trail of offerings behind you.”

A log shifted in the heart of the fire and a shower of sparks cascaded up into the night. A bird called, out on the darkness of the lake. All around them the campfires glimmered and voices murmured. A dog yapped in its sleep, chasing hares.

“Is anybody keeping watch?” asked Bedwyr.

Llywri nodded. “Since what happened at Ynis Witrin we keep a careful guard. Not that I think we are in any danger at the moment. Angus will not move against us yet.”

“What did happen?”

“The bard fooled us completely. Even me, and I am suspicious by nature. He rode up the old road one day a few weeks ago – I have lost track of time but his leg was still badly bruised from the fight at Caer Cadwy – and spun us a yarn about thieves and ambushes. A killer called Nai mab Nwython and a madman who claimed to be Bedwyr had slaughtered most of his friends. There was a woman with them, who had placed herself under Regin’s protection, then betrayed them to the robbers. For fear of Nai, Regin said – and that did make me wonder a little whether he was not exaggerating his own charms, but I put it down to pride.”

“To conceit.”

“If you like. But he would not be the first man to think himself irresistible to women. Our girls liked him well enough. I doubt if he slept alone all the time he was with us.”

“And Pabo?”

“Ah, Pabo.” Llywri stretched, and topped up his wine from the leather bottle. Bedwyr shook his head, then changed his mind and held out his goblet.

“Pabo thought he was the best thing to visit Ynis Witrin in years,” Llywri continued after a moment. “Regin was cunning, you see. He did not announce that he was the son of Vortepor. He let it slip out in conversation, pretended to be embarrassed. Pabo is starved of good company. The two of them would debate the poetry of Virgil one day

and the works of – of I don't know who the next. Up until then the only other readers at Ynis Witrin had been the two hermits on the tor, and their interests were limited to the Holy Writ.”

“Everybody liked him?”

Llywri considered. “Apart from Aniel. We put it down to jealousy. They were like Achilles and Patroclus, Aniel and Pabo, inseparable from birth. When they got into trouble as boys, it was always Aniel who took the beating – Pabo was the son of Melwas, and delicate for all his height. Loyal, Aniel was, but not overly bright. Aniel thought Regin was too smooth. Kept saying he would like to hear the other side of the story – about you and Nai I mean – and if somebody was pretending to be Bedwyr, it seemed odd to try it in Caer Cadwy of all places.”

“Not so simple after all.”

“Perhaps not.” Llywri shrugged and grinned, showing the gaps in the teeth on the right of his jaw. “I still did not believe it myself, even after I saw you. Only when you spoke.” His fingers toyed with the hollow of scar tissue.

A child screamed on the far side of the island and both men stiffened, listening intently until they were sure it was only a nightmare.

“They do that most nights, the youngsters,” said Llywri. “Poor little devils. Dragged from their homes in the middle of the night, forced to flee out here in the marshes, all the adults around them plainly terrified. Enough to give anyone bad dreams. And there's always some fool ready to tell them a nightmare is a sending, a sign of the future.”

“Angus,” said Bedwyr.

“Yes, Angus.” Llywri shared the last of the bottle between them. “Nobody has attacked Ynis Witrin in my lifetime. We were careless, I suppose. We knew a group of monks had announced their intention of visiting the hermitage on the tor, and we expected them to seek lodgings with us.”

He drank deep while Bedwyr waited.

“You remember what the old house is like? Half ruined, sections added at one end while the other moulders into the ground. Over the years it has crept towards the tor. The inside is a maze unless you know your way round: rooms opening into rooms, old corridors that end in blank walls, passages that have become storage places. A stranger would be lost in moments. Regin made a point of learning the house. He was fascinated by it all, by the ruins of the cellars with their hollow pillars at one end, by the new kitchens under the tor.” His voice lowered in imitation of the bard. “So clever, so interesting, how needs and building techniques change. Our forefathers had adapted the original atrium? Ingenious! This wall was cut stone, this one wattle and plaster? Fascinating! Advantages to both of course, depending on their permanence and purpose. Again, he was convincing. He fooled me, and Pabo lapped it up. It made Pabo look at the ancestral millstone with new eyes, start to appreciate its finer qualities.”

Llywri sniffed. “Then there were the bribes. That is what did for us in the end. Like his father Melwas before him Pabo was wealthier than he seemed – there is still a fair amount of trade coming in from the Severn Sea, even now – but since he himself thought little of earthly goods, he did not distribute his wealth as he might. And we did no raiding – most of the younger men had never even fought in earnest – so there were no chances for a warrior to become rich. I don't know exactly how he did it – Regin never tried me, probably because he reckoned my price would be too high – but I can guess.” Llywri's voice dropped again. ““Ten years service and only an armllet to show for it? At my father's

court – no, no, I must not speak out of turn – Pabo is just a little unworldly, don't you find?" Llywri snorted. "You can imagine. Medraut must have been the same kind."

"He was," said Bedwyr, remembering the man who had betrayed Arthur. "Medraut, whom no king in all the world could refuse, on account of his beauty and his wisdom," he quoted.

"Exactly! That is how Regin seemed to us! And I do not doubt he bought them little by little, a small piece of gold here and a large promise there, till they were tangled in his schemes. I could have done it myself once, before."

He plucked at the side of his face, the scar angry in the firelight.

"So Regin opened the gates?" Bedwyr asked after a pause.

"The main doors of the house. The big ones, where Cei fought the Saeson. Half the guard were with him by that stage. They said the monks had arrived late, in search of shelter. Aniel was suspicious, but what was there to suspect? It was late, the light was failing. The lamps were already lit in the house. Pabo and I were together, talking about something that seems trivial now but was important at the time: fishtraps on the river. Neither of us were armed. We heard the commotion in the entrance hall, ran towards it. Wiser men would have run in the opposite direction. We thought it was just an argument between drunks. I heard a scream, knew it was serious, and tried to pull Pabo back, but by then he had taken a spear from the wall and was not to be stopped."

Llywri turned to Bedwyr, his colour rising. "He is not a coward, you know. Aniel was bellowing treachery, and these figures were coming through the doorway, creatures from outside that the bard had invited in, like wolves in their hunger and eagerness for blood, all armed with swords and shields and hacking at anybody who showed a sign of resistance. Behind them was another, an old man with a seamed face and piercing eyes that made me want to hide. He had a sword in either hand and he was working both in the air as if he were loosening his muscles before the fight. I thought I was dreaming because all of them were bald or tonsured, and most were in brown robes. They were monks, there was no mistaking that; but since monks do not behave like an invading army this could not be real. Regin backed Aniel into a corner. It was like watching a dance where one partner does not know the moves. Aniel went down so suddenly I did not see what happened. Pabo threw his spear – I think he wounded one of them – and then we ran."

"How did you escape?"

"There are ways within the house our guests are not shown. We got down into the cellars, a group of us, and crawled out through the old hypocaust under the west wing. Then we ran for the river, gathering more refugees as we went, seized what boats we could find and fled for the safety of the marshes."

Llywri tipped his goblet towards the flames, and shook his head in annoyance. "Never a drink when you need one," he mumbled. "Pabo thought of the hunting lodge. It has not been used much in his time, though his father was fond of it. Sooner or later somebody will betray us to Angus. We have to leave the island to fetch provisions – we cannot live on fish and fowl alone, especially the little children. We hear word of Angus and no doubt he hears word of us." He stared around gloomily. "At present we are a nuisance, nothing more, certainly not a threat."

"Then you must become one," said Bedwyr, rolling himself in his cloak and preparing to sleep.

"How?" demanded Llywri of the night. "How?"

* * *

In the morning Bedwyr borrowed several wooden practice blades and took Nai to the far side of the island, which though not deserted was at least less crowded.

It was early, but some of the boats were already returning across the lake with a catch of fish. Others were anchored out in the deep water, or working in pairs with nets. Few of the fishers looked particularly accomplished, and Nai guessed this was something most of them were accustomed to doing for sport rather than from necessity.

“Like feeding the five thousand,” he muttered to himself.

“In summer they could live well,” said Bedwyr. “Not at this time of year. And the further they roam in their hunting and gathering, the more obvious their presence here will become.”

The light was low and cold, the surface of the lake grey, ruffled by the wind from the sea. Gulls wheeled overhead, scavenging for rubbish, and Nai thought the birds would be another marker for the Abbot’s men if they were out searching for Pabo’s refuge.

This side of the island was cold and bleak, sliding down to the water in a desolation of mud and reeds stiffened by frost. Bedwyr found a level patch of ground not far from the rime-rimmed shore and the two of them loosened their limbs, stretching and bending.

“How far are we from the sea?” asked Nai.

“Not far,” said Bedwyr. “The lake water is brackish, but drinkable if one must. And these people must.”

The two of them set their shields on their arms and began their practice in earnest, Bedwyr demonstrating a sequence of moves without speaking, and Nai doing his best to imitate him. The difficulty lay in not thinking about the movements, in letting the body follow its own course so the actions flowed one from the other and ceased to be separate parts but became a whole. At times Bedwyr would stop and wordlessly show Nai how an individual move should be made; Nai would repeat it and repeat it until he had it right (signalled by the briefest of nods from the older man) and then they would revert to the whole sequence, over and over again.

“Repetition, endless repetition,” Bedwyr had once said. “Drill the moves into your body so you do not need to think. At first you will find it dull, mindlessly boring, but it is exactly that mindlessness you need in combat. If you try to think you will be dead. You must act, and your body must know precisely what to do without being told. The gap between thinking and acting is what kills people.” He held up his damaged left hand. “It is what gave me this. I sacrificed my hand to save my life, but it should not have been necessary. You will come to hate me as I teach you, yet think on this: if all these hours of work save your life a single time, they will have been worthwhile.”

It was true, Nai had come to hate the older man in his role of teacher, or at least to resent him. He had spent a bad night in the hunting lodge, listening to Pabo snoring in the other room and wondering whether an assassin was going to burst across the main threshold at any moment, only slipping into sleep when he heard others stirring outside. He suspected Pabo’s fears were well founded; he also suspected it would be several days before the assassin nerved him- or herself to the task. And by then, he hoped, he would be long gone.

Bedwyr’s tap on the door had come far too early, dragging him from a dream of Seradwen showing him around the farm that was now the property of her late husband’s kin. ‘The horse herd is still mine,’ she had been saying, and he had understood her to mean it was the herd which provided the farm with its prosperity, and that she was therefore a woman of wealth, that the two of them need have no concern for the future. But he had

also heard Pabo's voice, coming from the air and the land itself, crying mournfully: 'You cannot go home again.'

And in his dream he had remembered the words Angus had spoken, when he and Seradwen had been the Abbot's guests at the monastery on the high moors of Dumnonia: "We can none of us go home. The world moves around us, Nai. We cannot go back. Have you not discovered that yet?"

Bedwyr's morning cheerfulness had been hard to deal with, as had the older man's insistence that since they had missed the previous day's practice they must make up for it today. As they crossed the island they gathered an audience of small boys and idlers, which added to Nai's ill temper. His scowls did nothing to discourage them; if anything, they seemed to make the crowd grow.

"Ignore them," said Bedwyr. "They will soon wander off when they see what we are about."

When they stopped for a rest, sweating in the cold air, Nai saw that he had been right. Most of the crowd had gone: those who remained had the look of fighting men themselves, though a few children still sat on a nearby hillock, no doubt avoiding being set to work by their elders.

The bubble-blower was one who had stayed. He grinned and waved when he saw Nai had noticed him.

Nai still could not decide whether the man was half-witted or incredibly shrewd; either way, the fellow had terrified him yesterday, and Nai reckoned the man was well aware of it.

"Now we fight," said Bedwyr. "First though, tell me how you would deal with a man with two swords."

"Two?" said Nai. He rubbed his neck, perplexed.

"Few practise with their shield hand, which is why I have made you do so – though not today in front of strangers. Your friend with the bubbling eyes is fascinated by us, by the way. Remember what I said? For every once you do an exercise with the right hand, you do it ten times with the left."

"And most people won't bother?" Nai said thoughtfully. "But you cannot count on that. If a man came at me with a sword in either hand, I'd assume he knew what he was doing."

The wind from the water was cold, and the warmth he had built earlier was fading.

Bedwyr smiled. "Yes. You would be wise to do so."

"I have a shield and a blade? I could use one to block each. I'd have to." Nai was thinking aloud. "If he can use both swords at the same time instead of one after the other he can attack from either side, or high and low. If I had a second weapon, like a war-knife, I could draw and keep it covered by the shield."

"You could," said Bedwyr. "And if you had no shield?"

"Anything. A cloak around the arm. Or pure speed, I suppose, though I doubt one could sustain it for long."

The older man nodded. "I regret I cannot show you how a master would wield two blades." He held up his damaged hand and smiled ruefully. "This will not allow me to grip anything for longer than a few heartbeats. But remember!" He lifted a finger in admonition. "The shield moves as the sword. You attack with the shield as well – the rim, the boss. Your purpose is to put your opponent down, now!"

And with the 'now' he launched his attack, Nai springing to meet him, the wooden blades clacking furiously.

“Meet force with force,” shouted Bedwyr. “You can’t stop my sword by just holding out your own!” His blade swept Nai’s aside and clouted the younger man in the ribs.

Nai could not understand how Bedwyr could seem to move so slowly yet always be ahead of his opponent. He himself floundered, panting, whipped his sword wildly from place to place in an attempt to catch the other off guard, while Bedwyr drifted, floated, danced, never hurried. Sometimes the dance was bottom-heavy, almost clumsy; other times it was high and graceful. Always it was perfectly poised, as Nai knew to his cost, having more than once tried to use his greater height and weight to shove Bedwyr off balance. It was like pushing a granite pillar, and no more effective.

“Meet force with force,” Bedwyr shouted again. “Don’t dab at it, Nai, or I’ll brush past you.”

“Aye, don’t dab, Nai,” called the bubble-blower.

“The spectators offer advice!” said Bedwyr. “Perhaps we should offer them a bout.”

He often did this, talked while they fought. The purpose, Nai had quickly realized, was to distract: to occupy that part of the mind which sat behind the eyes and so free the body to act without conscious direction. (Whatever some philosophers were rumoured to have said about the seat of consciousness being the heart, Nai knew the part of him which did the thinking, was most vitally and importantly *him*, lived at the front of his head, just above the nose.)

“Why are you laughing?” demanded Bedwyr.

“Nothing,” said Nai.

“Tell me,” said Bedwyr, his blade a blur as it thundered on Nai’s shield.

“I live above my nose.”

Bedwyr blinked, and in that moment Nai side-stepped, slipping out from under the attack, and caught him in the leg.

“Yes!” roared Bedwyr. He flung the wooden sword high in the air and embraced Nai, pulling him close and pounding him on the back.

The boys on the hillock cheered and whistled, then disappeared towards the main encampment. One by one the others followed, sensing the entertainment was finished, until at the end a solitary figure was left watching from by the water. He waited while they unbuckled their shields, then strolled towards them, grinning innocently.

“I liked that,” he said. “Can you teach me?”

Bedwyr wiped his forehead with a sleeve. “What is your name?”

The eel grin broadened, revealing the pointed yellow teeth. The bubble-blower was younger than Nai had thought, though not so young as his manner might suggest. He was desperately nervous, his hands visibly trembling; he thrust them behind his back and straightened under Bedwyr’s gaze.

“Racwant.”

“Racwant. ‘Retaliator.’ A good name for a warrior,” acknowledged Bedwyr. “Are you Llywri’s man?”

“I am.” The man shuffled his feet, frowned. “I have served him since I was a boy. But I am also one of Pabo’s warband.”

“Of course.”

“Lately Aniel was teaching me things.”

“What manner of things?”

“How to fight as he did.” Racwant tugged at the heron feathers in his hair. “He was faster than you, or at least he seemed to be. You move more easily.” He paused, embarrassed.

“Yet I am old?” said Bedwyr, quirking an eyebrow.

“Not young.”

Bedwyr tossed him one of the wooden blades. “Show me.”

For a moment Racwant stood clutching the practice sword as if he had never seen such a thing before. Then he turned to face them both and began to move, shuffling from foot to foot as he made the blade come alive. Watching, Nai could see that many of his movements were larger and clumsier than they needed to be, and he marvelled at how far he himself had improved under Bedwyr’s tuition. Two months ago he would have rated Racwant a dangerous opponent; now he saw the weaknesses inherent in the bubble-blower’s actions, and how to exploit them.

“Aniel died,” Racwant said as he wove the wooden blade around him. “The bard killed him. I was on guard that night. That is how I escaped: I wasn’t in the main house or the Warriors’s Hall.”

He slowed, letting the wooden sword hand hang loose in his hand. “I saw it, through the doorway. The bard cut him to pieces.”

“And therefore you fear everything Aniel taught you is useless?” said Bedwyr.

“Not just me,” protested Racwant. “All of us, all of us who were part of Pabo’s warband. That is why so few fled with us. We thought more might join us, but they have not. They have gone over to Angus. For a warband to prove faithless, that is bad.”

“Nobody expects a warband to fight on after its leader has fallen or left the field. You were caught unawares, without a leader once the champion was slain.” Bedwyr frowned, and added more gently: “Aniel’s defeat does not make him a bad teacher. What he taught you is good, though it does not yet flow naturally for you.”

“There is no strength in us,” said Racwant. “No hope. Pabo is no warrior, Llywri too old and too filled with cunning for any to trust him. If we fight, we will fight men with whom we ate, drank and trained, our back-to-back comrades, men who have gone over to this monk and his bard. It is bad, bad all round.”

Bedwyr took the second practice sword and twisted it through the air with such sinuous grace and beauty that Racwant stood open mouthed, forgetting his plaint.

“It is bad, yes,” said Bedwyr, his voice shearing the sudden silence. “But it could be worse. Gather your surviving comrades and tell them to meet me here this afternoon. Cowering in this marsh will achieve nothing. It is past time the men of the Summer Country began to fight back.”

Racwant’s face twisted as he tried to understand. “Lord, are you saying you will lead us?”

Bedwyr smiled. “A long while since I led men to war. Much depends on Pabo. But I shall not abandon you, I promise you that.”

* * *

Shivering a little in the cold wind blowing off the lake, Nai waited until Racwant had departed, eager to be about his errand. The sun was struggling to break through the low grey cloud, but the ice on the shore showed no signs of melting.

“What do you plan?”

“We need a fighting force,” said Bedwyr. “Glewlwyd’s kin are too few. The spirit of these people is broken, but it could be mended if they knew they did not fight alone.”

He peered across the lake at the boats wheeling in the water; one had tipped so far over in the wind that it seemed it must capsize.

“We give them three days.” The bushy eyebrows twitched as he regarded Nai. “Can you bear it?”

The boat righted slowly. The oar blades gleamed and frothed white in the water as the panicked crew made for the island.

“I can bear it,” said Nai.

“After three days, we will return to Gwenhwyvar. She will guide us to the place she has hidden the chalice.”

Seradwen, thought Nai. Although it had been his idea to leave, he missed her more than he had thought possible.

“And Seradwen.” Bedwyr patted his arm. “You did not intend to stay out this long, I know, but if we go now these people will think themselves abandoned.”

“Glewlwyd’s kin and Pabo’s folk.” Nai spoke slowly, mulling the words in his mind. “Even together, will they be enough?”

Bedwyr shrugged. “They will have to be. We have no more.”

“Our purpose is to drive Angus from Ynis Witrin?”

“And restore Pabo, so that we may have free access to the tor, without fear of interruption. And yes, like you, I am not sure we have sufficient strength. But I have no other answers, Nai. The days are long gone when men would rally to my call.”

Nai made to reply, saw the worry on Bedwyr’s face, and was silent.

CHAPTER TWELVE

The old woman hesitated before entering the ruins, glancing back at the distant figure of Eurgain climbing the hill. Something had frightened the sheep and she did not think the girl was wise to investigate by herself. On the other hand the rain was falling hard, soaking her cloak which had long ago ceased to be waterproof, and in any case, she doubted she would be of any help if there were trouble. Once perhaps, but not now.

She cast her mind out, trying to sense danger. She could hear the rain falling, the sheep bleating, birds calling from within the forest, nothing more, and she was left none the wiser. Her powers had gone, used up, and there was an end to it. To pretend otherwise was foolishness and vanity. The child would either live or die, and nothing she could do would make any difference.

Her fire was almost out. She raked the glowing ashes together and laid kindling on top. The cauldron she had scavenged from the ruins was waiting, half filled with water. She pulled a stone from the fireplace with the sticks she kept for that purpose, checked to see if it was still hot enough, knocked away the worst of the ash, and dropped it into the cauldron. The water began to bubble.

She added a handful of herbs from the bundle Eurgain had brought her and a few shrivelled vegetables. Sometimes she longed for meat or fish, but Wermund was not that generous. Chicken would have been pleasant. The Saesons kept chickens, scrawny-looking birds she was sure were poor layers. Better in her pot.

The fire was going well. There was a hunk of bread in the bundle. No butter, but a lump of cheese, the rind green and black with mould. She dipped the bread in the lukewarm water and chewed contentedly. She was warm, she was dry – fairly dry, anyway – and she had food. Her needs had become simpler as she aged.

After a while she dropped a second stone into the pot, peering cautiously at the water level. The cauldron was cracked, which was why it had been abandoned, but as long as one did not fill it too full it was perfectly adequate. The water was bubbling nicely now, and she could smell the roots cooking. Her stomach rumbled.

Something moved outside, something big and heavy.

She scooted into a corner, fumbling for her knife. The blade was not large but it was sharp.

“Who’s there?” she called.

The undergrowth rustled loudly. Stone clattered on stone, thudded to the ground. Whatever it was, it was coming in from the far side, working its way through the ruined walls. Another stone fell, with an impact she could feel through the earth. Her grip tightened on the knife. She glanced down and saw how flimsy it was: good for peeling vegetables but not much else. Against a sword or a war-knife the blade would be useless.

Odd to end like this, nameless and unknown in strange place. The girl might regret her passing, if the girl still lived, but no one else would mourn for her. Wermund would be relieved, and the Saeson women would be gleeful.

A flush of anger spread through her and she fought to her feet. “Who’s there?” she cried again. “Who disturbs my peace?” She tried to put some dignity into her voice, a little of the mastery which had allowed her to dominate her unruly people.

A tremendous snorting and grunting followed her words. A heavy sandy head poked into the shelter.

“Moch!” she exclaimed. “Pig!”

The beast snorted amiably and nosed toward the cauldron. She dropped the knife and jumped forward, only just in time to save the meal.

“Where did you come from?”

The small calculating eyes flickered over her. The body, huge in these confined quarters, shifted in her direction, forcing her into the corner. She seized a stick, intending to beat the animal away, then saw it meant no harm and used the stick to scratch its back instead.

The pig grunted happily.

Later, when the rain had stopped, a shadow appeared beyond the fire. She was eating, every movement watched by the pig, which had somehow taken possession of the corner.

“Come in,” she said, perfectly calm now. “I wondered if it was you.”

The old man shambled through the opening, looked round him suspiciously. He sniffed the air, clearly did not like what he smelled, and sat as close to the entrance and the fresh air as he could manage.

“He’s not my pig,” she said mildly. “Are you hungry?”

Moccus wafted a hand before his face, wrinkling his nose.

“The hungry cannot afford to be fussy.” She dipped a chunk of bread in the cauldron, held it out to him. The pig sighed, and closed its eyes.

Moccus stared at the offering, reached out a hand, hesitated.

“Go on,” she urged.

He made a noise deep in his throat.

“It’s me,” she said patiently. “You remember. Eat if you wish.” She laid the bread on the edge of the hearth and settled back into her place.

“I had forgotten what is like to be hungry,” she said conversationally. “When I was young I missed a meal or two. Sometimes I fasted for the good of my soul. But I was never worried about where the next one was coming from. There was a bad year, I recall, when I was on the cusp between being a child and being a woman. The salmon did not run, the crops failed and the deer wandered so far afield our hunters could not find them. But I was not yet an adult, and the burden fell upon the adults, not on me. They would always make sure we were fed, whatever the cost to themselves.”

She poked the fire with the stick she had used to scratch the pig. Moccus had taken the bread and held it against his mouth though he had not yet bitten.

“The babies did not do so well,” she continued. “Nor did the younger children. They fed us because we were on the verge of being useful. There is a word for it, like what surgeons do for armies after a battle. You remember? They cannot cope with everyone, so they say – ” she deepened her voice “ – this one will die anyway, this one is so minor it makes no difference, this one stands a chance if we treat him quickly.”

He grimaced, chewing on the crust.

“Those of us who are not surgeons and do not have to deal with dozens of wounded face different choices. We must decide whether to save a life or to let it go. If we are vain and foolish women who know better than our elders, we will sometimes preserve where it would have been kinder to have let it slip away.”

Moccus was engrossed in the crust. She ran her hands through her coarse grey hair. Behind her the pig twitched in its sleep.

“Some of us believe that any life is better than none. We are the ones who are so certain of ourselves we think it right to interfere, because we can, and because not to act would be to abrogate all responsibility.”

For all the interest he showed she might as well have been talking to herself.

“The lives we save are not the lives we have to live. Now I can understand a little, because I am old and the years have taken their toll. But only a little. My aches and pains are minor. When I was younger the choice seemed no choice at all. Not to help an injured man would be a denial of everything I believed. Yet if someone had said to me, you may die here and now in your youth, or live on in terrible pain for another twenty or thirty years, I wonder which I would have chosen?”

She laughed. The pig snuffled to itself.

“Sounds like the warrior’s choice. A short life and everlasting fame, or a long life and obscurity. The Greek Achilles, the Irish Cuchulain, they were both offered the same and they both chose the same. But nobody ever asked you, did they?”

Of a sudden his shape across the fire blurred. “I am sorry,” she choked. “I am sorry.” She put her hands to her face and was quiet.

His grip on her wrists was very strong. He prised her hands apart, caught a teardrop on a finger, held it to the firelight so it sparkled with all the colours of the rainbow, then put it to his lips and tasted.

His smile was beautiful.

Darkness had fallen before she spoke again. He lay propped on his side, a handful of old bones and rags, while she watched the eager flames, listening to their voices telling of long ago battles and old woes. She saw a proud woman riding among a host of great warriors, spear points flashing and banners tossing. At the head of the host rode a man with auburn hair, and as she watched in the flames she saw power and majesty descend upon him.

“Arthur,” she murmured, and the old man shifted uneasily.

The voices of the flames wove together, became voices she knew: a man with a gloved left hand sitting at a game board talking of kings and their heirs; another, huge and fair, challenging a stranger to wrestle at the gates of a fortress and the stranger refusing; the first man again, this time standing at the foot of a green mound casting defiance at the shock haired giant on its summit.

“I should not have interfered,” she said. “But if I had not ...” She shook the dazzle of images from her head, straightened and turned to her guest.

“I sought you,” she said. “After you left and I myself was cast out I sought you through the mountains of the north, through the forests and the moors, on the shores of the lochs and in the river valleys, down the long trackways and in the isolated holdings where they snarl suspicion at every stranger. I found not a trace of your passing, not a hint, not a rumour. It was as if you had never existed. I thought you must have died that first winter, that your bones lay undiscovered on a forgotten hillside, and I searched again, thinking to find your remains and bury them by the rites of your people. But there was nothing. You

had vanished out of the world. I wept for you – and for myself, who had failed in even this simple task, to keep you safe.”

He grunted and moved, so that she could see the deformity of his hip.

“How did you survive, you who are so utterly without power? You moved across this land like a ghost, casting no shadow, no reflection. I summoned what little skill remained to me, scried for you in the still waters, read the entrails among the standing stones, hoping at least to discover the manner of your death. Others hunted me: some for the sake of ancient injuries, now that I was weak; more because I was an old woman alone, easy prey. I survived because I am old and cunning, because I can still assume the trappings of power even if the force burned out long ago. But you, you did not even have that to protect you. How did you live?”

She glanced behind her at the pig, whiffling in its dreams.

“And you saddled yourself with a creature still more vulnerable than yourself. Why were you not robbed and beaten on your journey? These are dangerous lands for an old man and a walking meal, you know that. Even in the days of Arthur such temptation would not have gone unpunished. This is the very time of year when people slaughter the pigs they have so carefully nurtured, and for months the woods have been alive with warriors hunting the wild boar.”

His face twisted in the firelight and he coughed, shaking the frail web of cloth and bone that was his body.

“The girl from the Saeson hall asked me if I were a ghost the other day. What would she make of you, I wonder? If I undressed you I think you would fade away like moonshine, dissolve into the shadows.” She shook her head despairingly. “How did you survive? How did you walk the length of Prydein unharmed?”

He smiled at her, his lips curving under the tangle of beard.

“Powerless,” she said in wonder. “That is how you did it. Your very weakness was your strength. You slipped by unnoticed. Even the brigands of the road ignored you as beneath their dignity. You had nothing and therefore you had everything.” She laughed, a harsh sound above the crackling of the fire. “I should have known you would survive. After all, you have survived everything else.”

PART II

The hall was busy with strangers, big rough spoken men from the lands of the Gewisse by the sea, come in answer to Wermund's call. At first Eurgain had worried about Bolanus, already terrified by the Wermundings. If she found these newcomers frightening, it must be a thousand times worse for him. But soon she saw he had been adopted as a kind of mascot, under the protection of Wermund and old Guthlaf, for whom these men seemed to have an exaggerated respect. Indeed, she noticed that many of the strangers were more interested in greeting Guthlaf than Wermund, though the latter was to be their leader, the one to whom they would swear their oaths of loyalty.

For her part she kept out of the newcomers' way, staying close to the shadows or to Ceolric. Seeing him among these big men she realized afresh how much he had filled out since she had first met him: he was the largest man in the hall, and the strangers treated him accordingly.

"So," said Guthlaf one evening as she and Ceolric sat in their usual place by the wall. "Your man means to make us all worship his god, eh?"

He nodded at Bolanus, who was arguing some point with a newcomer not too proud to speak the Weala tongue.

"He is not my man," answered Eurgain as Guthlaf settled himself on the bench beside her.

"No, perhaps not," he agreed. "He has an old fashioned way of talking, though. Can you follow him, Ceolric?"

"His speech or his teachings? In his speech he reminds me of the men of Londinium. They too never used a short word when they could find three long ones."

"And his teachings?"

Ceolric shrugged. "I do not know. Wermund thinks it womanly nonsense, but a friend of ours was a Christian, and he was the least womanly man I have ever met."

"This would be one of the Wealas who fought beside you against the Scotti?"

"Yes. I suppose they were all Christians, though I was thinking of the hermit Budoc."

"Gorthyn was a man who lived in the here and now," said Eurgain.

"Most warriors are when they are young." Guthlaf tugged his beard. "You, young lady, are not of this faith?"

She laughed. "No. It was not for the likes of us. Our gods were little gods, the gods of the holy wood above the village. Bolanus talks of a master of all, a maker of the world. Our gods were of the world, not outside it."

"And ours are subject to Weird," murmured Guthlaf.

"What is this Weird?" asked Eurgain. "I have heard you mention it before."

"Fate, which rules all things," he answered. "And the end of all things is death. No triumph or happiness, however great, can last. It is not in our power to control our lot; our virtue lies in our strength to suffer and endure. Nobody can escape their Weird, not even the gods, for they too shall pass. All we can do is accept what Weird deals us without flinching. The coward bemoans his fate and is trampled in the mud; the brave man stands true and lives after his death in the hearts and memories of his comrades."

"A grim creed," she said. "Our gods were kindly."

“Kindly?” he exclaimed. “What has kindness to do with it? We are born, we endure, we die. We are like the logs on yonder fire. Some of us flare brightly and are quickly consumed; some burn with a long and steady flame; some flicker sulkily, giving out clouds of smoke and small heat. Yet we all come to ash in the end. If we are both brave and lucky our deeds may live on after we are gone. There is no hope in all the world, and the very gods are fickle.”

“You have thought deeply upon this,” Ceolric said gently.

Guthlaf’s features were grim. “I said a warrior when young does not dwell upon such matters. His arms are strong, his blade is sharp, and the morrow brings what the morrow brings. For old men it is different. Hareth and I talked often here before the fire. We knew our last days were upon us, and though it was good to be sitting in the midst of warmth and plenty, there was sorrow too, for with our passing the memory of the sights we had seen and the deeds we had wrought would also pass.” He clucked his tongue. “A pity he did not live a while longer. He would have liked to see the men of the Gewisse coming to your brother’s aid, coming because we had summoned them.”

“We?” said Ceolric, leaning forward.

A slow smile spread across Guthlaf’s face. “We. Hareth and I. Cerdic Elesing, king of the Gewisse, owes us a debt.”

“Tell us,” said Ceolric.

Guthlaf laughed. “It is a long story, and your lady would not believe me. She doubts my tales already.”

“Only the bit about the tiny cattle,” she said primly.

“The cattle! I tell you the cattle at home were dwarfs compared with yours. Waist height!” He held a hand above the floor to demonstrate.

“What was it like in Frisia?” asked Ceolric. “I have never seen it.”

“Cold and wet,” said Guthlaf. “You mentioned Londinium earlier. I was there once, and I met a learned man who asked me about my birthplace. He told me something one of the Romans had written in a book, long before either of us was born. I was so struck by it I tried to memorize it.”

He closed his eyes, and recited: “‘The tide floods the earth twice in every day, raising the eternal question: are these regions of the land or of the sea. The people dwell upon high mounds, built with their own hands above the reach of the highest tides. When the waters cover all they are like sailors on board a ship; but they are more like shipwrecked men when the sea goes out, and they chase after the fish receding with the tide. They dig up the peat with their own hands and dry it, more in the wind than the sun, and then with it cook their food and warm their bodies benumbed by the north wind. Their only drink is rain water, which they collect in holes dug at the entrance to their huts. Yet these people, if conquered by the Romans, would call it slavery!’”

Opening his eyes, he beamed with delight. “There! After all these years I can remember it yet. I do not say I am word perfect, mind, and it has been rendered from Latin to British to Frisian so something may have been lost, but his meaning is clear. He thought we were savages, that old Roman with his toga and his stone house. He thought we would be better off under Roman rule, except we were too stupid to see it. Well, where is he now? Where is he, and where is his eternal city?” Triumphant, he pounded the seat with a clenched fist.

“His words live,” Eurgain said gently.

Guthlaf's face clouded. "True." He brightened again. "Those of us who have not his knack of writing must make do with what we can find. Listen, and I will tell you of how it was when I was young."

For all his confidence he was pleading, begging them to listen, and Eurgain understood that he was afraid, afraid of the great dark into which he must shortly travel, desperate to give meaning to his life by passing on his story. So she did listen, then and on other nights, while around them the hall prepared for war.

2

I held the ship at a distance from the shore, clear of the cross currents, so we sat riding the long swells like a swan. Gwydawg stood beside me, legs braced against the motion, and for the first time I saw doubt in him.

"What do you think?" he asked.

The dusk was rising from the land, though it was still light out on the water. The coastline was already blurring: the headland to our east that marked the end of the beach was merging into the evening mist, and I could no longer make out the distinctive pattern of rocks in the shape of a pig's snout we had used as a guide.

"We wait for darkness and the tide," I said. "Once it is true night there will be nobody about."

"And if we have been seen?" He shivered in the chill wind.

I shrugged. "Then we fight, or run."

Our ship was of the old style: long, lean, and low to the water. We had unstepped the mast for the last part of the voyage, using the oars alone, and it seemed unlikely to me that anybody would have seen us.

"We have friends ashore, Elesa and I," said Gwydawg, telling me again what I already knew. As ever his voice was expressionless, as if he had learned each phrase by rote and had no idea what the words meant. "They will help us stay hidden until the time comes to strike. We will not need the boat."

The surf flared against the darkness of the beach. The men leant against their oars, holding the ship steady. I glanced at his face, unreadable under the spiral tattoos.

"How do we leave afterwards?" I asked.

"Do you wish to?" He smiled faintly. "There is nothing for you in Frisia."

"You want me to come with you?"

My surprise must have been obvious, for he turned and stared at me. I dropped my gaze, still unable to meet his eyes for any length of time.

"You choose," he said. "Keep the boat if you wish, though where you will find men to work her I know not." He bared his teeth, and again I saw how pointed they were. "Or accompany me. Your kinsman Hareth is with us, and you seem to have a liking for Elesa."

I frowned. I had thought to guard the ship until the others returned, but now Gwydawg was telling me they would not be back.

"I came with you as a shipmaster," I said. "Not as a warrior."

"If you are afraid then stay with the boat," he answered. "What you do when we are gone is of your choosing. It will be lonely on the shore with only the gulls for company."

He laughed, and I saw he had intended this all along, that I should go with them.

“Very well,” I said after a while.

“You are wise.” Gwydawg stared towards the breakers. “You had best speak with Elesa. He will not be surprised.”

Through the keel I felt the change in the swell as the tide began to run. The ship lifted, fought against the strength of the crew.

“Hold her!” I shouted, and gave control of the ship to Osric. Then I walked between the benches till I reached Elesa at his oar.

“Not long,” I said as I squatted beside him.

He glanced over his shoulder. “You have done well.”

“We are not ashore yet.”

“True.” He leant on the oak shaft of his oar. “What will you do once we are on land?”

“Come with you.”

Elesa raised an eyebrow. “I had wondered,” he said softly. “So, so. Why not? As Gwydawg has no doubt told you, there is nothing for you in Frisia.” His nostrils twitched. “You will be the least of us once we are ashore, you understand that? Even your kinsman Hareth will of necessity stand higher. We have trained together and you have not.”

“Are you saying there is no place for me?” I asked.

His face was serious. “No, I am not saying that. I will find you a place. I am merely warning you that you will go from being the shipmaster to being – ” He took a hand from the oar and waved it in the air. “If I tell the men to make a shield wall, each of them knows where he should stand. If I bid them form a wedge, then each knows his neighbour and can arrive beside him quickly and quietly, without confusion. You must do likewise, but since you did not train with us, you must take the hindmost position.”

“The boy’s place,” I said with a flash of humour.

“Yes,” he said, unsmiling. “It is all that remains.”

“So be it.”

“Good.” He turned again to his oar, let it trail across the pale surface of the water. “I am glad.”

The long breakers creamed and broke upon the shadowy shore. It was very quiet now, apart from the creak and groans of the ship, and we spoke softly, aware of how sound travels on water. The cliffs at the eastern end of the bay had faded into the haze of night. I could feel the currents tugging at our keel, pulling us towards the surf.

“It is time,” I said. “Will you change with Dunnere? I want your strength on the steering oar.”

He nodded, rose and pushed past me, hesitated. “We do not need to keep her alive,” he said, meaning the ship.

I stared at him until he dropped his eyes and went aft.

Osric gave the crew the beat to start them, and they picked up the stroke and drove the ship forward as if we were racing against unseen opponents, racing against the white horses of the sea herself.

Gwydawg came to stand beside me. “It was said of your ancestors that in their haste to reach the shore and be about their business of looting they would deliberately wreck their ships.”

I laughed. “I have heard that. It sounds like a boast to me, or someone’s reply to a foolish question.”

He frowned, not understanding.

“If I were wrecked upon a strange shore, and I were asked why I had arrived as I did, what do you think I would say?”

“That you were storm driven?” His frown deepened.

“Never mind,” I murmured.

The ship shuddered as the white water took her. Spray burst over the bows, drenched us. The great muscles of Elesa’s arms leapt and writhed as he fought to hold her bows against the dangerous cross currents of the bay, which could easily capsize us if things went badly. I shouted orders to the rowers, using their power first on one side then the other to keep her steady. I could hear the hiss and drag of the surf on shingle. Twice her bottom touched, too soon unless we were to be pounded to pieces; twice she lurched free once more, hurling herself at the beach as if she knew this was her final voyage and was determined to end in glory.

At last the breakers took her and lifted her high into the darkness. Beside me Gwydawg staggered and would have fallen had I not grabbed his arm. She came down with an impact that shook the teeth in my head, and I felt rather than heard the sound of her timbers cracking.

“Now!” I shouted above the roar of the surf. “Third watch over the side!”

They had been waiting for my signal and were moving before I had finished the order, leaping over the bow with long ropes in their hands to pull her up the beach before she lost all way. The keel rasped on the pebbles, began a hoarse scream that rose to a long shrieking moan. Elesa raised the steering oar free of its tackle so it would not drag on the shingle, stood cradling it in his arms while the ship sang her death song around him, the wind catching his hair and whipping it around his face.

“Guthlaf! I salute you!” he shouted.

My face was wet when we gathered our supplies and went ashore.

* * *

This was more than twenty years ago. In those days Arthur’s grip on what he was pleased to call the realm of Albion was tightening with every passing moon. He brought peace to the war-torn isle of Britain, which was good for the farmers and the traders, but not so good for those like me who sought to win fame and glory with the edge of a blade.

My kinsman Hareth and I had tried trading, carrying lava quernstones from the Rhineland to the Wolf-children of the East Angles, but our ship was wrecked with heavy loss. We went home to East Frisia, to our kin there, and our welcome was not warm.

East Frisia is a hard land. The winters are harsher there than here, and the three-aisled halls on their mounds are dwellings not only for men but also the cattle, which are brought under cover during the bad weather. The soil is thin and tired, more sand than earth, and prone to flooding from the sea. The sea eats away at the islands along the coast, and further inland lie moors and marshes. Famine is common, yet the people grow ever greater in number, while others press upon our borders: the Hetware, the Heathobards, the Myrgings, the Swefians, the Scyldings, and our kinsmen the West Frisians and their Frankish overlords.

Only Britain across the sea, Britain with her fertile soil and mild winters, Britain with her half-empty cities brooding across her sunlit fields, offered any hope. And now Arthur had closed that hope to us.

We went hungry that winter. The very old and the very young sickened and died. My brothers and their wives looked at me with resentment as another mouth. To Hareth and to me it seemed our god, Fosite of the Pillar, Lord of the Ocean, had abandoned us. In

our pride we refused to make sacrifice to him, and thereafter we were blamed for every ill that befell our families.

Finally, as the wild geese flew north in the spring, word came of two strangers visiting the Isle of Bulls, the holy isle where none dwell save twelve priests of Fosite and the cattle sacred to the god. According to the rumour, these strangers were gathering men for a raid upon Britain.

Though Hareth and I were out of favour with the god (and the god with us) we knew at once that we must go. I was better than most at handling a ship and had sailed the coasts of Britain, while Hareth was a skilled warrior.

Our kinfolk encouraged us to go, glad to be rid of us and the ill luck we carried in our wakes. They gave us a small boat for our journey, and so on a wet and windy day we came to the Isle of Bulls, which some call the Amber Isle.

Hareth muttered something under his breath as we brought our craft gliding into the anchorage under the shadow of the cliffs. I looked ahead and saw two figures waiting for us on the strand. The first was a big man, one of the largest I had ever seen. The second was not tall but very broad. The wind threw rain and sea spray into my eyes, and as I blinked to clear them it seemed to me that the second man had no face, only a blur of green under a shock of black hair.

We landed our craft and the shorter man came towards us, looming large across the pebble beach while we waited by the boat. The green blur became a pattern of spiral lines. He bared his teeth in a grin, and I swallowed, tasting salt mingled with the copper flavour of my fear. I could not move, held even as the young thrush is held by the dance of the hunting stoat.

“Welcome,” he said. “I am Gwydawg mab Pedrylaw Menestyr.”

His eyes were dead, black as cinders, with not a hint of feeling in their depths; cold eyes that could swallow a man’s soul and not be warmed.

“You will join us,” he said.

I bowed my head, not daring to meet his gaze for fear it would strip the flesh from my bones.

The sound of feet on the shingle freed me from the spell. “I am Elesa son of Esla,” said the big man. “Your boat will be safe here. Come then, and meet those others who have answered our call.”

By his voice he was one born in Britain. There is a difference in the accent and the choice of words, caused, I suppose, by the fact that in Britain many different peoples live cheek by jowl, Frank and Saxon and Dane all muddled in together instead of in their separate territories. Even in my lifetime the language has changed, become simpler, for not only must we talk to each other but also to the Wealas who are often slow of understanding.

Elesa led us up the cliff to their camp, and as we went I asked him many questions, talking hard to keep Gwydawg at bay. Soon I discovered that Elesa’s kindred were known to me: they were the Gewisse of eastern Britain. (Yes, that makes you start, but hear me out.) Long ago, in the time of Ambrosius or perhaps even earlier, they were given land around the higher reaches of River Rhee, that they might keep watch upon the Iclingas of East Anglia. In those far off days the Iclingas were a fierce and proud race, much given to raiding the soft cities and farms of the neighbouring Britons. Arthur broke their power when I was a boy, so now the memory of them has almost faded from the land, but for a time they were dangerous, and Elesa’s forefathers had been set to guard against them.

The crew Gwydawg and Elesa had gathered about them were trained fighters, drawn by the scent of the gold the priests of Fosite promised to any who answered the summons. They were fierce and dangerous men, each with some flaw that made him unloved by his own folk. Dunnere, for example, was said to have slain his brother in a quarrel over a woman, while Otta had fallen out with his lord's heir over the division of spoils from a raid.

Elesa made himself their master from the first. When Otta challenged his authority, dallying after being given an order, Elesa beat him senseless with his bare hands. Thereafter the crew followed him like dogs, and by the end of the first week he had them acting and moving as one.

Our last day on the island was a warm one. Elesa led us on a run around the coast to build our stamina before the voyage, and at the end of it we slumped upon the turf and stripped off our shirts.

"Have you seen his back?" whispered Hareth.

"The tattoos?" I said, thinking he meant Gwydawg, whose whole body was covered, from his wrists to his ankles. Many people paint some part of their skin, but I had never before seen a man half naked who still seemed fully clothed. His torso was a greenish blue, the colour of the sea off the southern coast of Britain on a sunny summer day.

"No, Elesa," Hareth said impatiently. "The scars from the lash. He has been a slave at some time, you mark my words."

I frowned, for it did not seem likely to me.

Then Elesa hauled himself to his feet and stood towering over us. The chatter faded as the men noticed him.

"It is time to tell you what we are about," he said. "Gwydawg and I came here to find men who are not oath bound to keep Arthur's peace."

"Are there none left in Britain?" I asked.

"None we can trust," said Gwydawg. His dark eyes turned upon me and I flinched under their gaze.

"This winter," Elesa explained, "Arthur extracted an oath from all the lords of Britain, Weala and Saxon alike, that they will not break his peace for a period of five years. Everybody has sworn, apart from a few outlaws whose word is anyway worthless. Therefore we have sought warriors from outside Britain."

"Why?" demanded Otta.

Gwydawg unfolded his arms and stood. "Cei slew my father. Then he slew my brother. I would have vengeance." His voice was bitter as the sea.

"That I can understand," said Otta. "A man must avenge his kindred, and double duty is owed to a father."

Gwydawg grinned then, grinned without mirth, his teeth white and pointed against the ritual scars of his face. "Yet there is more. My vengeance is not a simple one: a life for a life. I am Gwydawg mab Pedrylaw Menestyr, not a landless peasant seeking to avenge a fellow thrall. For generations my family have guarded a certain talisman, keeping it safe while the world turned about us. Arthur, Cei and the rest stole that talisman, at the same time slaying my father. Since then, Arthur has set himself up as Emperor of Albion, claiming sovereignty over all Britain by virtue of the stolen talisman. My vengeance must therefore encompass more than the death of Cei: it must also show how hollow is Arthur's claim."

"The king is shepherd of his people," muttered Hareth.

“Even so,” said Gwydawg. He paused, smiling around him, his teeth seeming sharper than ever. I remembered the old stories told about his tribe, the Attecotti: that they had a taste for human flesh.

“Only a false shepherd lets the wolf into his flock,” he continued. “Arthur’s son is already dead. If his closest friend is also slain, who then will believe in his pretence at sovereignty?”

He stared around him challengingly, waiting for one of us to gainsay him.

Otta shrugged. “Twenty to kill one, even such a one as Cei? Small honour in that. And I have heard his sight is gone. Still less honour in slaying a blind man.”

“Cei is not blind yet, and he does not walk alone,” Elesa said hastily, before Gwydawg could reply. “He is a man of high estate. Until last summer he ruled the North as Arthur’s Vicar. Now, broken by Llacheu’s death, he has retreated to his home in the west, like an old bear licking its wounds in his lair. That place is too strong to be taken by anything less than a great army, so we will ambush him and his train he travels east to meet with Arthur.”

“If he is broken by Llacheu’s death,” I said slowly, “what need of further vengeance?”

“My need!” growled Gwydawg. “Their blood cries out to me. In the night they come to me, wailing and howling, the spirits of my father and brother. In my own land I am a priest, a man who communes daily with the gods. Do you doubt me? My gods have sent me here, to this Isle, that I may find twenty men unmatched in the world for their courage and skill. You are those men.”

“Some of you will die,” said Elesa, studying each face in turn. “We are going up against the most deadly man on the face of middle earth. He is old now, aged before his time, and half blind, but I tell you – he is still more dangerous than any other man I have known. I have fought him twice: twice I have lost.” He paused, smiled grimly. “The third time pays for all.”

The men laughed, and I knew he had them. “Otta has said that there is small honour in twenty slaying one. I say again: Cei will not ride alone. The men of his household will be with him, and they are worthy followers of a mighty lord.”

Again he paused, surveyed them slowly. “Our task will not be easy. We have learned to fight together, and we shall have allies once we reach Britain. Above all, we have the favour of Fosite, Lord of the Pillar, Master of the Axe. You know this is true, for you have already been given gifts by his priests. More will be sent to your kin or will be held here to await your return, and although I cannot promise you we will find riches on this voyage, it is always possible.” He shrugged and grinned, suddenly seeming much younger. From the corner of my eye I saw Gwydawg frown.

“So I cannot offer you wealth, above what the priests are giving you. I cannot offer you glory, for there is some truth in what Otta has said – though I can offer you the chance to perform great deeds. I say again: some of you will die. Perhaps most of you will die. Of all the powers, Weird is the strongest and we cannot strive against it. At the end there is only this: I too have sworn to encompass the death of Cei by whatever means, and I shall not fail in my task.”

* * *

We passed our first night in Britain huddled against the wind among the sand dunes, not daring to kindle a fire. By the weak light of the half moon we could see something of our surroundings: low mounds covered with wiry grass, similar to the

mountains of Fosite along our own coast, which shift like the waves of the sea and have been known to swallow whole villages and great tracts of fertile farmland.

“This is an ill place,” muttered Elesa. “An enemy could be upon us before we knew it.”

“The boat lies on the strand like a marker,” growled Gwydawg. “I had intended it to be cast loose and smashed upon the rocks.” He cast a bitter glance in my direction.

“We may be glad of her later,” I said. “She is hurt, but not beyond repair. We may need a way home, afterwards.”

“Afterwards?” snorted Gwydawg, turning his back.

The wind sifted the fine sand, flung it into our faces. It stuck to our damp clothes, our hair, worked its way into our scabbards and fouled our blades. The night wore on, long as winter. We slept in fitful snatches, taking turns to stand guard out among the dunes, where the grass constantly rustled and the sands trickled and slipped, so that at any moment one might find oneself surrounded by enemies.

We greeted the dawn with relief, and squatted around Elesa. He brushed the sand from his cloak and grinned cheerfully.

“Now our real work begins,” he said. “Gwydawg has friends hereabouts, who will be searching for us along this shore.” He tapped his nose, winked. “It may be that Guthlaf was too clever at bringing us in unseen, and they cannot find us.”

Out on the water birds screamed and fought over their catch, the cries echoing back from the cliffs at the edge of the bay.

“Listen!” said Otta, cocking his head. “Somebody calls!”

“It is only the gulls,” said Hareth.

Otta rose to his feet and surveyed the dunes. “No. Someone is near. Who keeps the watch?”

The others stirred uneasily, laid hands upon their weapons.

“Dunnere and Osric,” said Elesa. He also straightened, slipping his shield onto his arm, a spear in his right hand. “Stand ready!”

For a long while we waited with only the wind and the birds for company, the sea beating at our backs. Of our sentries there was no sign, no sign at all, and the empty dunes with their long coarse grass waving in the breeze seemed to taunt us.

“Well, well,” a voice said from somewhere among the grass. “Who now keeps the pigs of the green fort?”

“Ah, the swineherd is gone,” answered another. “Long gone, long gone, over the seas and far away.”

“A giant he was, but another giant came and carried him off,” said a third.

“Poorly does the herd since his going,” lamented the first. “Perhaps one day he will come back to us.”

“Glad will they be to see him,” said the second. “Their one true friend.”

“Great was the love between them,” added the third.

They spoke in the British tongue, but the mockery of their tone was obvious even to those of our party who could not follow the words.

“What did they say?” demanded Otta. “Are these friends or foes?”

Elesa looked at Gwydawg. “You did not tell me.” His face was like stone, and his fist clenched and unclenched on the spear shaft. “You did not tell me these were our allies.”

The Attecotti shrugged and stepped forward, arms spread wide. “I am Gwydawg mab Menestyrl!” he cried in a great voice that silenced even the gulls. “Show yourselves!”

One by one they rose from among the dunes: short men, broad shouldered, not unlike Gwydawg in appearance. There were ten of them, arranged in a loose half circle around us, all armed with spears and small round shields. Some had dark feathers thrust into their hair, which they wore tied in a bun, and bow cases slung over their backs.

“Here we are, Cupbearer,” said the foremost. “And a miserable night it was, huddled in the sand waiting for a sign of you.”

Gwydawg gave them a cold stare, then nodded slowly in satisfaction. “Did you bring horses?”

“Enough for ourselves and you.” The man grinned crookedly. “Had we known Eliseg was with you, we’d have brought a white sow for him to ride home in comfort.”

For a moment I thought I had misheard. Eliseg was clearly their name for Elesa, but a white sow meant nothing to me. I glanced at the big Saxon. His face was grim as granite and a blue vein pulsed at his temple. Of a sudden he drove his spear butt hard into the sand and leant his weight on the shaft.

“Not men for offering greetings,” one of the newcomers remarked. “Nor thanks for a cold and lonely night.”

“There is no courtesy in them,” agreed another.

“Be still,” commanded Gwydawg, and they were – much to their own surprise, judging by their expressions and the way they shuffled their feet.

“The others in my party?” Gwydawg continued as if nothing had happened.

“Can walk,” said the leader.

“Who spoke of courtesy?” I asked loudly in British.

The wind lifted the sand, blew a fine scattering into our faces. Elesa grunted, ran a hand through hair still crusted with salt.

“Let us move before we are buried alive,” he growled. “Lead on, Llywri.”

“Why, you remember my name!” exclaimed their chieftain. He gestured to his men. “Back to the horses, my children.”

“I remember many things,” said Elesa as we picked up our belongings and prepared to follow. “That is why I am here.”

Llywri smiled sweetly in reply before turning his back. He and his men set off at a fine pace, angling away from the sea across the line of the dunes. They seemed to skim lightly over the loose sand while we trudged wearily in their wake, every step hard work. Soon they were well ahead of us.

“Wait!” called Gwydawg. “Where are our sentries?”

The hindmost of our new friends glanced over his shoulder. “Are they yours? They lie where we found them, their skulls a little dented but otherwise unharmed.”

“That will teach them to keep a better watch,” snarled Elesa. “Fetch them, Guthlaf, Hareth.”

As a beginning to an alliance, it did not bode well. We found Dunnere rubbing a red mark at his temple and swearing to kill whoever had struck him, while Osric merely looked thoughtful. Dunnere’s temper was not improved by the discovery that we had to walk wherever we were going.

“I am minded to sit down and stay here,” he said. “It is not wise for a man to exert himself after a blow to the head.”

“Perhaps not,” said Hareth. “But I doubt Elesa will agree with you.”

All that day we walked and ran in the track of the Britons. I have not made a journey like it, either before or since. They say Hengist the First Comer once ran for half a day across the Vale of Kent and then fought and won a full battle against the High King’s

son at the end of it, but he was a harder man than I. Besides, I had spent the last few nights aboard ship, which does little for one's legs and wind. We moved eastward and inland, staying out of sight wherever possible, though for my part I doubted we were as unseen as we hoped. There are always more people watching than one thinks. We travelled through deep valleys, climbed hills by ancient sheep paths that petered out before they reached the summit, strove always to stay below the skyline. We skirted marshes, forded rocky streams, fought our way through tangled woods that seemed untouched since time began.

At about midday, just as we came to the open uplands, it started to rain: a soft drizzle that seemed harmless at first but soon soaked one to the skin. I looked at Dunnere, still sulking beside me, the livid red weal half hidden by his thinning hair, at Hareth and the others, and called to Elesa:

“We must stop soon. The men need to rest.”

He lifted a hand in acknowledgement, picked up the pace until he ran beside Gwydawg on his pony. The two spoke, and Gwydawg swung in the saddle, glowered at me. Not long afterwards we came to a dell large enough to contain us all and Llywri signalled a halt.

“A shame your followers are so unfit,” he remarked to Elesa as he dismounted.

The big man's face was already flushed from the effort of running. His colour deepened, the skin standing taut on his cheeks, his eyes bulging in their sockets. For a moment I feared he would fall upon the Briton and rend him there and then, careless of the consequences for himself and our alliance. The other Britons must have thought the same, for several of them laid their hands upon the hilts of their weapons, and one set an arrow to the string of his bow.

“Easily solved,” I said, trying to keep my voice light though I had barely caught my breath and the blood was pounding in my head. “You walk and we ride.”

Llywri flung back his head and roared with laughter. “Oh, I like you, Saeson, I like you very much.”

He sat down on a cushion of furze and gestured to one of his men, who brought him a leather bottle. “Share a drink with me.”

I took a swig from the bottle. It was a strong mead, sweet to the first taste with a bitter tang afterwards, like so much in life.

“My thanks.” I returned the bottle. “I am Guthlaf son of Ordraf. Who are you?”

He lifted an eyebrow in exaggerated surprise that I did not already know. “Has your leader not told you?”

“No.” I glanced across at Elesa, who was ignoring us, though I was sure he was listening to every word.

“Not him. The other one.” Llywri nodded to where Gwydawg lay at the rim of the hollow beside one of the sentries. “The outcast priest.”

“Outcast?”

Llywri peered, satisfied himself I had understood what he meant. “His brother tried to kill Cei at Dun Eidin and slew Llacheu instead. Strong magic, to sacrifice the Amherawdyr's heir. With the failure of his plan to bring down Arthur, Gwydawg lost the rule of his people. It passed to his sister, the one who had summoned Arthur to take the test of sovereignty, and Gwydawg became an exile.”

“And Elesa?”

“Elesa blames Cei for the failure of his life.” Llywri shrugged mockingly. “So useful to have someone to blame. It absolves one of responsibility.” He gazed at Elesa. The big man seemed engrossed in adjusting his leggings. “They met somewhere, or Gwydawg

sought him out. Between them they dreamt this idea of using your god's gold to find a crew of warriors not afraid to go up against Cei."

"Why did the priests of Fosite agree to help?" I asked, curious.

He grunted. "Old history. Gwydawg's people and the followers of your god were allies years ago, before any of us were born. Together they raided Prydein in the days when the Romans held the rule – the true Romans, I mean, not their spavined heirs of today. Spoils were divided and oaths were sworn. Gwydawg has called in an old debt."

"Fosite is no longer my god," I said, though it hurt to admit it.

Again he lifted an eyebrow, and I realized that what was a great matter to me was nothing to him.

"And you?" I asked. "They told me the reason they needed us was that there were none bold enough in Britain to ride against Arthur."

He grinned. "Many in Prydein dislike him, would be glad to see an end of him. Even here, near his heartland, not all love him." He stretched lazily, yawned. "But then it is ever so with rulers, is it not? When he is gone, I dare say those who are presently strongest for his removal will be loudest in their lamentations. My men and I are here at the command of our lord, who has good reason to hate Arthur and Cei."

"Who is your lord?"

"The Young Prince, though he is young no more. The Lord of the Summer Country."

Again he stretched, a taut, bone-shuddering movement. Then he rose to his feet and rubbed at his bottom where it was damp from the wet furze. "Are your friends rested now? We have a distance to cover before dark."

The weather improved in the afternoon. Although the skies never altogether cleared, the rain stopped and the sun shone fitfully. Towards evening we came down from the barren brown heights to a tree clad valley. I remember a skylark filled the air above us with the sweet liquid of its song as we began the descent, and Llywri laughed aloud with the joy of living as he led us towards the stream that flowed along the valley bottom.

"We camp here," he announced. "No fires. A settlement lies a few miles away, and they must not know of our presence."

The men grumbled softly to themselves when Elesa translated his orders, but there was no real feeling behind it. We huddled in our cloaks among the trees and ate our own dried meat mixed with the stale bread the British had brought with them. Had it not been for Elesa and Gwydawg, a pair of glowering presences on the edge of things, I think we would have made friends with the strangers then. They were not a bad group. For my taste they were too prone to joking, flighty and quick to take offence like all Wealas, perhaps not reliable in a battle line – and often I have wondered whether that does not have something to do with the British custom of fighting from horseback, which makes it too easy to flee if the battle seems to go against you – but they were willing enough to be familiars. It was our men who held back, always aware of our leaders' disapproving gazes.

After we had eaten, Llywri, Gwydawg and Elesa held council. To my surprise Elesa asked me to join them. "Llywri likes you," he said. One hand fiddled with his sword hilt; the other wandered towards his hair, fell back, tugged his nose and beard instead. "I was a slave in the Summer Country once, and to this day I bear the marks of the lash his people used upon my back. I do not find it easy to sit with him and treat him as an ally."

"You were their swineherd?" I said, remembering the jibes.

We walked slowly through the trees, picking our way among the roots and the bodies settling towards sleep. This close to him, I was reminded afresh of Elesa's size: he

was easily the biggest man among us, large enough to make me – and I stood straighter in those days – feel small. How he made the shorter Britons feel I could not guess.

“For a while I kept their pigs, yes. Until Ceï freed me.” His voice was a deep rumble.

“What?” I exclaimed, stumbling over a pair of outstretched legs. For a moment I thought I must have misheard. “Then why do you want Ceï dead?”

Elesa’s jaw tightened. “Because it was Ceï who made me captive.”

I had noticed that when he was tired he had a slight limp. Tonight it was very obvious.

“Are you fit for another day’s travel?” I whispered as we came nigh Llywri and Gwydawg.

He drew himself to his full height, there in the darkness, and looked down at me. “I have to be.”

They were waiting for us under a fir tree. The scent of its needles was strong in my nostrils, so that even now, when I am old and near my end, the smell of a fir cone or a new cut branch returns me to that night. Above us the stars sailed through the clouds, gleaming like candles among the canopy of boughs. Far off I heard a wolf howl, and what might have been a dog bark in defiance.

“So,” said Llywri. “I think that you have aged, my friend. Time was when you kept the pigs of the Summer Country, you could have run all day and all night without pause – or so you told us. I watched you walking across the camp – for like all my people, I have good night vision, as you will recall from your attempts to escape when you were our slave – and it seems to me you move stiffly, like an old man.”

“We have all aged, Llywri.” The big man lowered himself slowly to the ground, having first swept it clear of needles. “You are no longer a child, though you still prattle like one.”

“You are both children,” said Gwydawg. His voice had lost none of its harshness, and he still spoke as if by rote, though the tongue he used was British and therefore, I assumed, his own. “Did I not need you, I would leave you here to end your quarrel.”

He moved away from the trunk, unpeeling a piece of rough bark as he came. “You are together because I have willed it. We have far to go, though not so far as we have come.” His deep set eyes glowed with sudden fire, as if somebody had against orders kindled a flame which was now reflected in his glare.

“You will work together because I will it, because the Powers we obey will it. Do you understand me?” He tossed the lump of bark at Llywri, who flinched as it struck his chest.

They were afraid of him, I saw, even Elesa.

“Do you understand me?” he repeated, and they both mumbled assent.

“Good,” he said after a long pause. “I do not care what you do to each other once Ceï is dead, if you both survive. For now you will put aside your enmity, lest it undo us all. And as a token of that, Llywri, I will tell you that you have spoken more truly than you know. Elesa is yet mightier than most, but he is not the man who herded the swine of the Summer Country.”

The big man grunted in protest. Gwydawg ignored him, while Llywri, his interest quickened, leant forward the better to hear what the Attecotti was saying in that oddly flat delivery:

“I am an exile, driven from my home by the wiles of my sister, who betrayed our ancient heritage. My features – ” he bared his teeth and indicated his tattoos with a swift

movement of one hand “ – make it hard to pass unseen by the servants of the lords of the land. I managed it, sleeping under hedgerows or taking the forests for my bower. On my travels I met with many people who, like me, had reason to conceal their whereabouts. For the most part they were outlaws, thieves and rogues; or charlatans pretending to a knowledge and power they did not possess; or those whose bodies harboured some evil spirit that had eaten away their minds. For a long while I wandered aimlessly, seeking but not knowing what I sought. Then something drew me north again, to the Forest of Celidon.”

He lifted a finger and all three of us shifted forward. “My sister was trained as a bard – female bards are not unusual among us, though uncommon among you southerners and you Saesons. She too had her time of exile, and she too visited the Forest of Celidon. There she found an isolated hermit’s cell, and within the cell she found a creature so old she could not say whether it was man or woman. That creature told her the great tale of Prydein, the first tale of the People who were the island’s original inhabitants; the tale which is at the heart of everything.”

Despite the darkness he must have seen the frown of puzzlement on my face, or else sensed it in some other fashion.

“You do not know this tale?” he said quietly. “No, why should you. Llywri knows a version of it, even Elesa knows a form of it, but you are not of this land as we are, bound to it blood and bone. Listen then. In the beginning was the Lady, and by her bounty the People lived. A child was born to her, a child named Gwair who would be the fount of life and cauldron of inspiration to the People.”

“Like Scyld Shefing,” I said, remembering.

“Like, yet far greater. Your Scyld was but a faint shadow of this one. Gwair was stolen at his birth, stolen by the one who should have been his father and was not: Pwill, the Grey Man. So the child’s true father with six companions searched for him long and hard, passing beyond the bounds of our world to the Kingdom of the Grey Man, whence none had ever returned.”

His voice cracked and rose, and I realized he was singing, singing a line of verse so old and so well known even I found it familiar, outlander though I might be:

*“Three shiploads of Prydein we went on the sea,
Save seven, none came back from the Fortress of Glass.”*

Somewhere above us a bird leapt to the air in a flurry of wings. I would have laughed, except that the words he croaked were powerful, and very old, more incantation than song.

“In triumph they returned, the seven survivors,” continued Gwydawg. “This venture has been acted out many times before and will be acted out many times again. The divine child comes to remake the world in a different image, is stolen away at birth, and is brought back by his father after many trials. And being what you are, you will ask me what it means, because that is what people always ask, as if the working of the divine powers could be bounded and limited by language.”

He fell silent. I was uncertain whether Gwydawg was now speaking to me alone, or to all three of us. We waited while the wind rustled the fir branches and the stream chattered in the distance.

“The child is the Spirit and Sovereignty of the land of Prydein or Albion,” he said at length. “That is the mystery, and the truth. My sister understood; Arthur understood.

Together they conspired to steal what my family have guarded since it was brought to us by the servants of Caradoc mab Bran at the time of his defeat by the Legions of Rome, after which the Legions conquered this island.”

“It did not save him then,” said Elesa.

“No,” said Gwydawg. “It did not. Nor will it save Arthur, at the end. That is not its function.”

“The Grey Man?” Llywri asked hesitantly. “You make him sound bad. Among my people he is held in high esteem.”

“Ha!” exclaimed Elesa, and would have said more, had Gwydawg not restrained him with a flicker of his fingers.

“The tale is my sister’s, not mine. And Pwill is not bad.” Gwydawg’s contempt for the notion was clear. “What is day without night, wakefulness without sleep, life without death?”

He stepped back towards the trunk of the fir, raised his head to the stars glimmering between the branches, sighed heavily. For the first time it struck me that he too must have doubts, be as beset with hopes and fears as the rest of us.

“I was telling you of how my sister found an isolated hut in the depths of Celidon Forest, and an ancient creature within it that she later claimed had taught her the true form of Gwair’s story. According to her, the creature perished once the tale was taught.”

Llywri laughed softly. “How timely!”

“It may be she was telling the truth; it may not. However, I also found a cell within the depths of the forest, far from any settlement. And I too found a creature so aged that like my sister I believed its name should be added to the list of the oldest living things: the Stag of Kilguri, the Blackbird of Gadarn Wood, the Eagle of Gwernabwy, the Owl of Coombe Colwith, the Salmon of Lake Llow.” His voice sank meditatively away.

“And?” demanded Elesa.

Gwydawg roused himself from whatever place he had gone. “And it told me to travel again to the south, to the hills of Calchwynyth, where I would find a man of the Saeson race lying on the roadside, surrounded by the bodies of his enemies. The man would be badly wounded in the leg, gored by a spear, and without my intervention he would die.”

Llywri’s breath hissed between his teeth.

“‘Why should I save him?’ I asked. ‘Because his seed shall have dominion,’ came the reply.”

A great crow of laughter burst from Llywri. “Dominion?” he spluttered. “Dominion over what? The pigs of Prydein?”

Elesa was on his feet at once, any weakness of his leg forgotten. I thrust myself between them, set my hands against the big man’s chest and pushed with all my might, striving to hold him back. It was like trying to restrain the fir tree. From the corner of an eye I saw the gleam of metal in starlight as Llywri drew his knife.

“There are worse things than pigs,” Gwydawg said calmly. “Pwill himself gave them to us in the beginning.”

The pressure on me eased. Both men were panting, and my face was wet with Elesa’s spittle.

“Tomorrow you will find a horse for the Saeson. Your men can take it in turns to walk.”

The knife rasped as Llywri returned it to the sheath. “Very well,” he said sulkily. “Why not? There is precedent. On Sow Day before Midwinter slaves may ride while their masters walk.”

“Beware,” growled Elesa.

Llywri made a sound deep in his throat. “Oh, I am wary, I am wary,” he said mockingly. “What worries me more is tomorrow, and the days following.”

“With reason,” said Gwydawg. He sank to a crouch, and after a moment the others did likewise. Some of the tension went out of the air. “What do we know of Cei’s movements?” he asked when they were settled.

Llywri described what his spies had told him, or told Melwas his master. Elesa held his peace, though I expected him to pass some remark about sneaking Britons. Llywri and Elesa knew the country well, and for once they were in agreement about the best place to lay the ambush: a dip in the road between two hills, far from the nearest farm.

“An old way station stands on the hill to the east,” said Llywri. “Nothing much remains except the stone signal tower which was its heart. If I were attacked upon this road, that is where I would run.”

Elesa nodded. “I too. If we had men to spare I would send some to take it, just in case. But we do not.”

“Keep it simple,” said Gwydawg. “Complicated plans have a habit of going astray.”

Far into the night they thrashed out their plan, arguing over details. Llywri’s bowmen were to play a key part in sowing confusion; if the gods smiled they might bring down Cei himself. We Saesons would make our stand upon the road itself, preventing Cei from breaking out, while the rest of Llywri’s men would harry from the side and behind. They would disguise themselves as Attecotti, painting their faces in imitation of Gwydawg.

“Will we let some live then?” I said.

They all turned to look at me. In Llywri’s gaze there was a touch of sadness, but Gwydawg and Elesa both stared at me with hard and bitter gazes, until I wished I had not spoken.

“It is not my intention,” said Gwydawg.

“I have my orders,” said Llywri. “We run no risks if anything goes wrong.”

“If your men do as they should there will be no risk.” Elesa’s voice was cold. “We kill them all.”

Llywri grimaced. I thought he would speak, but he did not. They returned to their discussion, until at last Elesa announced he must rest.

“Tell me,” said Llywri as we stood to leave. “How is your wife? And the two youngsters?”

“My wife lives among her people. My children are no longer young, and I have more than two.”

“Among her people? Surely not!” exclaimed Llywri. “She was born a slave, the daughter of slaves, in the community of Ynis Witrin. I would have seen her had she returned. Mind you, I suppose the children are full grown now. Time has passed so rapidly.”

“You mean my by-blows?” Elesa’s face was contemptuous. “I had forgotten them. They died upon the road where Cei and the other gracious lords left us. The woman I sold into slavery. She was nothing to me.”

“So,” said Llywri on a long indrawn breath. There was a pause. “So,” he said again, and was silent.

* * *

Waiting is the hardest part of war.

For me it was worst of all. Elesa had warned me my part in the battle line would be better fitted to a boy than a veteran of many fights, and I had accepted the wisdom of his words, expecting to be given a position in the rearmost rank.

Instead Gwydawg seized me.

“I need a runner who can speak both tongues,” he said.

So I found myself standing on the hillside looking down at the road with Gwydawg beside me, waiting as we had waited since dawn.

The five archers were hidden in the bushes below us. Shortly after dawn they had unpacked and strung their yew bows. Talking among themselves in their own quick tongue of wind strengths and the fall of an arrow, they had loosed several ranging shots at the road. Their shafts were of hazel, with bodkin heads designed to punch through mail; at close range even a shield is no protection against a well aimed arrow. When they were satisfied they placed range markers by the road, small signs they hoped would go unnoticed by the travellers: on a rock, a blob of the paint they had used to disguise their faces; in the ground, a deep driven stave, the end freshly broken so the white wood stood out.

“Are you a follower of Egil?” asked Gwydawg.

“No,” I said. “I can shoot a bow, but not well. It is a skill which needs constant use if one is to be good.”

A faint smile played around his lips as he returned his attention to the road. I did not ask what he knew of Egil the Archer, brother to Weyland Smith, patron of metalworkers. His purpose had been to remind me that Fosite had cast me out and I had no patron god: to remind me at the very time a man’s thoughts turn naturally to seeking the protection of a god, when he waits to go to battle.

Our men, under Elesa, were drawn up across the road in three ranks. He himself had taken the place of honour, in the middle of the front rank, leaning on his scabbarded sword. Near him were Hareth and Osric, while Otta was at his back as always. I envied them, that they would fight among friends this day.

Llywri and his horsemen loitered further along the hillside, in the cover of the trees. They would strike last of all, when the travellers were blocked by the Saesons and raked by the archers, driving down the slope to prevent them from escaping whence they had come, adding to the confusion.

Of Gwydawg’s part, or indeed mine as his messenger boy, I was less certain. Once the action began there would be no need for orders. The archers would loose while they had clear targets; Elesa had only to stand while the travellers broke upon him; and Llywri would decide the timing of his charge for himself. Gwydawg wanted to watch and gloat, I think, and me he wanted to punish for my original refusal to do more than captain his ship.

“The omens are good,” he said. Little by little he began a slow shuffling dance, so slow that at first I thought he was moving because he was restive. He went this way and that, sliding his feet through the long grass of the hillside, treading out a path behind him, a path that curled and wound to a centre. As I watched I saw the pattern, and the pattern was same as the one he wore upon his face and body.

When it happened, it happened fast.

The lookouts signalled. The archers set their arrows to the string, readied themselves. Llywri's men mounted with a faint jangle of harness, pulled hoods over their hair to complete their disguises. The Saesons ceased their idle chatter, lifted their shields and lowered their spears.

The riders swept into the valley, talking and laughing among themselves. Three mail clad men were in the lead, oval shields slung over their backs. One towered above the others, even as Elesa towered above the Saesons. His long fair hair streamed behind him, and I guessed this must be Cei. Then came a party of men and women in bright clothing, all taller and better made than most Wealas, and at the rear a group of older men, soberly dressed, slumping in the saddle as old men will.

“Now!” shouted Gwydawg, as the lead riders passed the stake. His dance became a caper.

The bowmen were well trained. They shot and shot, so fast they scarcely seemed to pause. The men in mail were the first targets, and all three were down with several shafts in them before they knew it. Then the archers switched to the hindmost riders, the older men, raining arrows upon them. A terrible shrieking rose from the road.

The riders rallied, drove forward against the Saesons. I held my breath, but this was not a fully fledged charge against a line already weakened by javelin play. It was a move of desperation, and it stood no chance. Our men held their ground, fending off the horsemen with their spears.

“Where is Llywri?” muttered Gwydawg. Wild eyed, he stared along the slope. “He should attack.”

“He will,” I said.

The big fair man I took to be Cei struggled to his feet. Even from the hillside I could see the shafts in his body and knew that he was close to death. Another rider, a woman, reined in beside him and somehow he hauled himself up behind her. His head lolled, and we saw his face clearly.

“That is not Cei!” screamed Gwydawg. He hopped from foot to foot with rage. “The wrong man, you fools.”

Llywri launched his attack, his half dozen charging down the hill. They went in silence, without the usual war cries lest they betray their origins, though I could not see it mattered. Nobody was going to escape. They cut through the remaining riders, turned and went back again. The Saesons, seeing the fight was near ended, broke their formation and rushed forward, eager for the fray.

Suddenly a great bellow of anger went up from the road. A giant stood alone in the midst of the confusion, armed with sword and shield. Llywri lowered his spear and rode at him. The giant shifted aside and cut through the horse's leg, so it fell screaming to the ground, throwing Llywri. Two men went to their leader's rescue: the sword spun effortlessly in the air and they crumpled.

“Cei,” I said.

“Shoot him,” called Gwydawg.

The archers tried, but all they managed was to feather his shield.

“Cei sees well for a blind man,” I said.

He was glorious. He moved across that hopeless field and alone turned the tide. Every blow he struck slew a man. He brought down the rest of Llywri's riders as they came at him, flung himself among the Saesons and smote them. I saw comrades fall, yet I could not mourn them, for to be slain by him was an honour beyond their deserving.

“Where is Elesa?” demanded Gwydawg, a note of panic in his voice.

“Caught in the press.” I pointed. Others in Cei’s retinue had rallied, pushed hard against the Saesons, who had opened out into smaller groups when they ran forward. Elesa loomed above the crowd, back to back with Otta, the two of them holding their own but unable to advance or retreat.

A voice rang high and clear above the noise of battle. “Father!”

A string of horses swept along the road. They were led by the surviving women, their bright garments more suited to a feast than to the carnage around them. At their head was the lady who had rescued the fair man, whose body was now draped over one of the ponies.

“Celemon,” breathed Gwydawg. He clenched his fists.

Cei’s daughter rode into the heart of the fight, found her father and helped him mount. The other ladies sought to do likewise for the rest, and though some were wrenched from the saddle before they came near, many were successful.

When all who could mount were once again ahorse, Cei’s great voice lifted above the battle fury.

“Ride! We ride!”

In a flurry of hooves and dust they beat through our scattered line and disappeared up the road.

“After them!” commanded Gwydawg.

He had no need to speak. The archers were already racing for their tethered ponies, and those of the Saesons who could ride were seizing any loose mount they could find. The remainder ran in pursuit, that steady ground eating lope which will eventually bring down a burdened horse, granted space enough and time.

“I hit him,” shouted one of the archers as he went past.

“Who?” I called.

“Cei, of course,” he bellowed over his shoulder.

The road rose steeply as it climbed the hill. The fleeing Britons were not far ahead of us. Many of their horses were doubly laden, and some were wounded. I was fresh, and for all I had started from behind I found myself gaining on the pack of runners. Our leading horsemen were out in front, giving tongue like hounds, but for those of us afoot there was no breath to spare.

“Harry them, harry them!” whooped one of Llywri’s men.

A dead man lay across the road, his face twisted in disbelieving rage. I hurdled the body, saw a second crumpled in the ditch. We were whittling them down.

“Up, up!” came the call.

Hareth was beside me, grinning. “They’ll not get far.”

“Did you see him?” I panted.

“Did I not? Nearly killed me. And the woman, the woman,” he marvelled. “Did you see *her*?”

Crowning the hill was the way station Llywri had mentioned: a tower of crumbling stone surrounded by a ditch. I paused to wipe the sweat from my brow, put my hands on my knees to draw breath. Once there had been an outer wall, but it was long gone, leaving a grassy space where the court had been. The tower itself was three storeys high, and at the top was a doorway opening into the air. Set into the courses of stone below this door was a line of great timbers, which must have once supported a gallery, but it looked very strange. While I stared, panting, a face appeared in the doorway and quickly withdrew.

“One of them escaped,” said Hareth. “See? Llywri’s riders give chase.”

“The rest are bottled here?”

They had turned their horses loose and the animals wandered over the lawn, or gazed at us with dull eyes.

“All of them. Cei as well.” He shifted uneasily. “Guthlaf, I do not like this.”

“We knew it would be bad before we started.”

“Yes. But I did not expect Cei to be ...” His face clouded as he searched for the word, shrugged. Then he brightened. “And the woman! What a woman!”

“Celemon,” I said, remembering the name Gwydawg had given her.

Directly beneath the opening into space was the entrance to the tower: a low black hole which had been the width of two doors until some former owner had halved its size with a pillar of red bricks. We stood outside waiting for Elesa and Gwydawg, none of us eager to be the first into the darkness. Inside we could see dim shapes, and the glint of steel.

A great roar of incoherent rage and anguish went up from inside the tower, became words:

“White Stork, Garanwyn, my son, my son.”

Gwydawg was beside me, laughing softly. The coiled lines on his face seemed to glow with a green light of their own. “His son is dead,” he gloated. “Let him taste sorrow before his own end. Let him taste despair.”

“Garanwyn, White Stork,” lamented the voice.

“We must attack,” said Elesa. He was breathing deeply. “We do not have much time.”

“We have all the time we need,” said Gwydawg. “All the time there is.”

I glanced at the sky, saw it was not so late as I had thought. Thick black clouds hid the sun, and a cooling breeze had sprung up around the hilltop, drying the sweat on my body.

“One horseman escaped,” I said.

“It does not matter.” Gwydawg stared at the entrance to the tower. “Who will be first?”

We shuffled our feet, all of us, and did not meet his eye.

“Are you afraid, my bold warriors?” he cried. “Afraid to meet the wounded lion in its lair? His battle rage has sustained him this far; it will not sustain him forever.”

“You go,” I said.

“I am not a great fighter,” he said. “That is why I brought you big men. I will abide here, and cast my spells to sap his strength.”

Elesa spat, drew his sword with a loud rasp of iron on wood. “Give me a shield.”

His own was hacked to pieces. I gave him mine, an unblemished yellow board wrapped in calf hide. He grinned as he took it, slipped his fingers into the iron grip behind the boss.

“You do not fight today, Guthlaf?”

“This is an ill deed we do,” I said, echoing my kinsman Hareth.

“The names of those who slew the Long Man, fair Cei, will live in song,” he said.

“There is fame; and there is infamy.”

He laughed then, a deep belly laugh that shook his whole body. “Then we had best hire a bard when we are done. Now, do you follow me or not?”

He leapt for the entrance. We went after him, leaving Gwydawg to his mutterings on the lawn.

An old man held the doorway. Elesa brushed him aside and I put my war-knife in his ribs. It was dark, and I blundered against a wall, felt cobwebs tangle in my hair. A spear

point sparked on the stone beside me. I struck blindly, jarred my wrist. A body collided hard with mine. A foot stepped on my toes and raked my shin.

I shoved away from the wall. Our men were stooping through the entrance, blocking the light. My bruised foot found a step, then another. Shapes struggled above me. A man screamed; a woman shouted. A rock shattered on the steps and I realized they were throwing down the loose stones of the tower.

I was at the bottom of a stair leading to the first level. There were gaps in the floor boards above me, through which came thin shafts of light that shone upon a blade or an arm. The stair was thick with bodies, cursing and screeching their fear and hatred. I saw Elesa, my shield held out before him, stabbing up at a patch of darkness. Otta was behind him, wrestling a spear from a pair of pale hands.

Part of the floor above gave way with a great cracking of timbers. A figure plummeted to the middle of the room, landed badly with no chance to recover. Blades flashed amidst the dust and light pouring through the new opening.

“Eliseg!” thundered a voice. “A challenge. Bare hands.”

“Father, no,” cried a woman from above.

“What will be the prize this time?” asked Elesa, stepping back from the man he had slain.

“This time, the freedom of *my* family if I win.”

“And if you lose?”

“Then you will have your heart’s desire.”

He stood at the head of the stairs, a man so huge the steps did not seem solid enough to bear his weight, and I wondered how we could ever have mistaken his son for the man himself.

“But I do not lose,” he said.

He came down, stepping from light to dark to light like a creature out of legend. He was past his prime, that was obvious, his belly hanging loose over his belt, the shoulders bowed, the hair thin and grey. His eyes were red rimmed and crusted white, something I had seen before only among men who had spent too long exposed to the salt of the sea, and his feet tested every step as if he did not trust his sight.

Even in his age he was the mightiest man in all Britain, in all the lands along the Narrow Sea.

“I accept,” said Elesa. He slipped his arm from the yellow shield, looked around and tossed it to me like a discus. “Thank you. It served me well.”

Then he unbuckled his sword belt and handed it to Osric, together with the blade. “Keep this for me.”

The two of them descended the steps in silence, Cei above and behind Elesa. The wind souged in the heights of the tower.

“Where?” demanded Elesa. He unfastened his warshirt and gave it to the nearest man.

“Here will do. Tell your men to clear a space.”

Although most of our crew did not speak his tongue his meaning was clear. They dragged aside the bodies, kicked the debris from the broken floor into the corner.

“Do you trust me to keep my word?” Elesa asked.

Cei smiled. “No. But I trust them.” He indicated the rest of us standing against the walls.

There was blood on his tunic, a red bloom that seemed to spread while we watched. He made no effort to bare his upper body as was customary. I remembered the archer

claiming to have hit him, and I reckoned the stub of an arrow was hidden beneath the cloth. The same thought had obviously occurred to Elesa.

“Will you not disrobe?”

Cei shook his head. His face was growing ever more drawn and lined, and we could hear his breathing: a long rasping wheeze as he fought for air.

“All I need to do is wait,” Elesa said cunningly.

Cei grinned, and I saw the man he must have been when he was young. “Then you will never know. One last time, Saeson.”

“The third time pays for all, Weala.”

They sprang together and strove, pitting strength against strength without subtlety. At first they appeared evenly matched, then of a sudden Cei seemed to straighten, to grow still taller. He broke Elesa’s hold and I saw our man wince at the touch of the huge hands. Then Cei’s arms went around Elesa and his hands locked in the small of the other’s back. For a moment they stood like lovers, swaying back and forth. Cei’s tunic was soaked in blood now, and it seemed to me that as he pulled Elesa to him so also must he be driving the broken shaft deeper into his own body.

Elesa screamed. His arms were pinned against his sides but he snapped his teeth at Cei’s face, to no avail. The Long Man drew him tighter and tighter to his chest, the sleeves of his tunic shredding as the great muscles swelled.

Above us the wind howled, drowning the groans of the wounded. A cold draught blew down the stairs from the openings aloft, and the old building seemed to shift under a great buffet. Then there was silence, a sudden lull in the rising gale.

In the stillness we all heard the crack as Cei broke Elesa’s bones.

Cei opened his arms, stepped back a pace to the foot of the stairs. Released from his hold, Elesa wavered, fought to stand and failed. He sank to his knees in a patch of light, rolled to his side, dead but refusing to die.

Otta and I went to him, supported him in our arms. His chest was a bloodied ruin, and there was a pink froth upon his lips. His eyes turned to us, unseeing.

“Cold, so cold, his grip,” he whispered.

We laid him gently on his back, aware of Cei watching. Whatever manner of man Elesa had been, he was our leader. To me he had shown only kindness, and Otta had loved him.

A spear flashed above my head, plunged far into flesh. Cei reeled, sat hard upon the nearest step. Gwydawg screeched in triumph, pulled the blade free.

“For my father!” He struck again. “For my brother!”

We seized him before he could stab Cei a third time. Otta held one arm and I held the other. Although he was not a large man he was powerful, and we would have lost him if Hareth had not come to our aid.

Celemon ran down the stairs. She ignored us, ignored the tattooed man writhing in our grasp, ignored the armed men waiting to be told what to do.

She crouched beside her father. He managed a smile. “If my sight were better, I would have seen him coming.” His voice was very deep, very hoarse. “If.”

His hands were laced across his belly, where the spear had struck him twice. Either wound would have killed most men outright. Blood was everywhere, welling between his fingers, dripping down the steps.

“Kill them,” cried Gwydawg. “Kill them all!”

Some of the men shuffled towards the stair, blades ready. Hareth let go of Gwydawg, placed himself in front of Celemon.

“No,” he said.

Otta and I glanced at each other. We were still holding Gwydawg’s arms. Without speaking we pulled him forward, breaking his balance, then tossed him across the room.

“No,” we said together.

The men hesitated. Osric came to join us, and we four stood looking at the ring of faces around us.

“Elesa made a bargain,” said Otta. He was weeping. “We must honour it.”

“Elesa was a fool,” growled Gwydawg, scrambling to his feet. “And he never intended his bargain should be kept. Even Cei did not trust him.”

“No, but Cei trusted us,” I said.

There was doubt in the ring of faces.

“Look at the woman,” said Gwydawg. “You can have her before you kill her. There are more women above.”

“No,” Hareth said. His voice shook.

“No,” said Dunnere with revulsion. “It is finished, and she is a brave woman, sorcerer. She has earned her life. Let be.” He slammed the butt of his spear against the floor.

“Rich rewards for those who do my will,” wheedled Gwydawg. “Gold and silver, great treasures, and the blessing of a magic man. I have brought you all this way; do not fail me at the end.”

“You did not bring me,” Llywri said in our tongue, limping through the doorway. He blinked, stared at Elesa’s body and the huge form of Cei being tended by his daughter; at the four of us in our protective line and the undecided mass of others.

“We should leave. My horsemen have given up the chase. Their messenger will bring help.”

“My business is not finished,” spat Gwydawg.

“Then stay and finish it alone. I see the swineherd is dead and Cei is not long for this life. What more do you desire?”

Cei raised his head at the mention of his name. “Go, and go quickly.” He coughed, groaned so deeply the tower seemed to shiver with the force of it. “My vengeance is coming.”

He spoke with utter conviction; the last words of his life.

One by one the men filed through the narrow door. Gwydawg made a noise of disgust and joined them. Soon only we four remained in the room with Cei and his daughter, and Llywri watching us with thinly veiled amusement.

“Well?” he said. “Are you Cei’s men now?”

“I will not leave Elesa,” said Otta.

Osric and I exchanged a glance. “They will need us for the ship,” he said.

Hareth looked doubtful. “What if Gwydawg waits till we have left?”

“Then I will kill him myself,” said Celemon.

We started, all of us save Llywri. A wounded man moaned on the floor behind us; someone else spoke soft words of comfort from the floor above.

“I think he has gone.” Llywri rubbed at his cheek, smearing the paint he had used to disguise himself.

“You speak our tongue?” Hareth’s eyes shone in the light from above. He spoke to Celemon as if the two of them were alone in the tower.

“Thank you for what you did,” said Celemon. She looked at him for a moment, half smiled. “It must have taken courage to be the first to stand forth. We will be safe now. Leave us to our dead.”

“I am staying,” said Otta. “I will see no more harm comes to them.”

Hareth nodded, saluted her. We turned to go, and suddenly she said: “Wait!”

She fumbled with a clasp, unpinned a brooch from her cloak. “Take this,” she said, offering it to Hareth. “With my thanks.”

“I shall never forget you riding to the aid of your father and brother,” he said. “I wish things had been otherwise. I would have fought for you, lady, had I known.”

He took the brooch and kissed her hand.

* * *

Outside were wind and black clouds, rain falling from a dark sky as if the very heavens wept for the death of the hero. Far off I heard a rumble of thunder.

“The gods are angry,” murmured Osric.

“Make haste!” said Llywri. “Choose a mount.”

A few horses remained, reins dangling over their heads. We took the best we could find, threw aside any baggage to lighten the load. In all of us there was a growing sense of urgency and dread. We did not know what was coming, but we could feel it drawing nearer. Lightning flashed, away in the north, and afterwards came the steady mutter of more thunder.

“The storm is moving this way,” said Osric. He did not look comfortable in the saddle.

I steered my horse around the tower until I had a view along the road to the east, the direction in which Cei had been travelling. As far as the eye could see the road was empty, right to the point at which its ribbon dwindled to a dot on the brow of a hill.

When I turned the others had already left, riding back toward the site of the ambush. I followed, not knowing where we were going. Of Gwydawg and the rest of our party there was no sign, but I assumed they were somewhere ahead of us.

Hareth and I had ridden before, though neither of us were horsemen. Osric though was having trouble: his mount was jumpy, and did not take well to having a stranger and a novice on its back. Twice it nearly threw him as they negotiated the descent. He clung miserably to the saddle with one hand and sawed at the reins with the other.

I overtook him on the slope, called words of encouragement. Llywri waited for us just short of the ambush site. Some of our people had chosen to remain on foot, and they were picking over the dead and dying, offering comfort to those who needed it and relieving those past caring of any valuables.

“My counsel is we ride, as fast and far to the west as we can,” said Llywri. He pushed back his hood, let the rain touch his skin. The paint on his face began to run, so the spiral seemed to be collapsing in upon itself.

“Keep to the road?” said Hareth.

“Till we can leave it safely, without tracks.”

“Not me.” Osric slithered from the saddle. The horse tried to bite him, and he thwacked it over the nose. “I’ll go with these others, scatter into the country. We’ll make for the ship if we can.”

Llywri nodded, urged his mount on through the corpses and the scavengers. I hesitated, gripped Osric’s shoulder.

“An ill day,” he said. “I shall meet you at the ship.”

We left him then and that was the last I ever saw of him, a lone figure in the middle of the road trying to rally the crew.

After that it was wild riding. Llywri set a hard pace, seeming not to care whether we could keep with him or not. The rain fell and the wind gusted; the flashes of lightning and the crashes of thunder grew ever closer. Gradually we overhauled more of our group and they added themselves to our train, or fell behind.

I confess – and it shames me to admit it, shames me deeply – that so great was the dread upon me that a part of me was glad to have others behind us, even if one of them was Osric. Something was coming, something with a terrible hunger for revenge. From time to time I glanced back, reckoning up how many we had overtaken, and wondering whether they would be enough to satisfy that hunger.

In my heart I knew the answer was no.

We came to a place where a lesser track crossed the main road. A man was sitting on the wet grass of the verge, his head in his hands. His horse, flanks streaked white with sweat, stood panting beside him. At the sound of our approach the man looked up and spoke.

“He is coming.” Gwydawg’s expression behind the tattoos was unreadable.

“Who?” I demanded.

“We cannot escape,” he said, ignoring my question.

“I thought you were a magic man,” said Llywri, without mockery. “Can you not hide our trail?”

“Not from them.”

He pointed to the trees fringing the track to the north. A dozen black crows watched us from the branches.

“They are his eyes.”

“Sweet Jesu and blessed Bran preserve us,” exclaimed Llywri. His face was pale under the streaks of paint.

“Bran?” said Gwydawg. “Bran will not help us now.” His laugh was harsh. “We have slain one of his.”

The storm clouds, purple against the dark haze of the sky, were upon us now. A flash of lightning lit the heavens and the rain became a torrent. Blind, I struggled with my panicking horse, fought to prevent it from bolting. I sensed rather than saw somebody brush past me, making for the northern track. My mount swung as if to follow, and I gave the creature its head, letting it run into the wind in the hope this might calm it.

The horse took the bit in its teeth and rattled along the rough track at a breakneck speed. Like Osric I slipped a hand under the saddle and clung for my life. Mud flew from the hooves of the leading horse, splattered my face. Thunder rolled above. The wildness seized me, made me cry aloud as we galloped, made me encourage the horse to go faster, to overtake the leader.

Of a sudden I felt the horse falter, miss a step. We slowed. The horse stumbled again, did not recover. I leapt clear, aware of the others at my back and fearing they would run me down. We were further ahead than I had thought though, and Llywri had time to bring his mount to halt.

“The horses are blown,” he said. “Down, all of you, and into the woods.”

There were six or seven of us – it was hard to tell in the confusion, blinded by the pouring rain. Everybody dismounted, and Llywri whipped the surviving horses across their quarters with a broken branch. They bolted along the track.

“Come,” he said.

We pushed through the wet undergrowth, moving blindly, driven by an animal urge to seek cover. The light was failing fast and it was dark under the trees. Cursing, we fought against the dragging branches and the slippery ground, forced a path deeper into the wood. Everything was wet: I put my hand upon a trunk to steady myself and felt my palm slide on the slime of the bark.

At length we came to a small clearing and without a word being spoken paused to rest. I glanced at the huddled forms around me: Llywri at my side, badly frightened; one of the archers sobbing for breath behind him; Gwydawg squatting by himself, his back against a tree; Hareth with the brooch bright upon his cloak; a pair of Llywri's men peering anxiously the way we had come. As I watched they drew their long knives, gestured to us to be ready.

The lightning flashed, lit up the clearing so for a dazzling instant every leaf and twig were etched upon the eye. The thunder burst directly overhead, a long slow boom that seemed to last forever.

Llywri's men fell, their cries lost in the thunder. A figure stepped into the space they had left. He held a sword in his right hand, and where his other hand should have been was a blur of darkness. He had no shield, no mail, no following: just himself and a single blade.

He smiled. There were five of us left and his advantage of surprise was lost. I ran at him, aware of Hareth angling in from the other side, of Llywri and the archer moving behind me, of Gwydawg scrambling to his feet.

The lightning struck again, and when my vision cleared the newcomer had passed me by, was halfway across the clearing. The thunder crashed as he blocked Llywri's attack, barring the other's wrist with his left forearm while his own sword hammered twice at Llywri's face. Llywri screamed, reeled aside clutching his head.

The archer swung his long knife at the newcomer's back, but the man had moved long before the blow landed. Hareth and I joined the archer, struck hard and often, but it was like fighting an image in water. He was never where we thought he was, always somewhere else, floating aside so our blades cleaved only air. We could not touch him, whereas he could have killed all of us a dozen times or more.

The flat of his sword struck me in the midriff, drove the wind from my body. Hareth stepped back, lifted his blade and shook his head. The archer licked his lips, edged cautiously away.

"I have no quarrel with any of you," said the man. "Tend your comrades."

Gwydawg's knife sliced toward his spine. He turned, almost casually, and let it pass him. His left arm struck the tattooed man on the side of the head and Gwydawg staggered.

"This is the one I want. For the sake of a brooch I will spare you."

"You are Cei's summoning?" Hareth said shakily.

"I am." He smiled again, a smile without warmth. "I am the vengeance of Cei and Arthur."

The left arm grabbed Gwydawg by the collar of his cloak, and I saw that the dark blur at the end of his sleeve was a black glove. Oddly, it was then that I knew him.

In former days his worshippers were many. Lately his following has lessened, so that he is now the least favoured among men of the three great ones. Wotan and Thunor are accorded far more honour than he. But Tiw is the oldest of the gods of war: judge of the battlefield and upholder of the rules of combat. There was none more fitting to avenge Cei's murder.

He tossed Gwydawg to one side, like a great cat with its prey.

Wheezing, I forced myself to my knees. “Lord,” I said, “Lord,” and bowed to him.

He studied me, eyes burning in the gloom of the clearing. The rain slackened as the storm at last moved away. From the trees came the grumbling of crows.

“See to the others,” he said. “Do not interfere.”

He dragged Gwydawg, who seemed dazed, across the clearing and into the darkness of the wood. I waited, frozen, and beside me I heard Hareth panting with awe.

“Tiw,” he whispered.

“Yes,” I said.

I was trembling, so weak I could scarcely stand. The archer had fled into the storm, but the two of us found Llywri and did the best we could to staunch the bleeding of his shattered face. To my surprise, the pair who had fallen first were not dead, only stunned; but then as he had said, his quarrel was not with us, only with Gwydawg.

Gwydawg.

As the racket of the storm lessened, we heard the ring of blade upon blade, and a high pitched squeal, like an animal in a trap. A moment’s silence, then a voice said, very calm: “Pick it up.” After a pause the clash of steel began again, slow at first, then a quick flurry, and a sobbing.

It went on for a long time, the sound of the blades, the screaming, the relentless voice demanding the affair be played out to the finish.

And so my tale ends, with the man coming out of the darkness, wiping his blade upon a piece of cloth torn from Gwydawg’s tunic. He walked past us as if we did not exist, and I saw that the god had left him, and all that remained was his grief, and his horror at what he had done.

We did not move until he had gone.

Hareth and I waited until Llywri’s men had recovered enough to tend to their master, then we too slipped away into the night.

* * *

“From that day forth our allegiance was given to Tiw,” said Guthlaf.

Eurgain laid aside the distaff and spindle with which she had been occupying her hands while Guthlaf was talking. “But ...” she began, then was quiet, thinking about what she wanted to say.

“You make little of your own part,” said one of the strangers who had come over to listen. “Cerdic honoured you.”

“Cerdic?” She frowned. “Why Cerdic?”

“Cerdic Elesing,” whispered Ceolric when the stranger ignored her. “Cerdic is Elesa’s son. Guthlaf took back word of Elesa’s death, and of the tattooed man’s foretelling that Elesa’s seed would have dominion.”

She looked around her at the newcomers in the hall: big men, fierce men, hardened warriors. “And these are Cerdic’s followers?”

“Most of them, yes.”

She rose and drew Ceolric to one side, away from Guthlaf and the stranger. “Wermund means to use these men to fight off any challenge from Ynis Witrin.”

“Yes.”

“And in so doing, make himself master of these lands.”

Ceolric nodded. “He will win the gratitude of the locals for protecting them from a usurping tyrant.”

“But these men serve Cerdic, not Wermund. All he will be doing is changing one tyrant for another.”

“He has thought of that. Cerdic may become his overlord in name, but it is a long way from here to Cerdic’s hall. I do not think my brother is too worried.”

She gnawed her lip. “Once it is done, why will they need Wermund?”

Ceolric smiled, amused. “You are devious. I think he will survive. The locals will trust him, the man who delivered them from the tyranny of this Abbot Angus. He will be useful.”

“For a time,” she said darkly.

“Cerdic is a man of honour.”

“Like his father?”

“No, not like his father. He scarcely knew his father. Elesa was a schemer and a wanderer, a man who became obsessed with what he saw as the injustices done him. Cerdic is successful; his father was not.”

“But Cerdic also schemes.”

PART III

CHAPTER ONE

1

Seradwen lay lonely in bed, wishing Nai were with her. The wind made it worse, howling around the hut like ravening wolves, reminding her of their time at the monastery in the wastelands of Dumnonia, when they had encountered Abbot Angus mab Connor and seen some of his followers.

She shifted uncomfortably, rubbed at a thigh, scratched under a breast. Other men had retired to monasteries and then re-entered the world. One of the most famous had lived and died a hundred years ago, when Britain was supposedly still part of the Roman empire in the west. Constans son of Constantine was a monk until the army in Britain proclaimed his father emperor in rivalry to Honorius. Constantine sailed to Gaul with a large force to secure his position. Constans left the monastery and joined his father, and for a time they were successful, until they were betrayed by one of their generals, Gerontius, and Constans was killed in battle. Constantine had himself ordained before surrendering to his rival Honorius, in the hope clerical robes would save his life. He was executed shortly afterwards.

Odd how the names reappeared. Constantine or Custennin and Gerontius or Gereint were common names in the ruling family of Dumnonia to this day. Nai's lord was called Gereint, while Custennin was the present High Lord of Dumnonia. Even more oddly, there was no love lost between the two.

But monasteries. She scraped an itch on her knee, dragged her thoughts back on to track. There were different kinds of monasteries, ranging from the very strict to the very loose. Some were simply associations of like minded people who chose to live and work together without taking any vows; in others every moment of the day was sternly regulated. Some communities were great landowners by virtue of the estates with which they were endowed, and were thus heavily involved in the world about them; others were deliberately sited in the poorest and most isolated regions, in order to escape from the distractions of society.

And Bedwyr. He was another monk who had returned. Sometimes during the last month he had talked of his time in Lesser Britain. His abbot sounded both wise and fair, a man of genuine faith and kindness, unlike Angus. But then she was prejudiced. When she had met Angus mab Connor, he had made it perfectly clear that he did not care for women. He had ignored her, speaking almost exclusively to Nai.

Was she being unfair? Perhaps he had not approved of her. She had after all run off with Nai, abandoning home and responsibilities like a girl in the throes of her first love affair. But she was a widow, not an unfaithful wife; a woman of means with every right to do as she pleased. And he had allowed them to choose whether they slept together or apart

during their stay at his monastery, so she did not think he objected on moral grounds. No, it was women in general he disliked, not her in particular.

‘Must be a wrong one,’ she heard Bodgath say in her head, and she laughed at the thought of her one true friend at her late husband’s farm. Little brown Bodgath with his shapeless cap and his hawthorn stick, Bodgath who was himself not overly fond of women unless they knew their business. But then he was not overly fond of men either, including her husband’s heirs, who did not know their business and were not willing to listen to someone who did. Bodgath preferred animals, especially horses.

She was wandering again. She laced her hands across her belly and tried to get comfortable.

Angus the one-time monk, the one-time leader of Custennin’s warband, the one-time Companion of Arthur – though the last only briefly. Angus was a cousin of the much loved Lleinawg, another of Arthur’s Companions, and a cousin also of Eremon the traitor, whom she had known when they were both children. She had disliked Eremon too – with reason, as it turned out, since he had tried to kill Nai.

Angus was a man of ambition, who wanted power because he believed himself the most competent to exercise it. A man who believed Arthur’s Albion could be remade, with himself in Arthur’s place. A man who, in his own words, had spent his life in pursuit of the best. And the examples he had used had been the best swordsman and the best warband. Which was revealing.

A man of violence. That was what was wrong with him, what she had smelled uncoiling from his hide like smoke from a smouldering log: he would always use violence to achieve his ends. She was not being fanciful. The other monks in his monastery, the ones who were not part of his little conspiracy, had been afraid of him, though they had tried to hide it.

Angus had levelled the same accusation at Bedwyr, when he was trying to persuade Nai to abandon the old warrior. But Bedwyr had a different feel to him. He was capable of violence, was probably even more proficient at killing than Angus himself, yet he was not a violent man. Bedwyr would laugh aloud if she said that to him, tell her she was simple, but it was true. He fought for other people, not himself; he was a protector, not a destroyer.

And Arthur, upon whom they all modelled themselves one way or the other? Arthur had been a soldier, yes, but he had also been a man of peace. For nearly twenty years he had stopped the tribes of Britain from killing each other, and for ten more years after his death the memory of his peace had held the warlords in check. The peace was breaking now, disintegrating like a breached dam under the force of the flood. There were rumours of fighting in Gwynedd, where young Maelgwn flexed his muscles (larger than most, said the same rumour); in the north, where the rival houses of the Coelings and the Kunwydyon renewed their ancient quarrel; in Wectis, where the Saeson Cerdic was busy subduing the Ytes. Alone, none of these matters were of great importance; taken together, they signalled a return to the dark days of Vitolinus the High King eighty years before.

The bedding was making her itch. She pushed back the covers and brushed at the bottom blanket, dislodging the specks of dirt that had fallen from her feet. Dawn must be near; soon she would hear the sounds of others moving and would be able to get up.

Was it chance that the issue of the chalice had suddenly resurfaced just as Arthur’s peace dissolved? For ten years, ever since Arthur’s death at Camlann, the chalice had lain forgotten and unheeded in the care of Gwenhwyvar. Now, suddenly, everybody wanted it: its former guardians, the Children of Menestyr; Vortepor of Dyfed, who had ruled longest

of all the lords of Prydein and therefore had some claim to seniority; Angus, as heir to Lleminawg who had won it in the first place. (Angus had claimed he only wished to see the chalice taken back to the far north in the care of its original guardians, to prevent lesser men from using it to buttress their claims to be Arthur's successor, but she had not believed him then and she did not believe him now.)

The Chalice of Sovereignty. She remembered Nai, fumbling for words with his harsh and damaged voice, saying that sovereignty might be held by good rulers or bad, but was greater than those who wielded it. The ruler might be corrupt, but sovereignty remained undefiled. Nai had said something else too, something which had struck her as important: the sovereignty of the land was that which abides deep within it.

She wriggled across the bed, stretching her toes.

If sovereignty abided within the land, then the chalice could never be anything other than a symbol, like a chain of office. Except that obviously the chalice was more than that: possessing a ruler's chain did not make a man a ruler. If she had understood correctly, the chalice would always find its way to the true sovereign; had Arthur and the rest not gone to seek it out, the chalice would sooner or later have been brought south.

So why had it been hidden away in the far north since the days of Caradoc mab Bran and the conquest of Prydein by the legions of Rome hundreds of years ago?

Because in all that time the island had been without a sovereign. Because sovereignty had lain sleeping until it was needed again.

Sometimes, and more so since leaving the farm where she had lived since her marriage, she tried to see into the future, to guess what would happen in the next ten or twenty years. She knew Britain had changed greatly over the last sixty years, so that for Bedwyr, Gwenhwyvar and their contemporaries it was an utterly different place from the one into which they had been born.

From her point of view it had not until now seemed to change very much from the world she remembered as a child. As a girl on the verge of marriage she recalled the countryside being worried by wandering bands of dispossessed from further east. Her husband's farm had been troubled by them for several months, but it was all over by the time she wed Mordav and moved there. That had been in the period of unrest immediately after Arthur's death. Things had soon settled, and she herself had never been directly affected.

Apart from Eremon's rebellion – which had been a freak and quickly put down, though with many losses – there had been little fighting during her adult life. Before her marriage she had lived briefly with Nai. (Impossibly young they both seemed now.) They had parted because she was unable to take his daily existence seriously: the arguments with his comrades over the best weapons; the futile cattle-raiding, where the only people hurt were the ones so drunk they fell off their horses. The warriors did no work, and so far as she could see in those days served no purpose.

Eremon's rebellion had changed her mind.

Now she was older she could understand how Gereint's warband, by the very fact of its being, prevented the raiding from becoming fully fledged warfare. She had seen their purpose when they fought Eremon and drove him from his lands. They were part of a balance of powers, and while those powers held each other in check, ordinary people, the farmers and workers like Bodgath, were left in peace to get on with their lives.

Peace. In the Kingdom of Heaven there would be no need for warriors. (Yet even Heaven had once known war, when certain angels dreamt of becoming gods themselves.)

Peace. That was the single most important thing Arthur had brought: imperfect, never anything other than fragile, but peace of a kind.

Now after thirty years it was ending, and the future was bleak.

And the chalice had reappeared.

2

On the morning of the fourth day Racwant brought them by the secret ways to the edge of the marshes. The bubble-blower had changed under Bedwyr's tuition, become more sure of himself. Nai still could not decide whether the man was a half-wit or immensely cunning (or indeed both) but it no longer seemed to matter much. He would serve his purpose, which was to bring the remains of Pabo's warband to a meeting place on the Fosse Way at the appointed time. Pabo and Llywri would accompany the warband, but its commander would be Racwant.

Nai shook his head. The whole incident seemed like a dream, like three days spent in some otherworldly realm. They were returning to the place where they had met Llywri, the woods were still filled with muddy holes and the wreckage of broken branches, and the mist still curled among the trees, drifting like smoke to twine around the horses' hooves and disguise the pitfalls. Except that this was morning and that had been afternoon, no time at all might have passed since their outward journey.

They came to the rocks where they had sat while Bedwyr talked of Cei. Racwant reined in his dun pony and beamed at them.

"You know where you are now. I will leave you here."

"Go carefully," said Bedwyr.

"I shall." Racwant raised a hand in farewell, his face solemn, wheeled his mount and rode back into the trees and mist.

Nai heaved a sigh of relief.

"You find him trying?"

"Yes," he said.

Bedwyr smiled. "Like many men he is a mix of simplicity and ambition. He possesses a single-mindedness which will serve us well. Left to themselves, Pabo would sit in his marsh and bewail his lot, and Llywri would talk about doing something and accomplish nothing. Racwant will drive them to act."

Nai was examining the ground. "Somebody has been here. Look."

Despite the rain, traces of their earlier visit remained in the form of hoofprints and a scuff mark where Llywri had stepped back when Bedwyr threatened him. More prints overlaid them, as if somebody else had been studying what the ground could tell them.

"Recent?" asked Bedwyr.

"Yesterday, maybe." Nai shrugged. "Several men. One rested on a spear butt. See the mark? Horses too."

Now that he had started looking Nai found more and more signs. "This was a large party," he said uneasily. "They followed our trail into the woods. Those twigs are newly broken, and not by us." He dismounted to search better, poking about on the fringe of the trees.

"Dung," he said after a while. "Too fresh for yesterday." He straightened, stared around him. "I think they were here this morning. Not long ago."

“How far into the woods did they go?” Bedwyr’s voice sounded unconcerned, but he swung his shield from his back to his arm and fastened the strap about his wrist.

“Not far. Enough to decide on our direction. Then they turned, came out again further down.” Nai followed the traces to the edge of the trees, looked up and found himself staring at a swath of muddy grass. “Look at the hoofprints here,” he said.

Bedwyr came to join him. “They departed in haste. Did something disturb them?” He glanced around. “Unlikely.”

“They reached a decision,” said Nai.

They looked at each other, looked again at the torn grass. The signs were clear. A dozen or so riders had set their heels to their mounts and left at a gallop.

“Like a raiding party,” said Bedwyr. He lifted an eyebrow at Nai.

“The farm?”

“I fear so.” Bedwyr ran his good hand across the stubble of his beard. His face darkened, and he drew a deep breath. “I must help them, Nai.”

Nai unslung his war-board, checked the javelins in his quiver.

“You should go to Gwenhwyvar,” said Bedwyr. “If I do not return, do as she asks for my sake.”

“Yes,” said Nai. He looked fondly at the older man.

“I mean you should go now,” Bedwyr said sharply.

“Yes. I should.” Nai made no move to leave.

Bedwyr urged his mount forward on the track of the riders. The trail was easy to follow, a broad swath of trampled grass leading up the hill.

“Will you go?” he called over his shoulder.

“No,” said Nai, drawing level with him. “They sheltered me as well, however begrudgingly.”

“That is not why I must help them.”

“I know,” Nai said impatiently. “You ride for Arthur and all the rest, and because such things should not be.”

Bedwyr nodded, and suddenly a smile lightened his set features. “Lend me a spear, cousin. I have none.”

From the top of the ridge they saw a plume of thick black smoke rising into the wind. The farm was much closer than Nai had expected. He had thought they had ridden for ages through the rain on that earlier morning, but it must have been the frequent need to stop that had made the journey seem so long.

“We take the road,” said Bedwyr, pointing to where the track curved in the shadow of the ridge. “My guess is the smoke comes from the barns; do you see how there are several columns? If they had warning enough, the people will have retreated to the stone hall. We trot to begin with. When I give the signal, we go to the gallop. With luck they – the raiders – will be too excited to hear us coming. I doubt if they have much experience of this kind of action.”

Whereas you do, thought Nai. I wonder how many times you have done this – though I’ll warrant never with only one man to back you. And you would do this whether I were here or not, even if you could ride away in safety with nobody to know.

“We are probably too late,” Bedwyr said as they descended the hill. “But we must try anyway.”

The hooves clattered on the gravel of the track. They splashed through the place where the stream crossed the path, and then they were riding between grey walls of stone, and sheep were scattering in the fields beside them.

“Not driven off the stock then,” called Nai.

“No. They’ve gone for the inhabitants first. This is a punitive raid, not a dash for loot,” Bedwyr said grimly.

The track wound between the old walls. The smoke was very black and thick ahead of them. Nai wished he had Coal under him, and rued the impulse which had made him think it would be clever to take a strange horse. At least he had had the sense to bring his war saddle.

He shifted forward onto the front horns of the saddle, feeling the familiar spot where the leather padding had worn thin and the wooden frame was hard against his upper thigh. The untrained mount faltered, and he knew he should have practised this more, accustomed the beast to his movements.

“Now!” cried Bedwyr.

The ground juddered, then flowed smoothly as the horses found their stride. Bedwyr was racing ahead, letting his mount lower its neck and head in the excitement of the gallop. Nai’s pony was eager now, running straight, and he allowed his left hand, encumbered by the shield, to loosen on the reins while with his right he plucked a javelin from the quiver hanging from the saddle.

Smoke gusted across the path. The barns and huts were burning. A ring of men stood by the entrance to the stone hall. The roof was a smouldering ruin. The ridge beam still stood, and a few charred rafters, but the rest was gone. The upper stonework was blackened.

The horses were frightened by the fires. Bedwyr swerved around the huts, found the low wall of the enclosure that enfolded the settlement, and let it lead them to the hall. From a pace or so behind him Nai saw a flicker of movement in one of the barns. A voice shouted.

They swept down the length of the hall, the ponies again running smoothly now they had the wall on one side to guide them.

The men were laughing and talking. Nai could see what had happened, as clearly as if he had been here to witness it: the people had been herded into the hall, willingly or otherwise, and the doors barricaded behind them; then the men had tossed burning brands on to the roof until it caught.

The anger rose within him. He hurled his spear, had a second in his hand at once, slipping into the old rhythm without thought. A man fell. They had been seen now, and the group was scattering apart like chickens before the fox. Twice more he threw, and then the easy targets were gone. Bedwyr struck twice with his sword, left and right, downing one man and splitting the shield of another.

They had to keep moving. The men were quick now they had realized the danger, dividing naturally into pairs, holding their war-boards out and up to cover themselves. Nai cast again, and knew even as he released that the spear would be deflected by a shield. Ahead of him Bedwyr allowed the wing of the enclosing wall to bring his mount back through the burning huts. Nai turned in the saddle, murmuring gentle nonsense to calm the animal, dropped the reins so his shield passed over the pony’s head and hurled two javelins in quick succession. The first took its victim by surprise; the second missed as his mount swerved.

He had lost control of the horse and it was panicking. The swerve combined with the weight of the shield dragged him off balance, and for a moment he reeled in the saddle, only the horns saving him from a fall. A hut blazed bright before them. The horse flinched, slowed, plunged into the smoke. Air and ground were thick with sparks: a shower of hot

embers stung his face as the wind fanned the flames. The pony spun and danced. He fumbled for the reins, aware of a figure running toward him.

“Nai mab Nwython,” bellowed the figure. “Stand and fight!”

He brought the skittering horse under control, calming it with his hands and legs. The man was close now, sword raised to shoulder height, face hidden by a leather cap. Nai rode at him, using the spear as a lance. He felt the point bed in flesh and released the shaft; caught the sword on the boss of his shield and rocked under the impact. Then he was past, and there were shapes all around him in the smoke, blades glowing red from the light of the fires.

A thatched roof went up with a roar of searing heat, the flames leaping high above the smoke. For the instant before the walls gave way the skeletal frame of the timbers was outlined in fire, then all came tumbling down upon itself. The horse screamed, a soul wrenching sound. The smell of burning hair was strong in Nai’s nostrils and he choked as the horse fled.

He had lost all sense of direction. The horse reared, hooves pawing the smoke, and the spear that would have struck his back flew past, so close he saw the gleam of the head against his side.

Nai shouted, heaved roughly on the reins, and fought the frightened animal under control. He went forward, hoping to escape into the open, burst through the smoke and found himself once again before the stone hall. The men there were even more startled than he was, and he threw three times before they gathered their wits.

The pony yawed, slowed to a standstill, trembling with fear and exhaustion.

“Ah, Nai, your horse is blown,” shouted a burly man, and this one Nai recognized by the gap in his teeth as one of the monks he had met in the monastery of Angus mab Connor.

“Wethenoc,” he said, letting the horse stand. “Is your abbot not with you today?”

“Had he known you would be here I am sure he would have joined us,” said a second man as burly as the first. They edged toward him, one on either side.

“Lasrian,” Nai acknowledged. This one he had seen fight Regin the bard with wooden blades in the training hall at the monastery, and though the bard had won Nai had no illusions about his own chances against the former monk.

“Have you come to die?” asked Wethenoc. His blade licked the air and his small round targe wove with it, both moving in curves, never still, winding back and forth so every part of Wethenoc’s body was covered against a sudden attack.

“To kill.” Nai flicked the butt of his spear at the pony’s flank and the animal plunged forward. He brought the javelin up and threw awkwardly, aiming for the middle of Wethenoc’s chest in the hope he might hit something. Lasrian’s sword thundered against his tilted shield and he both heard and felt the wood split under the force of the blow.

Wethenoc screeched. More men were coming. Nai reached for another spear. He fumbled the grip so he wielded it like a staff: cracked it down on Lasrian’s face upturned under a leather cap, then turned to flog at Wethenoc on the other side.

The horse broke free from the clutching hands. He hurled the spear into the mass of men behind him, and gave all his attention to guiding the pony along the line of the wall, back the way he and Bedwyr had ridden in the beginning.

All the huts had fallen in now, so the flames were not so high and there was less smoke. Even the barns beyond the wall were down to their foundations. A couple of men, seeing his course, tried to cut him off, but they abandoned the attempt when they realized

his speed would carry him through. Another lunged at him by the entrance to the yard and was sent sprawling by the pony's hooves.

Then he was out on the track with a clean wind in his face, galloping the length of the valley, and Bedwyr was waiting calmly where the path forked and a narrow trail led up into the shadows of the hillside, cleaning his sword on a piece of rag.

"What kept you?" Bedwyr asked as he drew level, tossing the rag aside and sheathing his blade.

"Old acquaintances," said Nai. He glanced behind him, but there was no sign of anybody coming after them.

"I tried to drive off their horses." Bedwyr followed his gaze, shrugged. "I was going to get us fresh mounts. Our friends were too quick for me."

"Nearly for me," Nai said breathlessly. His chest was tight from the smoke and he felt giddy.

They climbed the hill, the horses wheezing and panting, then dismounted at the top, where they would have some warning of pursuit.

"Let the horses rest while they can," said Bedwyr, eyeing Nai's pony anxiously. "This is not good country in which to be a fugitive."

Indeed it was not, being open and barren with little cover. Nai recalled Bedwyr saying this had been good grazing land once, but it was hard to imagine now. To his eyes it seemed flat and desolate, dank and dirty. Even the grass looked unhealthy, a bitter green as if there were something wrong with the soil.

The giddiness was worse. Nai sat and put his head between his knees. After a bit he said: "Do you think anybody escaped?"

Bedwyr shook his head. "Not from the hall. The smoke will have got them if the flames did not. Some may have been out in the fields and had a chance to run. I would have wanted that if I were Angus – a few witnesses to spread the tale of horror."

"A warning," croaked Nai. He found his water bottle, wetted his throat. "Was it because they gave us shelter?"

"I do not think so." Bedwyr's face was grave. "The farmer feared something like this. God forgive me, I told him he must endure until times changed."

They waited a while, watching the road below while the horses recovered. The fires crackled at the far end of the valley, and they heard voices, too faint to make out any words.

"You knew some of the men?" asked Bedwyr.

"From the monastery. At least two, and a third called me by name." Nai frowned. "Thinking about it, he was the man the Abbot made me fight with training swords. Isag."

"The third one?"

Nai nodded. "A short bout. He won, though compared with the others he was not that good."

"Isag," said Bedwyr. "Very biblical."

Nai stretched, feeling better. Bedwyr was watching the track, so he kept a wary eye on the ground behind them in case the raiders found another route out of the valley.

"Here they come," said Bedwyr.

The original party had been larger than Nai had thought. There were fourteen horses, but five now carried their owners slung over their spines like old sacks. Three more of the riders were slumped in the saddle.

"We did some damage," Bedwyr said with satisfaction, making no attempt to hide.

"They have seen us."

“Good. If they want to come up the hill after us, let them.” Nai studied the party below. Wethenoc was in the lead. The former monk’s face turned toward the narrow path, and Nai could see him assessing the odds. Reaching a decision the man cupped his hands and shouted:

“Our master bade us return home once our business was completed. Otherwise it would be the worse for you.”

Bedwyr stepped out into full view. From the side of his mouth he muttered: “Can you put a spear among them?”

The riders were slightly beyond what Nai would have normally considered the furthest possible range. He pursed his lips, gauging the wind strength. Given the advantage of height afforded by the hill, it might be just possible to land a spear among them, though at this distance there would be no force behind it save that of its own weight falling.

He took a spear from the quiver, went back a few paces to give himself room.

“Your master has betrayed his vows to God and to his rightful lord,” shouted Bedwyr. “He is a false traitor, and you who serve him are in peril of your mortal souls.”

Wethenoc laughed. “Old fool. If I had time I would come up and deal with you; you and that crow beside you.”

“Come and be welcome,” said Bedwyr.

Holding himself bolt upright, Nai ran. He lifted on to his legs and heels and cast with all his might, letting his momentum carry him forward so he fell into a crouch on the crest of the hill.

Straight and true the spear climbed on a shallow course. For a moment it seemed to hang, then the head dipped and it began to drop, hesitantly at first then with greater and greater speed. Wethenoc watched it come, mouth open in a circle of disbelief. Almost too late he realized his danger and wrenched on the reins. His mount reared. The spear struck, quivered malevolently in the earth between his horse’s hooves.

“Well done,” said Bedwyr.

Nai wiped his brow. “Do not ask me to do it again.”

“Tell your master he has three days to depart from Ynis Witrin and surrender himself to his rightful lord, Custennin of Dumnonia,” shouted Bedwyr.

Wethenoc stared at the spear, looking up the hill at Nai. He seemed too shaken to reply.

“Or what?” called another of the riders.

“Or he will meet his doom, and you with him.”

The riders jostled amongst themselves. A few appeared to be contemplating a charge up the hill, but Wethenoc roused himself and spread his arms wide to prevent them.

“Who are you?”

“You know who I am,” called Bedwyr.

Wethenoc shook his head. “I know the dark man with you and his skill with the spear. You I do not know.”

“I am Arthur’s man, as was Angus in his youth. Unlike him I keep my faith.”

Lasrian pushed his horse up beside Wethenoc. “Arthur is gone.” He yanked the leather cap from his head, and shook it angrily. Nai could see the smear of dried blood on his face, and the circle of shorter hair on his crown where the tonsure was growing out.

“But I am not. You have slaughtered those you should have defended. Worse than a wolf that preys upon the herd is a sheep-dog that turns upon the flock.” Bedwyr raised his grey blade. “Come, and feel my vengeance.”

“Tell me your name,” demanded Wethenoc.

“I am Bedwyr mab Petroc.” The rocks rang with the echoes of his name.

“Your day is done,” howled Lasrian. He set his heels to his horse and galloped down the valley. The others followed behind him, living and dead alike; all save Wethenoc. The burly man sat upon his horse with his head bowed until the others had vanished around a bend in the track.

“You slew Isgofan,” he called when it was quiet again.

“I did.”

“In a fair fight?”

“The two of us alone, before many witnesses.”

“That is not what Regin says.”

“Regin was not there,” said Nai. He raised his voice, made hoarse by the effort of shouting. “Regin was too busy bewailing the loss of his harp while men died around him. He did not see the fight.”

“I wondered,” said Wethenoc. “I wondered.” He shook himself. “Angus was Isgofan’s master. I do not understand why he acts as he does, but he is angry.”

“So too am I,” answered Bedwyr.

“He is the best man I have seen with a sword,” said Wethenoc. “A man must follow the best.”

“You did not see me in my prime,” said Bedwyr.

“There is the nub,” Wethenoc said sadly. “You are no longer in your prime.”

He gathered the reins and walked his mount after his companions, moving with a slow dignity. It was a long while before the sound of the hooves on the gravel died away.

3

A gentle tap at the door roused her from a half doze.

“Seradwen? Seradwen, are you awake?”

“A moment,” she called, pulling a gown over her head and combing her fingers through her hair before opening the door.

A woman stood outside, pale with lack of sleep, hands fretting at the seam of her skirt. Seradwen recognized her as the wife of one of Echel’s cousins, though she could not remember her name.

“I am sorry to disturb you so early,” the woman said in a rush. “Gwenhwyvar is asking for you.”

“Gwenhwyvar?” Seradwen said stupidly.

“She is not well.” The woman coloured slightly. “Oh, of course, you knew that. I mean she has taken a turn for the worse, poor dear.” She dropped her voice. “We worry about her, and the events of the last month or so have been such a dreadful strain for her. Will you come?”

“Yes, yes, I’ll come.” Seradwen pulled the door wide, aware that the hut needed airing, that her clothes were scattered untidily across the bed and single stool in a way she would have thought sluttish in someone else’s room. “Just let me find my shoes.”

She hunted through the mess, feeling the disapproval wafting from the woman on the threshold.

“This is not a royal command.”

“I am sorry?” Seradwen paused, a shoe in either hand.

The woman smiled nervously, plucked at a loose thread. “I was told to tell you that. Gwenhwyvar said you were not to feel you had to come at once.” She swallowed, added: “Though I think you would be wise to do so.”

Seradwen stared. “Is she dying?”

The woman looked shocked. “No, no. But she had a bad night, and I expect she will sleep through most of the day.”

Outside was a cold, grey dawn. The air was heavy with the promise of rain, the sky low and dull. Even the birds sounded subdued. They hastened across the yard, avoiding the worst of the mud, and came to Gwenhwyvar’s chamber.

Although Seradwen had talked with the former queen in the hall and in her workshop, this was the first time she had seen her room. Unlike her own it was clean and well lit, with fresh rushes strewn upon the floor and bundles of sweet smelling herbs dangling from the ceiling. A brazier glowed at the foot of the bed, so the room struck hot as one entered.

Gwenhwyvar herself lay in the bed, propped up on bright cushions. There were deep shadows under her eyes, and her skin looked very white against the colourful fabric.

“My dear Seradwen,” she murmured. “How kind of you to come. I hope we did not disturb you?”

“I was awake,” Seradwen said awkwardly, feeling large and ungainly in this pretty space. “I did not sleep well.”

She blushed as she realized this was a foolish thing to say to someone in Gwenhwyvar’s position, but the older woman merely smiled and patted the edge of the bed.

“Please, sit and talk to me a while.” She lifted her head from the pillows, said: “Anna, would you be very kind and fetch us something warm and nourishing from the kitchen? Some broth, perhaps?”

The other woman nodded. “It may take a little while. The kitchen will not be ready yet.”

Gwenhwyvar smiled winningly. “There is no hurry. I shall have Seradwen to keep me company.”

“Very well,” said the woman. She glanced suspiciously at Seradwen before pulling the door closed behind her.

“I manipulate her shamelessly,” said Gwenhwyvar. Her voice was weak, and Seradwen had to lean close to hear. “She is kind and caring, but she is also possessive. I need to talk to you privately.”

“Me?” said Seradwen, unable to conceal her surprise. When the summons came she had assumed Gwenhwyvar wanted a fresh face around her, somebody with interests outside the daily life of the settlement. This sounded more ominous.

“Yes, you.” The bards still sang of the young Gwenhwyvar, a woman with a form like gossamer, who had inherited a third part of the beauty of Mother Eve. Even in her age and illness, the remnants lingered.

“I am dying,” she said calmly, and raised a hand to stifle Seradwen’s protests.

“Not in the sense that we are all dying, but specifically, in that I doubt if I have more than a few weeks to live. And I am glad. I am going home, Seradwen, and not before time. I am very weary.”

Seradwen could see it writ large upon her face: the weariness of one who has outlived her lover and her sons, seen the death of all her high hopes.

“There are things which must be done before I go. I had thought to do them myself, with Bedwyr’s help. But I no longer have the strength. You know about the chalice?”

“I know *of* it.” Seradwen frowned. “I would not say I know *about* it. I know Arthur and his companions brought it back from the far north. I know Arthur was wounded and unable to perform the ritual himself, that Lleinawg acted as his substitute. I know the chalice is said to confer sovereignty, and that it is now in your keeping. And I know that others want it. But I do not understand it.” She hesitated, added: “I wondered if the chalice does not convey sovereignty, as we think of it, but rather attaches itself to the sovereign.”

“Go on,” Gwenhwyvar encouraged.

Seradwen shrugged. “This is probably foolish. The affair began when the woman Teleri came to Arthur’s court – your court – and sang of the divine child who was stolen away by the Grey Man, and how the child’s father rescued him. There are parallels between that story and what happened to Arthur.”

“It is the same tale,” said Gwenhwyvar. “But in a different time.”

“Arthur was lamed, like Nudd in the story. Lleinawg danced the labyrinth for him, answered the questions asked by the guardians. But he died. That was not in Teleri’s tale.”

“No, it was not.”

“And later. Angus told of us of the death of your son. You came, after he was dead, with the chalice.” She glanced uncertainly at Gwenhwyvar, and the older woman gazed back without flinching. “According to Angus, you tried to heal him with the chalice.”

“And the chalice was flawed,” murmured Gwenhwyvar.

“So Angus said. Did you truly think it might raise him?” She felt herself blush. “Forgive me. That was rude.”

Gwenhwyvar laughed. “No. You have a right to ask.” She pulled at the covers, her hand white and frail. “Did I think the chalice would raise Llacheu from the dead? No, though that must be how it seemed to others. I hoped the chalice would heal not his ills, but the ills of our land, the petty hatreds that divided us. And to some extent Llacheu’s death did heal us, because it horrified us all, even those who thought of themselves as opposed to Arthur. Gwydawg mab Menestyr was driven into exile by his people, and Teleri became their leader in his place. When Gwydawg plotted to slay Cei, he was forced to go outside the island to find the men to accomplish the deed.”

She sighed, adjusted the cushions. “That has always been the way of it. The hatreds come from within the realm, and the tools come from without. They will tell you that all our troubles stem from when Vitolinus the High King invited the Saeson Hengist into Britain to help defend the island against the Picts from the far north and the Scotti out of Ireland. There is a grain of truth in that, but Vitolinus also wanted the Saeson mercenaries to crush his rivals within the realm. The threat from outside was used as an excuse to raise the force to destroy the threat within. It is the divisions among the lords of Prydein that were at the root of our problems, not the presence of the Saesons.”

“Hence Albion,” said Seradwen.

“Yes. Albion was an attempt to start afresh, to put behind us the old hatreds of Britannia or Prydein. The chalice gave us the idea, enabled us to draw a line and say: ‘Forget the old hatreds. Here we begin anew.’ It failed of course. The hatreds were too strong.”

“One cannot ignore the past,” said Seradwen, thinking aloud.

“No. The past shapes us.” Gwenthwyvar struggled upright in the bed, her voice growing stronger. “As we grow older we all tell our stories, to ourselves and to others if they will listen, seeking to link the fragments of our lives into a reassuring whole. The bards especially have made a series of disconnected episodes of my life, and so powerful is their glamour that even I am hard put at times to remember what really happened, what I thought and felt instead of the mythical creature they have created. Yet in a way they are right. My life has indeed been a tale of glory and woe, of a striving to make real an impossible dream.”

She coughed, reached for a cup beside the bed and sipped to clear her throat.

“I suppose the usual purpose of our tales is twofold: to give the past life, make it real; and to teach the young how to behave, that they may, as the old saying has it, honour God, do no evil and practise bravery. We tell our would-be warriors of courage against great odds, of the virtues of loyalty, courtesy, truthfulness.”

She shook her head suddenly, and Seradwen caught a glimpse of how she must have looked when young.

“I have grave doubts about many characters in the bible. Adam casting the blame onto Eve. Jacob cheating Esau of his birthright and their father’s blessing.” She sipped again, added darkly: “Not a fitting way to behave.”

“Your tale,” pressed Seradwen, seeing by the gleam in Gwenthwyvar’s eye that they could wander far from the point unless she was checked.

“My tale,” mused Gwenthwyvar. “You know, I wonder sometimes whether we have it right. We think we know which parts of our story were important, which parts minor. For me, obviously, my life revolved around Arthur and the rise and fall of the realm of Albion. But supposing that is not what mattered at all, or that Albion and everything else were merely a means to an end in some greater plan? Perhaps the realm of Albion saved some child from being raped and murdered, and the child grew to live a saintly life, and that was all our purpose.”

“I should think Albion saved countless children from unpleasant deaths,” said Seradwen.

Gwenthwyvar’s eyes twinkled. “I am sure it did, and more besides. I was being dramatic. Did Bedwyr tell you of his time in Isca, after he parted from Nai at Porthyle? He hid himself among a loose community of Christians living around the old market square, and called himself Petroc after his father. The Children of Menestyr came to the city, asking after a man with one hand named Bedwyr or Mab Petroc. A woman of the community warned him of the danger. She knew him because when she was a small child her father had held her up to wave to the great hero Bedwyr as he rode past their farm. Bedwyr waved back in response, and thus the memory of it stayed with her all her days. You see? A trivial action, one Bedwyr had long forgotten because for him it bore no significance. Yet thirty years later it saved him from grave danger.”

“The chalice,” prompted Seradwen.

“Yes, the chalice. There have been times when I have cursed Teleri for tempting us with her tale, and yet now I see it was our tale as well. We lived our lives by a pattern, a great pattern laid down at the beginning of the world, and we could not have lived them any other way. It was inevitable that Arthur would rise to power, that he would have two companions with him always, so close they were like three parts of one whole, that his sons would die before him, that he would be betrayed and brought down at the end. And that his wife would outlive him, linger on to die in obscurity.”

Seradwen shifted uncomfortably, and Gwenthwyvar patted her hand.

“You think I am rambling. Listen. The glory days ended with death of Cei, not the death of Llacheu. It was Cei’s withdrawal and death that mattered. My son’s death was survivable. Young men do die in battle. I had lived most of my adult life with an army at war, and I had often comforted the mothers of the fallen. Llacheu’s death was a nightmare, but I was not completely unprepared. For Arthur also it was a great grief, but he too endured. Cei was the one worst affected. Llacheu was in Cei’s care, and Cei himself struck the blow that set my son free. He felt that he had failed: failed Llacheu, failed Arthur, failed me. It was not his fault, never his fault, and we never blamed him, never did anything save show him our love, but he withdrew from us. He could not face our sorrow, feared his very presence would remind us of what was lost. With Cei’s departure the triumvirate was broken. That was the true victory for the Clan Menestyr: not that they had encompassed the death of Arthur’s heir, but that they had parted Arthur, Cei and Bedwyr.”

A spasm of coughing shook her, tore through her fragile frame. She gestured for the cup and Seradwen passed it to her, held it while she drank.

“You must understand. You see, when Cei first withdrew and then was killed, the Children of Menestyr won a victory as important as Arthur’s great victory at Badon Hill. A victory for all they represented: the small-minded, selfish, closed community, the ones who hated Saesons because they were different, yet were willing to use them to further their own ambitions, the ones who jealously hugged their privileges to their breasts and refused to share (because if they did the privilege would be a privilege no longer), the ones who hated rather than loved. I say the Clan Menestyr, but it was not them alone. Melwas of the Summer Country, to whom as you know I was once betrothed, played a part, and there were others who helped without becoming directly involved. We all know this world of flesh is corrupt, yet it still comes as a shock sometimes to discover just how corrupt. Many in the Church daily betray Christ’s teachings by pursuing earthly power; the lords of the land too often act as oppressors rather than protectors.”

She drank again from the cup. Her eyes were luminous with unshed tears, and looking at her Seradwen saw the mark of death clear upon her face, exactly as she had seen it upon her father’s face in the weeks before he died. Gwenhwyvar’s skin was stretched and translucent, purified and otherworldly, glowing with an inner light of its own fragility.

“Imagine an apple tree,” said Gwenhwyvar. “A seed is planted, grows through the seasons despite storm and drought until it reaches maturity and puts forth clouds of blossom. Then a blight strikes and the promised fruit withers on the bough.” She gestured helplessly. “So it was with Albion once Cei was slain. The fruit withered, and the tree fell. Without him the shining city could never be built. The flaw in the heart of the chalice dates from the moment Cei was obliged to kill Llacheu to save him from a lingering painful death. And once Cei was dead, the flaw could never be mended.”

“So the chalice,” began Seradwen, then floundered for the right words. “The chalice is a magical object? It is indeed linked to the health of the realm?”

Gwenhwyvar smiled. “It is all a matter of how one looks at things. The Saesons have a god called Tiw or Thincsus, a warrior god with one hand. Lately he has fallen out of favour among them, and his worshippers are few. Some of them believed Bedwyr a manifestation of the god, and the cult had a minor revival. Who is to say they were wrong?”

Seradwen blinked. “Are you suggesting Bedwyr is a god?”

“The Church teaches us we are all spirits clothed in flesh,” Gwenhwyvar shrugged.

Seradwen was not sure how seriously the older woman intended this, for the light of mischief was back in her eyes. In anyone else Seradwen would have dismissed such talk

as madness, or ravings brought on by a fever, but Gwenhwyvar was undoubtedly of her right mind.

“You know as well as I do,” Gwenhwyvar continued, “that the world is full of spirits great and small, neither angels nor devils but between the two, some friendly to humans, some hostile, some indifferent. Our ancestors worshipped them as gods. Our country dwellers, even those nominally Christian, make offerings to them still. In Arvon they yet sacrifice a bull every Whitsuntide, and all creatures born with a slit in the ear are sacred to the god. Many of our saints are of doubtful origin, like Alban with his head cut off, so reminiscent of Bran the Blessed. But my point was who can say for sure that upon occasion those spirits do not set aside their memories and clad themselves in human form? If we are to believe the old tales, the powers of the land once walked as men and women: Bran, Beli, Llew, Rhiannon.”

Seradwen shivered and Gwenhwyvar relented. “I am teasing you. Yet I am also in earnest. I am talking old magic, deep magic, part of the very being of the land. They say of the giant Bran, the Crow Lord, the great Guardian of this isle, that after his death his head was buried at the heart of the realm, and for as long as it remained hidden no oppression could come to this land. Nowadays they say also that Arthur disclosed the head, because it did not seem right to him the realm should be defended by any strength save his own. Like Bran, Arthur’s roots go deep, and so do the roots of those associated with him.”

She laughed suddenly. “Yet what is magic, but the tool of the powerless? The Children of Menestyr made great play of their magic because nothing else remained to them, nothing save the memory of the days when they had been the scourge of the island. Magic is practised by old women, slaves and madmen, by people living on the edges of society, the ones who would otherwise be of no account: the people of the margins.”

Gwenhwyvar leant forward, her eyes very bright. Seradwen made to speak, stopped as she realized the other had not finished. The soul endures, she thought as she listened, absently massaging her stomach, and whatever may be true of the body Gwenhwyvar’s soul is no more near death than one waiting to be born.

“I am powerless now,” said Gwenhwyvar. “An old woman, waiting to die, with nothing left save a tarnished prestige. So I turn to mysticism and magic, to old legends and cracked beliefs. The past cannot be changed; the present unfolds without me; the future is bleak now Arthur’s legacy seems to have failed. But –” she raised a finger “– we have not quite finished. The Children of Menestyr may have lied and exaggerated their powers, yet a kernel of truth lay buried within their wilder claims. The chalice is the land, in the same sense that the sovereign is the land, the health of one depending on the other. What was done in the Western Isles thirty years ago must now be undone.”

“And if it is not?”

“Then I see nothing but fire and blood, the slaughter of the innocent, for generations to come.”

“And if it is undone?”

Gwenhwyvar pursed her lips. “Who knows? Something greater, I think. We cannot cure all the ills of the isle, but it may be the apple tree will yet bear fruit.” She closed her eyes as a spasm ran through her. “Albion was never intended to be a perfect realm. We were not so foolish as to think we were better than other mortals. What we strove to do was create a world in which others might be better than us. And that hope is not yet ended. Even as the clay upon the potter’s wheel recalls the shape in which it was first moulded, so too will Britain recall Albion.”

“What do you want me to do?” Seradwen asked gently.

“To go with Bedwyr and Nai when they return and fetch the chalice. It is hidden in a place I used to play when I was a child. I will tell you how to find it.”

“Why me?”

“Because you also are part of the pattern.” She smiled. “You, Nai, Bedwyr, me: we are all part of the pattern.”

CHAPTER TWO

Every morning the newcomers went out in small groups to make themselves familiar with the countryside. Sometimes they took Wermund or Ceolric with them to act as a guide, but often they went unaccompanied. When they returned in the evening they would describe the places they had been, comparing their findings; and from what they said it was obvious that they made a point of visiting the local farms. It was equally obvious that some of them could speak British, since they would relay the conversations they had had with the farmers, and it seemed to Eurgain, eavesdropping on their deliberations, that they were weighing each household, reckoning its prosperity and the mettle of its menfolk.

“You and your brother are fools to trust them,” she hissed at Ceolric one afternoon. The hall was almost empty, apart from Hildeburh and Ricola debating the merits of madder dye, and Guthlaf dozing by the fire.

Ceolric frowned, tugged his bead in a mannerism he had caught from the newcomers.

“Russet,” said Hildeburh in the background.

“A warmer shade,” countered Ricola. “Russet has too much brown.”

“Do you remember asking me about the word *giest*?” said Ceolric. Even though they were speaking his mother’s tongue, he dropped his voice. “You had been talking with Hildeburh.”

Eurgain grinned. “You mean Hildeburh had been telling me I was a stranger. At some length.”

“The colour must be fixed with alum,” pronounced Hildeburh. “That will give it richness of tone.”

“*Giest* means a stranger or a visitor,” said Ceolric. “The stranger may be friendly or may be hostile; he will have purposes of his own and is not bound to you by ties of kinship. Another word is *Gaest*, which means both guest and host.”

There was a subtle difference in the vowel sound: so subtle that Eurgain would not normally have noticed it.

“A guest is one who consumes what the host provides,” continued Ceolric. “One cannot be a guest without a host, nor a host unless one has a guest. Agreed?”

She nodded. “Yes, I think I follow.”

“And a third word: *Geist*.”

This time the vowel sound was longer, though again she would never have noticed if Ceolric had not placed an unnatural emphasis on his pronunciation.

“You see?” he said. “Almost the same word. Almost. But it means a ghost or spirit, a bringer of fear and anger, somebody whose behaviour cannot be foretold, an outsider; or again, a creature that consumes, but without restraint.”

“The dead are hungry,” she said, and shivered.

“Yes, the dead, and all creatures of the dark, of the fens and moors and forests, of the wolf slopes where true men rarely venture. And here is what I am saying: a guest lives within certain bounds, honours the customs of his host. A ghost, a human ghost, does not: will take all the host has and demand more, will consume everything.”

He glanced behind him at Guthlaf dozing by the hearth. “My brother Wermund and Guthlaf invited these guests to our hall to help them dominate the native landholders. Cerdic of the Gewisse is under an obligation to Guthlaf, because Guthlaf brought him news of his father’s fate, and of the foretelling that Elesa’s seed would have dominion.”

Eurgain started, suddenly recalling the old woman had used the same phrase.

“What?” asked Ceolric.

“Nothing,” she said, knowing how foolish she would sound if she repeated the prophecy.

“I scoffed at your worries when we talked of this before.” Ceolric frowned. “Now I am not so sure. It seems to me these our helpers, our guests, are fast becoming *ghosts*, and that we ourselves are the ones who may be eaten.”

“I do not like the way they are spying out the land,” confessed Eurgain. “They sound as if they are dividing it up amongst themselves.”

“I think they are,” said Ceolric. “I think they are.”

Hildeburh and Ricola walked across the hall, their discussion of colours and fixing methods done. They greeted Ceolric gaily, scowled at Eurgain.

“We plan a new tunic for your brother,” said Hildeburh. “One suited to a leader of men.”

“Good,” Ceolric said awkwardly. “What colour will it be?”

“Red,” answered Ricola. “A rich red, like a fine wine.”

“Not purple?” asked Eurgain.

Hildeburh glared. “Not yet, child. One day perhaps, when he is the master of great territories.”

At the sound of the door closing behind the women, Guthlaf coughed and stirred himself. He stretched to relieve the stiffness of his limbs, stared around him as if wondering where he was and why the hall was empty. At the sight of Ceolric and Eurgain his expression brightened.

“Have they gone? I was pretending to be asleep so Hildeburh would not talk to me, and I must have dropped off for a moment.”

He limped toward them, stretching his legs till the life returned, his face still crumpled with sleep.

“Listen, I have been thinking about your friend.”

“My friend?” said Eurgain.

“Bolanus,” he said impatiently. “The preacher. He talks well.”

Ceolric studied him doubtfully. “I thought you were a follower of Tiw.”

“So I am,” the old man said defiantly. “So I am, and have been ever since I saw him.”

Eurgain had held her peace at the end of Guthlaf’s story. This time she was unable to resist. “But it was Bedwyr.”

“I know that.” Guthlaf shook his head crossly. “Of course I know it was Bedwyr. Who else had the right to avenge Cei and his son, apart from Arthur himself? But the spirit of Tiw was upon him. I was there. I saw it. Thunor’s hammer, girl, anybody else would have killed us all. That was the point. Who else could have walked into the heart of his enemies, defeated us all, yet slain only the man he wanted? He marked Llywri for his

treachery, I told you that, but the rest of us were just men doing what we had been asked to do. There was no malice in us, and thus none in him. Bedwyr as Bedwyr would have killed us. Too dangerous to leave us alive. Tiw as Bedwyr did not need to kill us. We were no threat to him.”

“Why would a Saeson god descend on a British warrior?” she demanded.

“Ah, weala girl, weala girl!” said Guthlaf. “Being both a foreigner and a woman you do not understand these matters. No shame on you for that. They are hard even for me.”

“And me,” Ceolric said drily. “I confess I also am puzzled.”

“Well might you be. Yet the answer is clear. What I saw as Tiw, another might have seen as something else. The Irish have a god with a strange and unpronounceable name who lost a hand in battle and wears a silver one in its place.” He folded his arms across his chest and looked at them with an air of satisfaction.

“Bolanus,” Eurgain reminded him.

“Bolanus, yes.” Guthlaf scratched his head. “You yourself do not worship this god of his?”

“The Christian god was not for the likes of us,” she said. “We were a humble people, fishers and farmers. The wide world was no concern of ours until it came visiting us. Our gods were small gods, the Lord and Lady of our wood. I know little of the Christians, but I do know from what the hermit Budoc taught me that their Christ was the Young Son, the Defender of Mankind against all ill.”

“So, the god of Bolanus is a god for the well born?” said Guthlaf, tilting his head and peering down his nose.

She nodded. “Yes. Bedwyr followed him, for example. Which is why I cannot see how the spirit of Tiw could fall upon him.”

“Good. If Bedwyr followed him, and Arthur also, he must be a worthy god.” Guthlaf grinned, added more solemnly: “These are great mysteries, not easily explained. I do not wholly understand how this Christ came to be killed by mortal men, yet Bolanus tells me he returned to life after his death, and that this is true and men who had seen it wrote it down in a book.”

Ceolric shrugged. “Budoc said much the same. He claimed to have – ” He stopped suddenly, remembering that Budoc’s possession of a piece of the Cross was a secret. In any case he could scarcely explain how an obscure country hermit came to have such an object without letting slip that Budoc was really Bedwyr, which did not seem a good idea. “A talisman,” he finished lamely.

Fortunately Guthlaf was too busy with his own thoughts to pay any attention.

“I am old. The companions of my youth are either dead or lost to me. I have neither wife nor children living.” He considered a moment, added: “That I know of.”

“Are you going to become a Christian?” asked Eurgain.

“Perhaps,” said Guthlaf. “It is not an easy decision. I have responsibilities. If I convert, others will follow.”

There was an air of the ridiculous about him, with sleep matted in his eyes and his hair all tousled. Yet what he said was true. Others would follow his example, and Eurgain could not decide whether this would be good or not. On the whole she thought it good: Bedwyr was a Christian, and the best man she had ever known, at once the kindest and the fiercest.

(Sometimes, when life among the Saesons seemed unbearable, she was tempted to blame him for the destruction of her village, since Eremon and his men had come hunting for the chalice they believed to be in Bedwyr’s keeping. Then she remembered that the

Saasons had followed soon after, and if Eremon's men had not already slaughtered her kin, the Saasons would have done something very similar. None of it was Bedwyr's fault.)

She was not sure how much of Bedwyr's kindness stemmed from his Christianity, and how much from his nature; or even if the two could be separated. Nor was she certain of exactly what Bedwyr believed. While living as the hermit Budoc he had never tried to convert his neighbours, or prevent them from venerating the fountain at the heart of the wood. He had healed them of their illnesses and injuries where he could, eased their passing where he could not. If people asked him questions he had answered to the best of his ability but he had never pretended to know everything. (And that, she thought from the vantage of several months of travelling and dwelling among strangers, was probably the mark of true wisdom.)

Having listened to Bolanus, she suspected that when Bedwyr had spoken of his beliefs, he had given a simple version, as one might to a child. Of course, she had been a child when she knew him, not only in terms of her age but also in terms of experience. Now she was a woman grown, however Hildeburh and the others might treat her.

"Why?" she said.

Guthlaf laughed. "Always you ask the direct question. And always I answer. If you were a man I would think you rude. Because you are a pretty girl I allow you the freedom. I think I am a very old man."

Ceolric laughed as well, though Eurgain did not think Guthlaf had said anything funny. "So," she said. "Why do you wish to become a Christian?"

"I told you. Because I am old and tired. Because my gods, Fosite, Tiw and the rest, are fickle, need constant sacrifice to buy their favour, drive hard bargains and do not always keep them. My gods are subject to Weird, will one day wither and die. If Bolanus is to be believed, his god is the *Scyppend*, and stands above even Weird."

"*Scyppend*?" Eurgain said uncertainly.

"Shaper," translated Ceolric. "The Maker."

"Yes, the Creator," said Guthlaf. "I have never heard of a god who claimed to have made the world, not even Wotan the lord of wind and war, the master of magic. To me it seems so unlikely it must be true. Bolanus tells me that as his god is the *Scyppend* we are all his children, even those like me who have unwittingly broken his laws." He grinned. "I am glad I did not know of these laws when I was younger, because then I might have broken them wittingly."

"Might?" said Ceolric.

"This god is a god of mercy," Guthlaf said more seriously. "Bolanus claims the god loves us, his creations. I have never heard that before either. Our gods are famous for withdrawing their favours, as Fosite withdrew his from me. Even now that rankles. I did nothing wrong, but Fosite abandoned me. This god, Bolanus says, does not do that. We may withdraw from him, but he is always there, waiting. There was something about sheep," he added vaguely.

"Sheep?" Ceolric said in surprise. "How do sheep come into it?"

Guthlaf shrugged. "Some story this Christ told. He sounds like a sensible person, one who knew about animals and fishing – and boats. He knew a lot about boats. There was a shepherd, and one of his flock went missing. The shepherd searched and when the missing sheep was found there was great rejoicing. Bolanus says I am like that sheep."

From the corner of her eye Eurgain saw Ceolric stifling a grin, and for a moment she saw what he saw: Guthlaf in a fleece, bleating frantically and agitating his tail.

“I will follow him, I think,” said Guthlaf. “Bolanus is a brave man, for all he is not a warrior, and his god also is brave, I think. Bolanus says the god sent his only son to suffer with us, to die upon a tree that we might be saved, and though I do not understand that part, it sounds important. It makes me feel good inside.”

“Will you abandon Tiw?” Eurgain asked.

Guthlaf looked shocked. “Of course not. That would be foolish, and might arouse his wrath. Besides, he does not have so many worshippers as he once did. Tiw needs me. He is not a jealous god; he will not mind sharing me with another.”

* * *

A black cat flowed from the broken wall at Eurgain’s approach and vanished into the forest. The old woman was sitting outside her shelter, laboriously stitching a patch onto a shapeless garment.

“How are your eyes?” she asked as Eurgain drew near. “Mine are useless for close work.”

She lifted the garment – a hooded cloak – and displayed the uneven stitches. “I was good at this once,” she said ruefully. “Not any longer. I took me half the morning to thread the needle.”

Eurgain set the basket down and took the cloak and needle. “Shall I start again?”

“Why not?” said the old woman. “The basket looks heavier than usual.”

“It is. More mouths to feed, more scraps.” Eurgain used the point of the bone needle to unpick the thread.

“Too many guests?” said the old woman, picking up on the tone of her voice.

Eurgain explained how busy the hall had suddenly become, with the arrival of Bolanus and the men of the Gewisse.

“I have seen them.” The old woman smiled. “My eyes still work well at a distance. And this Bolanus, he was the one who frightened the sheep the other day?”

“Yes. He had a friend with him, but I do not know what happened to him. An old man, misshapen, with a pig.”

“A pig?” The old woman chuckled. “He stayed a night with me then wandered into the forest. He seemed harmless, poor man. The world is full of them, the damaged, the dispossessed, rendered homeless by fate.”

“He was all right? Bolanus was worried about him. He saved Bolanus from being robbed on the road, and he – Bolanus I mean – feels he deserted him once he arrived here.”

The old woman blinked. “Did he? I did not know that, and yet in a way it does not greatly surprise me. Even chance meetings may have a purpose.”

The patch was frayed. Eurgain concentrated on hemming around the edges to make a strong join.

“These men of the Gewisse,” said the old woman. “Do they worry you because they remind you of what befell your people?”

“No.” Eurgain laid the sewing aside and thought about it. “Yes. Perhaps. They seem dangerous to me: wild, changeable. I cannot tell how they will act from one moment to the next. They brag of their deeds, challenge each other to drinking matches in the evening. If Wermund did not make them leave their weapons by the door I think someone would have been killed by now. Their quarrels blow up out of nowhere and pass as quickly. They will be at each other’s throats one instant and swearing undying friendship the next.”

“The way of the warrior in the mead hall,” the old woman said softly. “And this Bolanus, how does he manage in the midst of this? He cannot find it easy.”

“He is terrified most of the time, but he will not give up.” Eurgain smiled at the thought of him. “The men treat him like a talisman. They admire his courage. They can see he is frightened, and not a warrior. If one of them challenges him the rest rally to his defence. Odd really, because I would have expected them to have nothing but contempt for him. He has no common ground with them.”

“Except that he will not give up. They admire courage above all other virtues, and few of them are so foolish as not to recognize his bravery. He is far from home, further than mere miles, amongst a strange people of whom he has heard only the darkest tales, and yet he persists in the name of his God.”

“How do you know?” asked Eurgain.

“Why, I too have lived among warriors as an outsider. Besides, the Saesons have a great respect for priests of all faiths.”

“He says he is not a priest.”

“They will think he is being mysterious. He acts like a priest: bears no arms, talks of God, lives his life by certain rituals. If it looks and smells like a priest, then to them it is a priest. Besides, he is the guest of their host.”

Eurgain pulled the needle through the fabric a final time and bit through the thread. “Now, there’s a thing,” she said, and related what Ceolric had told her about guests, ghosts and hosts.

“Thank you.” The old woman took the cloak from her and rubbed her fingers across the stitches. “A fine job. You fear these Gewisse may consume Wermund and his kin?”

“I do,” she said. “But you know, Bolanus, who seems so harmless the Saesons made him welcome without any doubts, may bring the bigger changes. He has almost made his first convert: Guthlaf, the old man I told you about.”

“The one who witnessed the death of Cei?”

“Yes. Guthlaf has much more – what’s the word – influence than I ever realized. The Gewisse all admire him, hang upon his every word.”

“And you thought he was just a dotard dozing by the fire?” teased the old woman.

Eurgain blushed. “Yes, I did. All he has ever done is tell stories.”

The old woman stood, rubbed at her bottom where it was damp from the wall, grimaced. “Age is a terrible thing,” she said. “Did you know it was Guthlaf who told them how to build their hall?” She nodded at the expression on Eurgain’s face. “Knowledge is useful. The others had seen it done before, but only Guthlaf had the skill to direct them. Wermund told me about it. He used to visit me before you came.” She cackled. “I suspect he liked to practise his mother’s tongue, and I was the only person to whom he could speak it without losing dignity.”

“So Guthlaf – ”

“Guthlaf has guided this community since its beginnings,” interrupted the old woman. “I would guess it was his idea they come here, rather than establishing themselves closer to their kind, on the eastern side of the forest. I have never met him, but I think he is a cunning man.” She shrugged. “Perhaps I read too much into his actions: an old failing of mine, to see significance where none exists.”

“Why is he so important? They are one family, interwoven by blood or marriage, but Guthlaf does not stand close to any of them. Eanfled is his sister’s daughter, that is all.”

“Remind me, which is Eanfled?”

“The first wife of Leodwald, who is their leader after Wermund.”

The old woman grunted. “A sister’s child is a close connection among my people. Was it not so among yours?”

“I suppose it was,” Eurgain admitted reluctantly. “But Guthlaf feels distanced from them. Like an outsider, and yet he is not. I can’t explain it clearly. You are right: to start with I thought he was an old man they kept because they were fond of him. Then I saw that he has nothing but contempt for his niece Eanfled, who allows herself to be dominated by Hildeburh, Wermund’s wife. In her turn Eanfled does not much care for him. Wermund listens to him, but Leodwald avoids him when he can, almost as if he is in awe of him.”

“Wermund is the one who matters. From what you told me, Guthhlah is important because he was with Eliseg at his death.”

“Eliseg?”

“Elesa,” the old woman said impatiently. “The father of Cerdic.” She rubbed the hook of her nose. “Cerdic is a man of power. Fate is strong upon him. All these years he has played a clever game, building his influence. Only once did he miscalculate, when he was much younger. He raided into eastern and southern Dumnonia a time too often, made a nuisance of himself. Arthur’s Companions burned his mead hall in retaliation and he was fortunate to escape with his life. After that he sat quiet and licked his wounds for a long while, slowly restoring his power. He sent no men to Camlann, though one of his rivals, Bieda, garnered much prestige by persuading many to accompany him to that dread field.”

The old woman sucked her teeth. “He was cunning, Cerdic. After Camlann, there were none left to oppose him. The best men of the Gewisse not in his service lay dead upon the field, and the Lords of Prydein were too busy with their own troubles to worry about a minor Saeson chief in the marshes opposite Clausentum. Now I hear he has subdued the island of Wectis, a stronghold of the Ytes. He will move north toward Sarum soon; already it pays him tribute. It would suit him well to have an ally to the west of the Sallow Wood, keeping occupied any who might object. I would guess Guthlaf made the suggestion, and Cerdic listened because Guthlaf has taken part in great events before, whereas he would have dismissed Wermund and Leodwald as mere adventurers.”

She leant against the wall with a satisfied expression on her face. The black cat leapt up from the long grass, scabbled for a hold on the broken stones, prowled their length and rubbed itself around the old woman’s shoulders.

Eurgain studied the two of them. “You speak as if you know.”

“These are the games the mighty play, the way their thoughts run.” The old woman pushed the cat aside, took pity on Eurgain. “Like Guthlaf, I was not always old. In my day I also played these games. I know how I would act if I were Cerdic, and can guess his ambitions. Good for him. He is no worse than any other lord, British or Saeson.”

“Wermund told you,” said Eurgain. “Or at least, he told you enough for you to guess the rest. I think he values your counsel: certainly he has always been insistent you be provided for, despite his wives.”

The old woman looked at her long and hard. “You are growing, girl, growing. You begin to understand what it is to be a wise woman. You and Wermund are not my only visitors. Others come too when they are in pain. Sometimes I take my payment in information.”

“Where do you go when you are not here?”

The cat walked along the wall, mewling, jumped down and investigated the basket.

“The back of the north wind, to see the King of All the World. Have you heard of him? He sits upon a great throne resplendent in raiments of gold, and acknowledges no man his master.”

Eurgain frowned. She had heard the phrase before, a king described in those very words, but she could not remember where.

The old woman burst out laughing. “You see? For a moment you believed me. It is not difficult to create a reputation for oneself. No, child, I visit the nearby farms. They too need my skills as a healer, and sometimes my advice. Should they trust the Saesons? Would they do better to accept Angus as their lord?”

“What do you tell them?”

She smiled thinly, a gaunt, lanky creature with a deeply furrowed face under a shock of grey hair. “To judge a man by his actions. What else?”

CHAPTER THREE

“This is the place,” said Seradwen. She pointed to the ruins visible on the flat ground half a mile away.

The day was bright with a cold wind. Clouds’ shadows chased across the hillside behind them, and the ancient trees lining the track shivered under the force of the gusts.

“It looks deserted.” Nai patted Coal’s neck.

“Yes,” said Bedwyr. “We would see smoke if anybody lived here.” He frowned. “I think I have been here before, years ago. There were people living in the old corridor along the front. They had put on a new roof and filled in the open sides with timber. They stalled their animals at one end and lived at the other. A mean existence.”

“And the main building?” asked Seradwen.

Bedwyr shrugged. “If I remember rightly it was largely fallen in. I may have the wrong place, but that tower on the left looks familiar.”

The track led them to a gap in the remnants of a wall. On the far side were the bones of a garden, long since run wild. To their right was a tangle of green brambles and mossy trees, ornamentals that had grown beyond their strength and been felled by the winter gales. To the left the scrub was thicker, briars and gnarled gorse intermingled with saplings struggling for light.

Seradwen shivered and drew her cloak tighter about her. The garden felt hostile, as if the long neglect had made it dream dark dreams of domination, of choking the life from any people foolish enough to stay within its bounds. She was glad she was not alone.

“Orchard,” said Nai, gesturing to the right where the tangle had given way to twisted apple trees, heavy with moss, well past the age of bearing fruit. He drew rein and studied the fallen building ahead of them. “Impressive.”

“If this is the same place, it was part of the imperial estates once,” said Bedwyr. “I mean the emperors of Rome, not Arthur. Much of the land around here was owned by the emperors and managed by their servants. The workers were slaves. That’s why nobody laid claim to it, until Ogrvran Gawr came west and wed Gwenhwyvar’s mother. Memory lingers.”

He eased his pony forward, said over his shoulder: “Where now?”

“An old well shaft beside the tower,” answered Seradwen. She glanced around her uneasily. “Are you sure we are alone?”

Nai held two spears in the hollow of his shield and another in his right hand. “I think so. In any case, we are far more dangerous than anything we are likely to meet here.”

That made her smile, as he had intended, and they followed Bedwyr toward the house, between what had once been lawns with an artful scattering of shrubs, and was now a weed choked expanse covered with young sycamores and a curious straw-like growth, flat and white in the winter sunshine.

The corridor across the front of the house had been divided into two parts with an unroofed gap in front of the original entrance. The timber partitions that had filled the spaces between the pillars had rotted away, leaving only a few half eaten boards behind. From the look of it was a long while since anybody had lived here.

“Do you want to go in?” asked Seradwen, hoping the others would say no.

“I think we should,” said Bedwyr. “Unwise not to make certain it is indeed deserted.”

The three of them dismounted. Bedwyr went first, choosing the opening on the left, his sword and shield at the ready. Then came Seradwen, carrying the war-knife they had given her, and finally Nai, watching their backs.

The uneven floor was caked in a mixture of mud and old dung. Broken wattle partitions marked where the far end of the space had been divided into stalls, but one could see at a glance that the space was empty. They turned about, Nai in the lead now, and crossed the gap to the right hand section of the corridor. Here the floor was more even, beaten earth rather than mud and muck. Any partitions had been removed, and a few charred lumps amidst the ashes of an old fire near the centre of the room suggested what might have happened to them.

“Nothing,” said Nai.

“The house,” said Bedwyr, moving swiftly before the others could object.

Inside the entrance was large hall with doorways leading to the rooms on either side. The floor was choked with dust and debris from the upper storey: lumps of plaster and stone rubble; bits of old floorboards and broken rafters too rotted by damp for to be taken as firewood. Above the largest pile the hall was open to the blue sky and scudding clouds. A section of the rear wall directly opposite the entrance had collapsed, leaving a pillar with a branching top, like a tree turned to stone, standing in isolation. Presumably it had once been part of another doorway.

The internal walls had been painted in the distant past, and though the paint had peeled and faded, Seradwen could see that they had once been black and red, the heaviness broken by panels of a symmetrical design picked out in pale blue and gold.

“What are these?”

Nai was standing under the hole in the ceiling, turning over the heap with a toe. A shower of small coloured stones slid to the floor as he disturbed a lump of timber.

“Tesserae,” said Seradwen, her voice hollow in the emptiness. “The room above must have had a mosaic floor.”

Bedwyr stepped past her to the doorway on the right, returned a moment later. “The staircase has collapsed. That side of the building is in poor shape.”

“Is there another way up?” she asked.

“I would guess so.” He pointed at the ground. “Somebody has been here.”

She looked, and saw the scuff marks in the layer of dirt. A clear trail led through the left-hand doorway.

“People,” said Nai, joining them. “Or animals?” He squatted, examined the tracks. “Not recent. There’s a film of dust over them.”

“I think they have gone, whoever they were. The building feels deserted.” For all his assurance Bedwyr’s eyes were wary.

Nai straightened. “Let us find out.”

The smell was stronger in the room beyond: damp and decay mixed with the rank odour of fox. A bundle of twigs and old rags in the corner marked where the animal had denned for a time. This room was smaller than the entrance hall and showed fewer signs of

damage, though the plaster was bubbling and crumbling on the walls. A flight of stone steps led to the floor above.

“Everything worth having has been taken,” said Bedwyr, glancing around the emptiness. “Not so much as a door hinge.”

“Up then,” Nai grunted.

The steps were uneven, worn away in the centre by long years of use. Again the men put Seradwen between them, and she did not know whether to be grateful or offended. The house frightened her, not least because it was a much grander version of the villa where she had lived with her husband Mordav, and she was very aware that without the determination of Mordav’s ancestors the place she had for years called home would also be an abandoned ruin. It was a sobering thought that buildings, which seem so solid and secure, were as mortal as their inhabitants.

The stair was built against the outer wall of the house. She climbed into the darkness above, one hand trailing the stonework, watching Nai’s strong legs ahead of her. A faint gleam came from the spearhead as he used it to brush aside a cobweb, and then they were on a small windowless landing.

“Watch where you walk,” said Nai. “I do not trust the floor.”

A flight of wooden stairs with a worm eaten handrail led higher. Light streamed down, faltered as a cloud shadowed the sun, returned renewed, illuminating the steady fall of dust motes swimming on a cold draught.

“Somebody has been here too.” Nai indicated the footmarks on the steps.

They edged cautiously up the rickety staircase. The handrail was no protection. Most of the supporting banisters were missing, and it looked as if it would break under the slightest strain.

“Is this wise?” said Seradwen. “Even the scavengers did not come this high.”

“Did I tell you?” Bedwyr said cheerfully from behind her. “In Lindinis I met a man who claimed to be selling a column from the house where Agricola planned his campaigns against the Caledonians.”

“Was it true?” she asked after a pause.

Bedwyr chuckled. “Grief, no. Agricola lived more than four centuries ago. Besides, so far as I know he was never in Lindinis. But I admired the fellow’s ingenuity and his gift for salvage.”

Nai clambered up the final few steps, testing each tread before trusting it with his weight. “It’s safe. Nobody here, though they are not long gone.”

The room at the top was cold and square, with windows on every side. A crust of bread mouldered in one corner; in the other were the furred faeces of a small animal. Seradwen wrinkled her nose.

“How could anybody bear it?” She moved to one of the windows, careless of the floor creaking beneath her, and thrust her head out into the fresh air.

“Ware glass!” called Nai.

Sharp fragments disguised by dirt clung to the edges of the frame.

“I don’t suppose they did,” said Bedwyr. “I expect the creature fouled the room after they had gone.”

Seradwen drew her head back through the frame, taking care not to touch the edges. “They?”

“He or she.” Bedwyr shrugged, crossed to the window overlooking the garden. “Only one person, I think.”

“It’s like an eyrie,” said Seradwen. “I have never been this high in a building before.”

“It’s a trap,” Bedwyr said grimly. “There’s no way out except down the stairs.”

“Roof?” questioned Nai.

The two of them stared through the window that looked out over the length of the house.

“I’d not rely on it,” said Bedwyr. “You’d have to drop down onto the tiles and none of them are safe. Most of the roof has fallen in under its own weight – look at the ruin of the far wing – and what’s left will not last long.”

“Did Gwenhwyvar ever live here?” asked Seradwen, peering over their shoulders. “She said she played here as a child.”

“Her father had some repairs made, which is why this end is still standing. She must have spent time here, but I doubt if the family did more than camp out in the ruins.” Bedwyr wrinkled his brow. “I vaguely remember Gwenhwyvar showing this place to Arthur shortly after they were married – I suppose I must have been part of their escort – and saying something about how happy she had been here.”

Nai grunted. “A kind of extended excursion, I expect. Freedom from the rituals of daily life.”

“I believe Gwenhwyvar’s father had some thought of using this as a winter base,” said Bedwyr. “He was impressed by its size and grandeur – there was more standing in those days. But it was not a practical idea. You could never defend it, and you’d have needed a huge amount of skilled labour to render it habitable even then.”

“A sad place,” said Seradwen.

“Let’s find the well,” Bedwyr said briskly.

The sky had clouded over by the time they reached the ground floor. Without the sunshine the breeze struck chill. Seradwen led them around the side of the building, into the full force of the wind. Now Bedwyr had mentioned it, she could see that the wall had been patched at some stage in a render darker than the original, creating a mottled effect. A fine white powder blew from the older sections, stinging her eyes, and she wondered how much longer the tower would survive.

“Here,” she said, indicating a ring of dressed stones.

If the well had ever had a cover there was no trace of it now. Nai picked up a pebble, obeying the irresistible impulse, and dropped it down the shaft. The splash came quickly.

Seradwen leant over the parapet and gazed at the dark water a short distance below. Gradually the ripples stilled, and she saw her own face, pale and distorted, and the sky behind her. The air over the shaft was cold as ice, even colder than the wind. The stonework, speckled with moss, extended down at least as far as the water-level. Tiny ferns clung to the joints between the blocks.

Some of the stones were missing just above the water. She wriggled over the parapet until she could stretch an arm down and her knuckles grazed the surface, the water so bitter cold that for a moment she felt nothing, and then the shock made her gasp aloud.

“All right?” Nai’s voice seem to come from very far away. She was dimly aware of him putting a hand on her belt to hold her as she leaned still further over the well, thankful she was taller than most women. Her hand slipped into one hollow, swept to the back and found nothing.

Gritting her teeth and thrusting away the image of a slimy toad or worse sitting in one of the holes waiting for her fingers, she tried the next, groping to the back of the space.

“No,” she gasped. “Help me up. I shall have to move.”

Her ribs hurt where the rim of the parapet had pressed into them. Nai held her as she sat on the stone, rubbing her sides.

“They are much further down than the ones at home. Mordav’s farm, I mean,” she corrected herself, because the farm was home no more.

“I expect the well has been raised over the years,” said Bedwyr. “The original inhabitants cannot have gone through this every time they wanted a pat of butter from the cold store.”

“Would you like me to try?” asked Nai.

“Let me have one more go.” She smiled at him fondly. “Third time pays for all, as they say.”

She shifted around the well to a new position and once again leant down into the depths. Her hand found another of the cupboards, fumbled inside over the cool damp stone, felt an obstruction give beneath her fingers. She hoisted herself further over the wall, feeling Nai’s grip tighten on her belt, her arm aching with the effort of the stretch, the object slipping back from her fingertips; and then suddenly she had a corner firmly in her grasp.

“I have something,” she said, her voice distorted by the well. “Supposing I drop it?”

“Then Nai will have to go fishing,” said Bedwyr from above and behind. “You won’t drop it.”

She reached down with her other arm until she had both hands around the object. It was smaller than she had expected, but heavy. It felt like a casket of metal.

“If I hold it can you pull me out?”

“Yes,” said Nai.

He drew her up, swiftly and smoothly, turning her until she was sitting safely on the parapet facing the ruin of the house, and in her white knuckled hands was a plain box of tarnished grey metal.

“You can let go now,” Bedwyr said gently.

She gave a deep sigh of relief and slowly slackened her grip.

“So,” said Bedwyr. “Open it!”

She looked at him, the white hair and high forehead, the thick eyebrows, the steady gaze, then held out the casket in arms that trembled slightly.

He shook his head. “No. It is not for me. Gwenhwyvar wanted you to be the one, otherwise she would have sent Nai and me alone.”

“Why me?”

He shrugged, shrewd eyes amused. “I do not know. I do not know everything. But I have never handled the chalice and do not wish to now, lest I be tempted after all this time to take it for myself. And if I did, I think only disaster would follow.” He laughed quickly. “There’s a question! Do I show restraint because of my noble nature, or because I fear the consequences? Open it, Seradwen, and let us have done.”

The casket was fastened by a hook of the same grey metal as the box. She eased the hook from its ring, surprised to find no resistance, and lifted the lid. Inside was a bundle of cloth: soft linen worn thin as a veil, she discovered as she unwrapped it, fold by fold. And there, nestled in the heart of the wrappings, was the chalice.

As she drew it from the box the sun broke through the clouds. The chalice caught the light and so took fire, burning red and gold with the glory of the heavens. Beside her she heard Nai make a wordless exclamation, but she herself was too lost in wonder to

breathe, lost in contemplation of the yellow and orange flickers around the edge of the blaze, the hints of honey and copper, straw and brass, a dozen other shades for which she had no name.

She might have sat there for ever had the sun not clouded over. Of a sudden the light failed, and she was left holding a broad rimmed vessel of amber tinged glass, with a crack or flaw across the base.

“What?” she said, stunned.

“What indeed,” Bedwyr said quietly. He held out the linen cloth which had fallen unnoticed to the ground. “Cover it again. It is a conspicuous object when it catches the light.”

Seradwen wrapped the vessel and placed it back in the box. “I thought it would be much bigger.”

“Yes,” he said. “That is its strength. And when it shines, it seems large enough to encompass all the world. That is its danger.”

She closed the casket and closed the lid, feeling like a traitor as she shut the chalice into the darkness. “It was made for the light,” she murmured in protest.

“Who’s there?” growled Nai. He leapt to his feet, seized the spears he had propped against the parapet, and bounded round the rear of the house before Seradwen realized what was happening. Bedwyr drew his sword and stood ready.

“The house was not so empty as it seemed,” he said softly, his gaze roving restlessly across their surrounds.

Seradwen clutched the box tight to her chest. The white growth that had spread over the former lawns lifted and writhed in the wind. The sycamore saplings swayed in a slow dance.

A horse whinnied.

“Coal,” she said, and started toward the front of the house.

Bedwyr’s arm blocked her. “Wait. Let me go first. Watch my back.”

His movements are different, she thought as he went ahead of her. He walks like a much younger man when there is danger. And he moves quickly, though he seems unhurried, gliding across the ground leaving no trace of his passing.

Nai reappeared from the back of the building. “I heard Coal,” he said. There was an odd expression on his face, a mixture of embarrassment and uncertainty.

“Who was it?” asked Bedwyr, pausing to let him join them.

“I don’t know. I saw a face watching us from behind the building.” Nai grimaced doubtfully. “When I got there I saw something scuttling into the brushwood behind the house.”

“Something?”

“Bent over but running on two legs. I suppose it could have been a man: a badly damaged man.” He did not sound convinced. “Anyway, it has gone now.”

Coal whinnied again.

“And we have company,” said Bedwyr.

They had left the horses outside the main entrance. Nai peered around the corner, stepped out into the open, followed by Bedwyr. Seradwen held back, hugging the casket.

Four men were sitting on shaggy ponies a few paces short of the old corridor, staring up at the ruin. Each carried a long spear and a small round shield, painted a dull yellow and decorated at random with bronze studs. Two wore mail under their brown cloaks, the rings glinting as they shifted in the saddle.

“Saesons,” said Bedwyr.

Seradwen had never seen a Saeson before, and she studied them with renewed interest, her mind very calm. They were not natural horsemen: none of them looked comfortable on their mounts. Otherwise they looked like anybody else, not the ferocious monsters of popular legend. They were a little over average height – it was hard to judge, since they slumped in the a saddle in a way she would not have tolerated in any men of hers. All four were bareheaded, the hoods of their cloaks dangling down their backs, and their hair and beards were brown, not the fair colour she had been led to expect.

“Who are you?” called Bedwyr.

One of the mailed men wheeled his horse to face them. The other three fanned apart, heads turning as they watched the ruin and the garden for signs of danger. They were unnecessarily heavy on the reins, and Seradwen bit her tongue to stop herself berating them for their clumsiness.

“Are you for Angus?” The mailed man’s accent was thick, and his voice higher pitched than she would have anticipated, but she had no trouble understanding him.

Nai and Bedwyr exchanged a glance. “No,” said Bedwyr. “Are you?”

The man smiled, urged his pony closer. Behind him the other three walked their mounts nearer, spreading in a loose ring centred on the corner of the ruin.

“No, we are not,” said the man. “What are you doing here?”

“Passing through,” answered Bedwyr. He twisted his sword so the light ran down the blade.

“Why did you stop?”

“We were curious.”

“I also.” The man dismounted and swaggered toward them, eyes widening as he saw Seradwen. “This is giantish work, yes? It drew us from across the hills. Did you go inside?”

“We did.”

The man kept coming, and the horsemen pressed closer, still holding their spears upright but almost within thrusting range. The heads looked wickedly sharp.

Stepping away from the wall, Nai growled: “Far enough.”

The man blinked at the menace in the raw voice. He stopped, feet planted well apart, and gestured at his companions to stay. “You are well armed. Are you against this man Angus?”

“We are,” said Bedwyr.

The Saeson considered this for a moment. “Where are you from?”

“You ask a great many questions.” Bedwyr lowered his sword. “From under Caer Cadwy.”

“Under?” The man frowned.

“In the shadow of the hill.”

The Saeson seemed no more content with this answer. Seradwen realized that to him the phrasing was ambiguous, and that Bedwyr was well aware of this.

“Not far from Ynis Witrin?” The Saeson mangled the place name, added: “Glasdun.”

“Not far, no. And you, where are you from?”

“We came to help our friends against this Angus.” He bared his teeth. “We have yet to see a sign of him.”

“His men burned a farm two days ago.”

“How do you know?” the Saeson asked suspiciously.

“My companion and I arrived before they had finished.”

“Where was this farm? What did you do?”

“North and west of here, on the edge of the marshes.” Bedwyr lifted the sword again and the man’s face tightened. “As for what we did, we killed some of them. They were too many for us to kill them all.”

The Saeson stared at him, barked something to his fellows. One sniggered uneasily. The other two, Seradwen saw, had their eyes firmly on Nai.

“I am not that old,” said Bedwyr.

“You understand our tongue?”

“A little, though I have not used it much of late. Now, tell me, who are these friends of yours and how did you come to these lands? You are men of the Gewisse by your speech, and far from home.”

The man nodded slowly. “You are bold enough. We are four to two.”

“Three,” said Seradwen.

The Saeson roared with laughter. “Three then. But I am thinking we have no quarrel with you.” He turned to Bedwyr. “You are right, we are of the Gewisse. We came through the Sallow Wood to be here, and it was not a journey to make lightly, especially in winter.”

He spoke to his fellows and they dismounted, tossing the reins over their heads of their ponies. When they touched the ground they seemed less threatening, though they kept their spears in their hands.

“Wood woses and trolls lurk under the trees. We are not far from the forest now.” The man waved a hand. “We thought we saw such a creature a while ago. It seemed to us it came this way, scuttling across the grass like a crab. We followed, then saw the giants’ ruin.”

“Why did you cross the Sallow Wood?” asked Bedwyr, refusing to be distracted.

“The Cyning Cerdic sent us. He owed a debt for his father’s sake to a man who lives here. The man asked for aid and we came.”

“Eliseg?” said Bedwyr.

“Elesa,” corrected the Saeson. “This man was with him when he died fighting the one you call the Long Man.”

“Cei.” Bedwyr’s face was stern.

“You knew him?”

“I knew him. And Eliseg – Elesa.”

The Saeson regarded him with interest. “Did you? I was a babe when they died.”

One of his fellows made a remark and the others laughed aloud.

“Not with that beard,” said Bedwyr, and they laughed all the harder.

Suddenly a decision was reached. The Saesons propped their spears against the wall of the house, slid their war-boards from their arms and slung them over their backs. They hunkered down in a circle, below the worst of the wind. One produced a leather bottle from under his cloak and offered it to Nai. After a moment’s hesitation he laid his javelin aside and accepted.

“Will you accompany us to our hosts’ hall?” asked the spokesman. “I am Thurstan son of Wistan.”

“And your host’s name?” inquired Bedwyr, drinking in turn from the bottle.

“Our hosts are twain. Wermund is one, Leodwald the other. Both are good men, honest toilers who had sooner make the land fruitful than wage war. Yet both are doughty fighters.”

“Wermund,” Bedwyr said thoughtfully. “That name is familiar.” He glanced at Nai. “Very well, we will go with you. It may be that we have interests in common.”

CHAPTER FOUR

Eurgain was trapped in the hall, fiddling with a ball of yarn, when she heard the harsh horn blowing.

Around her the women set aside their work and began to chatter excitedly. Hildeburh frowned, exchanged looks with Eanfled, relented.

“A little air will do us good,” she pronounced. “And if we are visited by strangers, they should be welcomed in a seemly fashion.”

“How does she know we are being visited by strangers?” Eurgain asked one of the younger women.

The woman gave her a pitying glance. “By the horn blast. ‘Strangers escorted by friends,’ was the signal.”

“I have not heard it before.”

“We were not an armed camp before,” answered the woman, moving to the door in the wake of the others. “Come, or we will not be able to see.”

They hastened out into the yard. Everybody seemed to have gathered there, even the thralls. The warriors had been practising their spear drill in the area beside the hall. Now they formed two lines with a lane between them leading to the hall, holding back the women and children.

“Dignity,” called Hildeburh, her voice lifting above the excited buzz from the crowd. “We will greet them with dignity.”

Eurgain had not realized how large the community had grown in the last few weeks. There were several faces she had not seen before, hangers on attracted by the newcomers, who being warriors needed people to serve them. A child wriggled past her and someone else jostled her elbow. She could not see over the tall figures of the warriors, and she found the crush uncomfortable. When she tried to work her way free of the crowd, an angry grunt told her she had stepped on somebody’s toes. Nobody would give, and everyone was pushing. The line of warriors was bending under the strain, and some of the men were swearing crossly. Another child brushed past her, upsetting her balance. She swayed, might have fallen if a strong hand had not steadied her.

“There you are!” said Ceolric. “I could not find you.”

He braced himself and squared his shoulders. The pressure lessened and she was able to stand in front of him, resting her head on his chest.

“I can’t see,” she said.

“I’ll tell you what happens,” he said cheerfully. “I don’t think we can get out without causing an accident. He raised his voice. “Steady there! Don’t shove! Spread out to the sides.”

A few people moved in response, and the line was able to straighten.

“They are coming,” said Ceolric. “Thurstan at the head, his men on the wings. They are not under duress, their spears are at high point.”

Eurgain realized there was a whole system of signals about which she knew nothing: horn blasts to indicate the nature of new arrivals; secret signs to show whether you acted of your own will or were a hostage.

“Three riders with them. Not prisoners, but Thurstan is not certain they are friends.”

“How can you tell?”

“Eh?” Ceolric shaded his eyes, peered at the riders, still some way off. “Oh, because he just waved his spear twice. One of the strangers is on a black horse. All three of them have better mounts than our scraggy beasts.”

“What is it?” she asked, catching his tone of voice.

“Something in his stance. Watchful, wary; menacing. He is a dark man, black hair bound back in a long tail. Greying at the temples. He reminds me – ”

He broke off, grabbed Eurgain’s hand and forged ahead. “Give me passage!” he cried, wading through the crowd as a bear might wade through a pack of hounds, dragging her behind him.

The warriors parted to allow them out into the lane. Ceolric released Eurgain’s hand and began to run, shouting: “Cousin, cousin!”

The crowd looked on in astonishment, muttering among themselves. Thurstan and his followers reined in, startled, stared at the madman as he raced toward them waving his arms. The dark rider suddenly let loose a hoarse whoop of triumph and put his pony to the gallop, plunging through the escort and slithering to a halt a few paces from Ceolric. He threw himself from the saddle and the two men pounded each other on the back.

“You’ve grown, lad,” said the dark man, “thickened out.”

Eurgain had been gaping in confusion, as bemused as the crowd. At the sound of that voice, raw and ruined, utterly unmistakable, she hurled herself at the dark man.

“Nai!” she screamed, and he caught her and swung her through the air, feet dangling, as her father had swung her when she was a little girl.

“Eurgain,” he said, setting her on her feet again. “And see who is with me.” He pointed behind him at his companions.

“Budoc,” she said, using the name by which she had known him best.

He had changed, changed so much she was not sure she would have recognized him without Nai’s prompt. The beard had gone and the hair was cut short. The last time she had seen him he had been recovering from an illness that had left him thin and frail.

He had regained the lost weight, so in that sense was more like the man she remembered from three or four years ago when he had first appeared in Porthyle. But then he had been a monk turned hermit, a man who had withdrawn from the world to live out his final days in contemplation; a man full of grief and close to despair. He was different now, younger and stronger, like a light unveiled.

“Bedwyr,” she whispered as he dismounted and came to her.

* * *

“If I’d known it would please you this much I would have found them sooner,” Thurstan said that evening when the explanations were over and they were all gathered in the hall.

Ceolric grinned. “What better than the meeting of old friends?” He belched happily, passed the mead horn to Nai at his side.

“Glad I am to hear it,” said Thurstan. “Your friend seemed to me a grim and dangerous warrior when I came upon him: I think he would have challenged all four of us to protect his woman.”

His eyes measured Nai, who smiled at him amiably.

“He would,” said Ceolric. “If he felt it needful.”

“Will he and the old man fight beside us against this Angus?”

“They will,” Ceolric answered firmly, though he knew Bedwyr was still discussing the details with Wermund and his advisers and nothing had yet been resolved.

“Good,” said Thurstan. “I was not sure I was right to bring them here. It was in my mind they might be spies, though I never heard of spies taking a woman with them.” He frowned, furrowing his face. “Which would be a good reason for doing so.”

“What is he saying?” asked Nai.

“That you look dangerous,” said Ceolric. “He would rather have you for him than against him.”

Nai gazed around him at the hall, filled with feasting men, the thralls dashing back and forth with platters of meat and jugs of ale or mead. The fire burned brightly, and the walls were hung with embroideries and painted shields.

“Your brother has done well.”

“A hard struggle, but the worst is over now, save for this matter of Angus and his demands. They plan to build a second hall for Leodwald and his family next year.”

Nai nodded. “The hall is crowded.”

“Most of these people are strangers come to help us, like Thurstan.”

Thurstan glanced up at the sound of his name. “I am eager to fight at your side, weala,” he said in his accented British.

“The honour will be mine,” Nai said courteously, and toasted the Saeson with his drinking horn.

“The women will be out soon,” remarked Ceolric.

“Do they always eat separately?” asked Nai.

“Not when we are alone. On formal occasions yes. My brother’s wives are busy overseeing the servers.”

“Wives? How many does he have?”

“Two. So does Leodwald.”

Nai lifted his eyebrows. “Is that common among your people?”

“Not any more, not unless one cannot beget sons upon the first wife.” Ceolric glanced at Nai’s face. “I shall not take another wife. Eurgain is all I want.”

“The Hearth Lord wants you,” said Thurstan.

Wermund had stood and was beckoning to his brother. “Bring your friend as well,” he bellowed above the noise. “We need his counsel concerning this Angus.”

Among the British the master of a hall and his most important followers or guests were always seated at one end of the building, often on a low dais to separate them from the common body. The Saesons had different custom. Wermund and Leodwald’s seats were half way down one side of the hall, while the place next in honour was along the opposite wall, so the hearth and its crackling logs was between them. In front of the double thrones was a lesser chair for the lords’ spokesman, and there sat Guthlaf, staring intently through the flames at Bedwyr.

A space was cleared for Ceolric and Nai on the nearby benches.

“I have told them that Angus hates Saesons,” Bedwyr said to Nai. “You met him more recently than any of us. Give us your impression of him.”

Nai gathered his thoughts. “He is a hard man, an ambitious man who feels time is against him, for he is no longer young. He was jealous of his kinsman Lleminawg, who was

Arthur's friend. From what he told Seradwen and me he does not like Saesons, though he admired a man called Wulfstan – but then Wulfstan was a friend of Llacheu, Arthur's son."

Across the fire Guthlaf was translating rapidly, but Nai saw Wermund smile at the mention of Llacheu and guessed he spoke British every bit as well as his younger brother.

"Angus failed in Dumnonia. He succeeded in the Summer Country. He wants power." Nai turned to Bedwyr. "Have you told them of Tingyr's farm?"

Bedwyr shook his head. "Not properly."

Nai gave the story: how the farmer had defied the tribute collectors on their first visit, how they had returned and destroyed the farm. "We arrived too late. We killed a few, Bedwyr and I, waited till the rest had gone. They burned them in their own hall."

On the other side of the eddying smoke he saw Wermund shudder. It was a common fear, that of being trapped by raiders inside a burning building, the doors barricaded against you, so you perished without even the chance to strike a blow.

"We found no survivors. A few may have fled into the wilderness; there is little hope for them. Women, children, all of them were slain."

Wermund broke across Guthlaf's translation. "This was a punishment?" He had the same eastern accent as his brother.

"Yes," said Nai, speaking to him directly. "A punishment and a warning. Ceolric tells me you have allies among the locals. This will shake them. To my mind you must act quickly, or you will lose them."

Leodwald whispered into Wermund's ear, and Wermund answered him softly. Then he rose abruptly to his feet, crying out to his brother in the Saeson tongue so all those around him could hear.

Nai leant close to Bedwyr, who muttered quickly: "He asked Ceolric if he trusts us."

Ceolric spoke in reply, his face serious, then turned to Nai. "I owe my life and much else to the pair of you. I trust you both without fear or failing. We were comrades in arms, and will be again if that is your desire."

"It is my desire," Nai said formally. "I would be glad beyond measure to have you at my side."

A great roar went up from both sides of the hall. The men beat upon the tables, stamped their feet and chanted Wermund's name – not Leodwald's, Nai noted – working themselves into a frenzy.

In the midst of this Guthlaf left his seat and made his way around the fire, an elderly man stooped under his own weight, moved with purpose toward them. Bedwyr watched him come, smiled wryly and murmured to Nai:

"I think they rate your friendship more highly than mine. Fickle is fame, as they would doubtless say."

"Not to me, lord," said Guthlaf. He knelt before Bedwyr. "Long ago I saw you fight. You spared my life then, gave it meaning when it had lost all meaning. I am old now, but I vow to you my blade and what skills remain to me."

Bedwyr gazed at him long and silently. "Well, well," he said at last as the chanting faded away. "Is it so? When was this?"

"After Cei died. In a forest, when the wrath of the heavens was unleashed."

"So," said Bedwyr. "The Long Man. Fair Cei. He was the best of us all, and I avenged his death, God forgive me, in a manner of which he would not have approved. My mind was clouded with rage." He shifted his gaze to the flames of the fire.

Guthlaf reached out cautiously and covered both of Bedwyr's hands, the good and the broken, with his own. "Not so clouded you did not have mercy on the rest of us, lord. Nobody else would have done that."

Bedwyr stared into the fire.

"Gwydawg acted without honour," continued Guthlaf. "We followed Elesa, who whatever his faults was not treacherous. He made a bargain with Cei, and he intended it should be kept."

"I remember that," said Bedwyr. "Celemon told me. I wish I could say it was for that reason I spared you, but to be truthful I cannot now recall anything save my hunger for Gwydawg's blood." He shifted in his seat. "It was long ago, and God knows I have done my best to atone for what I did to him."

"Will you accept my blade?" asked Guthlaf.

Bedwyr looked down at him and smiled. "Yes, for one final fight. And to seal the bargain between us all, I have a gift for young Ceolric." He nudged Nai. "Cousin, will you fetch what the farmer gave us?"

Nai crossed the hall to the saddle bags piled by the entrance, found the long bundle and returned. The hall fell quiet as the men watched him walk between the benches, aware that something significant was about to happen. He handed the bundle to Bedwyr, who slowly unwrapped it, savouring the moment.

"I seem to be making a habit of giving people swords," Bedwyr muttered from the corner of his mouth. He winked, and Nai stifled a grin.

"Ceolric, my friend, my comrade. Will you accept this from my hands?" asked Bedwyr.

Guthlaf struggled up from his knees and stepped aside. Wermund leant forward on his seat. The whole hall waited eagerly. Even the thralls were still.

Ceolric came forward, towering over Bedwyr, a faint blush on his face that might have been caused by no more than the heat of the fire.

"In memory of Porthyle, when we stood shoulder to shoulder against Eremon and his Scotti." Bedwyr handed him the long blade in its sheath of wood and leather.

Both Bedwyr and Nai had worked upon the blade and scabbard, doing what they could to restore them after years of neglect. They had polished the bronze binding at the neck of the sheath, and the matching chape at its foot, till the metal shone in the firelight. They had oiled the leather cover so it had regained some of its original suppleness, though nothing could disguise the cracks where it had dried out. They had replaced the thongs that held the hilt tight in the scabbard and renewed the baldric that made the sword hang neatly at its wearer's side.

"Unfasten the peace bands, brother," said Wermund. "Let us see this blade."

Now he had the master of the hall's permission, Ceolric loosened the thongs and drew the sword, hefted it to judge the balance, then lifted it high so all could see.

The brightly patterned blade gleamed in the light of the fire, the winding marks left by the smith's hammer dripping red and gold.

Ceolric was speechless. Wermund rose from his seat and came around the hearth. "This is a kingly gift," he said.

"It belonged to a king's father once," said Bedwyr. "Look at the pommel."

Ceolric reversed the sword and frowned over the scratches. "*Dyrstig. Eic Elesa nemde*," he read hesitantly. "Courage. Elesa named me this."

A sigh of astonishment went up from the hall. "How did you come by this?" asked Wermund.

“A long story,” said Bedwyr. “Ceï took it from him the first time they met.”

“A kingly gift,” repeated Wermund. “Ah brother, I feel the stirrings of envy in my heart! Our friend Bolanus would not approve.” He rubbed his hands together. “Now, we have much to discuss. We must decide where your new blade can best be put to use, how we are to deal with Angus and his warriors. Let us leave our friends to their feasting and retire to the women’s quarters for some peace in which to make our plans.”

* * *

“That poor child,” Seradwen said when she and Nai were at last alone. “Her family murdered, ripped from her familiar world and brought here, and then Hildeburh as the mistress of the hall.”

“Is she that bad?”

“Nai, she is ghastly. I would have killed her by this time. I don’t speak their language, but I don’t need to. She is one of those creatures who think there is only one way of doing things – her own – and any other way is not only wrong but probably dangerous to boot. It never occurred to her Eurgain might know how to skin an animal and might be able to do it rather better than she can herself. She bullies the other women, constantly drags her ancestors into the conversation ... What were they but smelly barbarians brought over to serve us as soldiers? They couldn’t even keep an oath of loyalty! If I were descended from them I would keep quiet about it, I can tell you.”

Nai put a finger over his lips. “Hush, sweetheart. The walls are thin.”

Wermund had offered them the choice of sleeping in the hall with the other guests, or in one of the tents pitched in the yard to take the overflow. They had braved the cold and chosen a tent for the illusion of privacy it would grant them.

“These are our new allies,” he added. “We must not offend them.”

She was quiet a moment, then said in a different tone: “Do you trust them?”

“I trust them to fight Angus. Afterwards, who knows? Wermund is not a fool. He can see the advantage of having a grateful Pabo on his flank rather than an ambitious and resolutely hostile Angus. In five years time Pabo may find his new neighbour less friendly than he thought, but frankly that is his worry, not ours.”

“What is Pabo like?”

Nai flared his nostrils. “They call him Creyr Tigern, the Heron Lord, and he does resemble one from a distance. The same clumsiness on land, the jerky knees on spindly legs. He made great play on me as hoarse black crow and him as grey heron. He wanted me to become his man.”

“Were you tempted?”

“No.” He smiled, teeth white in the darkness. “Well, a little. He is not the first lord to be driven into the marshes by an invader and I do not suppose he will be the last. Some have regained their possessions, and with the aid of Bedwyr and the Saesons he might be numbered among them. I liked him and did not like him: a good enough man but not a fit ruler.”

“Listen!” Seradwen sat bolt upright. From beyond the leather walls, far above them in the cold heavens, came a faint baying, like a pack of hounds in full cry after their prey. It grew nearer and nearer, passed directly overhead as a yelling and yelping, then faded north across the hills.

“Sky hounds,” said Nai.

“One loitered,” whispered Seradwen. “Did you hear the crack of the huntsman’s whip?”

“A good omen.”

“Spring is coming,” she said sleepily. “Eurgain was saying how cold she found it here.”

“Colder than Porthyle.”

“To me it seems colder than Mordav’s farm, and that was far from the sea.”

“How is Eurgain, apart from Hildeburh?”

“She seems happy enough. Mind you, I did not know her before, so it is hard to judge.”

“Neither did I, not before her family were killed.” Nai nestled further under the covers.

“I showed her the chalice. I thought she had a right to see it.”

“What did she say?”

“That it did not look hundreds of years old.”

Nai chuckled. “A practical girl.”

“She has a point.”

He rolled onto his side, studied her profile in the dark. “I believe she is right. The cup is old, but not that old. Whatever was carried north after Caradoc mab Bran fell to the Romans invaders, it was not this. To my mind this is loot from an Attecotti raid a few generations ago, not an object from a past so distant only vague legends have survived.”

“You mean it is a lie?”

“No,” he said carefully. He fumbled through the dark for the water bottle, wetted his throat. “I think the chalice changes, even as the sovereign changes. Judging by the old tales, it was once a great cauldron which would not boil the food of a coward. Then it became a bowl, a huge drinking bowl. In the story Teleri told at Caer Cadwy, it was both a child and a golden cup shaped like a waterlily, with pearls around the rim. Now it is a vessel of yellowish glass – I suppose at a pinch a bard might call it golden, though I saw no pearls. In another hundred years it might be an ewer or an urn. It changes according to the needs of its time, that is all.”

A voice spoke somewhere in the night as the sentries changed. Feet shuffled past the tent, swore softly as they tripped on a guy rope.

“What does Bedwyr intend?” asked Seradwen.

“An attack on Ynis Witrin. If he can persuade the Saesons to march with us, we will meet with Pabo’s men and the sons of Glewlwyd, besides gathering any of the local farmers we can find. We will have to keep our plan simple, he says. No tricky manoeuvres, nothing complicated, since we are not accustomed to fighting together.”

Seradwen nodded, seeing the wisdom of this. Anything else could easily end in disaster.

“Bedwyr advocates a straightforward advance along the road, where the Saeson foot will have the advantage over their cavalry. Angus has to meet us. The old villa cannot be defended, and if he withdraws to the heights of the tor he has lost.”

“Why?”

Nai felt the tiredness seeping through him. “Because Angus needs a victory. His power is based upon force of arms, upon conquest. If he goes onto the defensive he will look weak, and his support will begin to melt away. The longer the campaign lasts the greater our advantage. The Saesons can do what Pabo can not: they can ravage the land, proving the falsity of Angus’s claim to be its protector.”

“Putting the brunt upon the poor peasants.”

“It will not come to that. The threat is enough.”

She roused suddenly. “But Nai, we cannot afford a leisurely campaign. We are more tied than Angus. Gwenthwyvar has to reach the tor and very soon, otherwise it will be too late.”

He leant across and kissed her cheek. “You know that, I know that, Bedwyr knows that. We hope Angus does not.”

“And if he does?”

“Then we are in trouble.”

* * *

Another full day passed in debate before the host was ready to depart. Wermund and Guthlaf seemed convinced of Bedwyr’s good will, but others, perhaps not surprisingly, counselled caution. Leodwald became their spokesman if not their leader, arguing that to march against Angus in his lair would leave their home and the homes of their native allies unprotected. Who knew what bargains the weala lords might make among themselves? Was Pabo to be trusted? Were Pabo and even Bedwyr – this said with a respectful nod in the old warrior’s direction – not engaged upon purposes of their own? They would use the Saesons to reinstate Pabo, to achieve whatever goal Bedwyr had in mind – and that goal was suspiciously vague. What came next? Was it not possible that Pabo, flushed by his success, would seek to extend his rule across these lands as well? Remember Finn, remember Offa, those kings across the sea who became far rulers as much through cunning and the manipulation of their neighbours as through force of arms.

The argument swayed back and forth throughout the day, conducted openly in the hall with any man free to add his opinion. In the end what settled it was that Wermund wanted to go, wanted a single decisive battle against Angus rather than a spring and summer of inconclusive raiding.

“We cannot protect every homesteading,” he said at last. “Either we spread so thinly our force will be picked off little by little, or else we gather our men in one district and watch helplessly while Angus attacks in another. One does not defeat the dragon by cowering at home: the brave man seeks out the worm in its barrow and slays it there, careless of the cost!”

By his passion he convinced the waverers, and all that remained was to agree the details. The greater part of the host, including the newcomers from beyond the Sallow Wood and most of Wermund’s own followers, would march. A handful would remain behind to guard the hall, with Leodwald as their leader.

“My brother risks much,” Ceolric whispered to Eurgain. “If we fail, and he returns, he will ever after be second to Leodwald.”

“You think him unwise?”

“No. I think he has weighed every action since he realized great Bedwyr was under his roof. If he fails, he fails gloriously. If he succeeds, who knows?” Ceolric smiled. “He may yet call himself king before he dies, however small his kingdom. Then he will have outdone our father, and be content.”

* * *

The host departed on a bright and cold morning. The women and children gathered with those men who were staying behind to watch them leave, and many faces were envious as they saw the warriors mustered in their finery. Some were mounted, some on foot. Some bore swords or axes and were clad in hip-length coats of mail, others had spears and jerkins of boiled leather. All save the handful of archers had shields: large for the spearmen, covering them from chin to knee; smaller for the swordsmen, much lighter and easier to manoeuvre.

Guthlaf laughed aloud as he surveyed the host: thirty stout Saesons and another twenty or so from the local farms.

“A long while since I saw this many fighting men gathered in one place,” he cried happily, circling the army on the pony he had been granted in deference to his years. “The ravens will follow us this day, knowing our purpose, waiting for us to feed them.”

Eurgain shuddered at his words, and beside her Seradwen asked what he was saying.

“He is glorying in the death to come,” she answered.

“Ah well,” Seradwen said practically, “if men did not glory in battle, the horror of it would overwhelm them.” She peered to at the head of the loose column, where Nai was consulting with Wermund and Ceolric. “Are we moving yet? All they seem to do is make speeches.”

At Seradwen’s insistence Eurgain was to accompany the host. Gwenhwyvar would need helpers on her final journey, and the girl was one of the few in the secret of the chalice. As Seradwen had pointed out in response to Ceolric’s objections, it would only enhance Eurgain’s standing if it were known she had been a handmaiden to Arthur’s queen. The discovery that the hermit the girl had sometimes mentioned was in fact Bedwyr mab Petroc had impressed Hildeburh mightily, the more so since Bedwyr had known the grandfather Oeric of whom Hildeburh was so proud. Eurgain’s life had become easier since Bedwyr’s arrival; a connection with Gwenhwyvar would make her position unassailable.

“I am coming anyway,” Eurgain said when asked for her opinion. “I shall disguise myself as a foot soldier if necessary.”

Finally the column began to move. Across the yard Guthlaf was deep in conversation with Bedwyr: something the latter said made the old Frisian raise his head.

“My bow,” he shouted at the crowd waving their farewells. “Beside my chest near Wermund’s seat. Fetch it, someone.”

There was a flurry of movement as one of the bystanders went to do his bidding.

“I have had it for years,” Guthlaf explained. “I was never very good myself, but I was impressed by the damage wrought by Llywri’s men when we ambushed Cei and his escort.” He faltered as he remembered to whom he was speaking, rallied hastily. “I never acquired the skill myself, never had the time, and in any case my eyes are not what they were. But perhaps somebody else amidst our host, or one of Pabo’s men, will find a use for it. A shame to leave it moulder in the hall.”

Bolanus sidled nervously through the crowd, carrying the bow inside its leather case, with a quiver of arrows slung over his shoulder and a small bag in his free hand.

“I brought it all,” he said in his clumsy Saeson.

“I thank you,” said Guthlaf. He opened the case and slid out the yew stave. “This is not a new bow, but it should still be sound. The strings are in the bag, both gut and hair. They are more recent than the bow.”

“You have a bracer as well,” said Bolanus, pulling a bone plate with leather straps from the bag. He fastened it to his left forearm, using his teeth to tighten the knots.

“May I?” he said, indicating the bow.

Guthlaf hesitated. “It has a fair draw,” he said doubtfully. “It is not a toy.”

“Let him,” Bedwyr said quietly.

Guthlaf passed the bow back to Bolanus, who looked through the bag until he found the string he wanted. He slipped one end through the horn nock that capped the stave, then took the bow and bent it with practised ease, stretching the length of twisted

sheep-gut over the second nock with no more effort than a bard replacing a string upon a harp.

“Thus Odysseus,” murmured Bedwyr, and Bolanus looked up at him on his horse and smiled, then proved the string by plucking it, so it rang sweetly.

“Like a swallow,” said Bolanus as the note died away, and his smile became a grin.

“Aye, well enough,” growled Guthlaf. “But can you shoot?”

Bolanus took an arrow from the quiver, held it to his eye, checking for imperfections, discarded it. A second he dealt with the same way, but the third he found acceptable.

Earlier the men had set a target in the rough shape of a man over in the far corner of the yard, some hundred paces distant.

“The head,” said Bolanus.

“Too far!” exclaimed Guthlaf when he realized what the other intended.

Bolanus bent the bow, drawing to his ear, and released. The arrow flew to the target. Guthlaf frowned and trotted his pony across the yard, leant forward and tugged the shaft free.

“Well?” said Bolanus when the old man returned.

“Well indeed,” answered Guthlaf. He shook his head. “What would you? I thought you a man of peace.”

“So I am,” said Bolanus in his own tongue rather than his broken Saeson. “And I am also a good Christian, which Angus is not. He has taken the name of the Lord God in vain, using it to further his ambitions. Vengeance will fall upon him, and I would be there to witness it.”

Guthlaf glanced at Bedwyr, registered the almost imperceptible nod of the head. “So be it,” he said. “But be careful. You have not yet completed my instruction in your faith and I would hear more.”

“I shall be very careful,” said Bolanus. He hefted the bow. “Very careful.”

* * *

More men joined them as they marched, summoned by the messengers Wermund had sent once the decision was taken. By the time they reached the farm of Glewlwyd’s heirs their numbers had swollen to over seventy, the largest hosting seen in this land since Arthur’s day.

Echel himself came to meet them, and another ten with him.

“The people of the Summer Country are rallying to Pabo,” he told them. “They have heard of your army on its way to free them from the tyranny of a strange ruler. The marsh folk have risen, and Angus is beleaguered at Glasdun. The patrols he sends to scout the land either return very quickly, or not at all.”

“He is blind then?” asked Bedwyr.

“We believe so,” said Echel.

Bedwyr heaved a sigh of relief. “My great fear,” he muttered privately to Nai, “was that the marshmen would not rise, and Angus would be free to set a trap for us.”

Leaving Wermund to settle the host for the night, Bedwyr went with Seradwen and Eurgain to see Gwenhwyvar. Under her cloak, Seradwen clutched the casket to her belly, finding herself oddly reluctant to relinquish it. A woman was waiting for them at the door of the hut, her hands fretting at the seam of her skirt, and by that gesture Seradwen recognised her.

“Anna,” she said in greeting.

“She is waiting for you,” Anna said quietly. “We are near the end now. I know what you bring is important, but please, try not to tire her.”

Bedwyr rested his head against the door post. After a long moment he turned to Eurgain. “My dear, will you wait outside until I call you?”

“I shall keep her company,” said Anna.

Bedwyr opened the door and ushered Seradwen inside.

Even in the few days since Seradwen had seen her last, Gwenhwyvar had changed. She was sitting up in bed, and two spots of colour smouldered high in her cheeks. Her face was drawn and white, with the ethereal look both Seradwen and Bedwyr had seen before on those not long for this world.

She looked up eagerly at their entrance, eyes large in the gaunt face.

“Did you find it?” Her voice was weak, the words slightly slurred.

Seradwen nodded, unable to speak.

“Do not look so sad. Rather, rejoice with me, for I am going home. I dreamed of Arthur last night, Arthur as he was in the days of his youth, and I fell in love with him all over again.” She held out her hand, wasted and thin in the lamplight.

“Oh my lady,” said Bedwyr, and choked, so that Seradwen thought her heart might break.

“Bedwyr, take comfort.” Gwenhwyvar smiled and her speech grew suddenly stronger. “We did not fail. The clay remembers its shape upon the wheel. One land, one people, however they may be governed. Remember the question: whom does the Sovereignty serve? Remember the answer?”

Bedwyr made reply, and their voices twined together as if in prayer, reciting the words Arthur had uttered on an island far to the north and west, when the chalice had first come into his hands.

“Albion, and all those who live within her bounds, whether they be British or Saeson or Scotti or Attecotti or none of these things.”

“Let me see it,” commanded Gwenhwyvar.

Seradwen flung aside the folds of her cloak. Bedwyr held the casket while she unfastened the latch and lifted the chalice free of its wrappings. Once again it caught the light and burned with pale fire: pale, because the source was now the lamps and not the sun. And at its heart, clearer in this manufactured light than in the natural light of day, was the flaw, like a deep black chasm in the roots of the world.

“Yes,” breathed Gwenhwyvar.

Gently, very gently, Seradwen placed the chalice in the older woman’s grasp, and all three of them lost themselves in contemplation of its light.

Later, Gwenhwyvar roused and said: “You have someone else with you?”

“Outside,” said Bedwyr. “I did not wish to crowd you.”

“Who is it?”

“Do you recall I spoke of a girl who nursed me though an illness when I was hermit?”

Gwenhwyvar smiled. “Bring her in.”

Bedwyr opened the door and beckoned. “Lady, this is Eurgain.”

It was obvious from Eurgain’s face that she was overwhelmed by what she saw within the room. First was Gwenhwyvar, Arthur’s queen, ravaged by time and wasted by illness, yet still beautiful and still a legend; and then there was the chalice, seeming to throb with a life of its own, the colours flowing through it as the dying woman shifted on the bed.

“Come, Eurgain, sit by me,” said Gwenhwyvar. “These twain have work to do, but you and I shall sit and talk for a while. Then tomorrow you shall ride with me in my carriage.” Her features creased with amusement. “I call it a carriage, in memory of the old days. In truth it’s a cart to which the men have fixed a roof. They claim they have rid it of the smell of whatever they hauled in it last.” She lowered her already weak voice so Eurgain had to crane forward to hear. “I suspect, my dear, that it was dung, but none of them have the courage to tell me.”

Eurgain laughed aloud and the awkwardness was past.

“One last favour this night,” said Gwenhwyvar. “Will you take the chalice, Seradwen?”

“Lady, I am not worthy,” Seradwen exclaimed, unconsciously echoing Nai’s words at Caer Cadwy a few months earlier.

“Do you recall the last time you visited me upon my sickbed?” asked Gwenhwyvar. “We talked – or at least I talked and you did me the courtesy of listening – of how our lives follow a pattern. So. Once there was a woman whose husband died before his time, leaving no children to inherit. His estate was a fine one, to which many were eager to lay claim. Wearied by their demands and fearful of their rivalry, the widow went into exile.” Her gaze rested upon the younger woman, and though her tone was mocking her eyes were sad. “Need I continue? Will you keep the chalice for me till the morrow?”

Seradwen made a gesture of submission. “Lady, if it is your desire.”

“And yours also, I think, and rightly so, for as I told you before, you too are a part of this.”

CHAPTER FIVE

Riding down the road with Racwant on a dun pony at his side and a handful of Pabo's men at his back, Nai remembered how Bedwyr had described the approach to Ynis Witrin. Distance became deceptive, the old man had said, and the low lying landscape gave unnatural prominence to small hills that would pass unremarked elsewhere.

That landscape was flooded now, and the small hills had become islands. The waters, cold and blue under a clear sky, stretched away to the blur of what could be either high ground or low cloud on the horizon. The mirror surface was broken here and there by the tops of trees or a willow clad knoll, or oddly shaped patches of land on which sheep and cattle crowded. Plumes of smoke rose from some of the larger islands, and Nai wondered what manner of people would choose to live here, in isolation for the greater part of the year.

"We hope they have no boats," said Racwant.

"Boats?" said Nai, his mind on the islands and their inhabitants.

"Every household has its boat," Racwant said impatiently. "You can see why for yourself. The word is they were all hidden when Angus came. Let us hope they are hidden yet."

Nai glanced behind him at the long empty line of the road on its high causeway. "We should see anybody trying to land behind us. They would be dreadfully exposed."

Racwant grunted, and it was so much the sound Nai himself might have made when he thought his leader was wilfully ignoring the facts that he had to suppress the urge to laugh.

"Bedwyr is back there," he explained. "He is not a fool, and the embankment is easy to defend."

With a twitch of the head Racwant indicated he was not completely convinced.

The creak of leather and the sound of hooves on a hard surface came from the riders behind them. Otherwise it was very still, with scarcely a breath of wind to ruffle the surface of the water.

To Nai's right were the three peaks Bedwyr had described. The nearest was the tor, well wooded on the lower slopes where they lifted above the flood. Above the trees were the terraces, unevenly spaced, larger versions of the platforms for ploughing Nai had seen on the hillsides of his homeland. At this angle he could not tell whether they ran right around the hill in a single spiral path as others had implied, only that they seemed to end well below the summit. Smoke drifted from the top of the tor, where the wind was stronger. Nai shaded his eyes against the brilliance of the sky, and saw the hermits' huts clustered on the shoulder, and above them the ill defined defences of last redoubt.

Racwant followed his gaze and grinned crookedly. "If they retreat to the heights all we need do is sit below and wait. The weakness of the tor is it has no water."

“Angus will have thought of that,” said Nai. He stared at the summit. “How far can his watchers see?”

“A long way.”

“Far enough to see the main party behind us?” he asked sharply.

“Not unless our friends are moving a deal faster than they were when we left them.” Racwant sniffed, pointed ahead. “Anyway, it does not matter now.”

Nai felt a familiar hollowness in his throat and he touched the scar there with trembling fingers.

Sunlight glinted on the blades of the approaching horsemen. They rode at a steady pace, knee to knee across the causeway in dressed ranks, not hurrying even though their opponents were in sight. Watching them come, Nai remembered that these men had once been part of the warband of Dumnonia, and that they were far better trained and much more disciplined than the troop at his back. It was not a comforting thought.

The road widened where it crossed an islet in the marsh some fifty paces from his present position. He nudged Coal forward, then reached for his quiver and pulled out a spear, held it aloft.

“We take the island,” he cried in his rusty voice. “We skirmish and withdraw, lure them on.”

Pabo’s men raised a ragged cheer, and they made for the open space at a fast trot.

“Lances,” puffed Racwant. “Not javelins.”

Nai adjusted his new shield. “They mean to close with us. Good. We must sting them into chasing us.”

They formed a thin line across the slightly higher ground, and waited, the waters lapping around them. They were pitifully few against those approaching: a dozen against thirty or more.

Nai could make out individual faces now: the former monks Wethenoc and Lasrian at the front; Regin the bard behind them. Regin’s mouth was opening and closing as if he were singing, though Nai could not distinguish any words.

He ran a hand over his brow, sweating despite the cold air, and swept his gaze across his men. Beside him on the dun Racwant wiped his own forehead, smiled shakily.

“Waiting is worst,” said the younger man.

“Bubbles from your eyes,” Nai murmured.

“It made you notice me,” said Racwant. “Now I wish you had not.”

Nai laughed and the men around him grinned.

The lances dropped and the horses leapt forward, growing suddenly larger. “Steady, steady,” called Nai.

The earth seemed to tremble under the weight of the oncoming riders. Nai waited until they were almost upon the island then shouted: “Now!”

The air was filled with spears as Pabo’s men threw and threw again. Men and ponies crashed to the ground, skidded along the causeway, legs flailing. One horse and rider went over the edge of the bank, sent sheets of water spraying across the road. The force of the charge was broken, and for a moment the attackers milled in confusion. Then they rallied and renewed the onslaught, guiding their mounts around the fallen, lances levelled at the men on the island.

A grey pony came directly at Nai, a golden buckle winking on its breast. He hurled a spear at the animal, Coal fretting beneath him, and the grey reared, hooves pawing so close he felt the wind of their passing on his cheek. The rider tumbled from the saddle, screeching with rage, and Coal lunged forward to trample the man into the mud.

“Back!” bellowed Nai.

Beside him someone screamed as they were spitted by a lance. He caught a glimpse of Wethenoc, wielding a sword with ferocious glee amidst the press, and then he grabbed Racwant’s arm and dragged him from the fray. Somebody shouted “Coward, coward,” behind him, which struck him as both stupid and a waste of breath, and then Coal’s hooves were ringing on the stones of the road.

Twenty paces down the causeway they paused and regrouped. They had lost three men, and two more were so badly cut about he ordered them back to the main party. The lancers were counting their own losses on the isle, and he tossed four spears at them in quick succession, shrieking “Throw, throw,” at his comrades. His voice was failing fast.

A lancer fell. A horse bucked and twisted as a javelin hit its hindquarters. Wethenoc brandished his sword, and the lancers plunged along the causeway, all thought of dressed ranks forgotten in their excitement.

This time they fled before the lancers could reach them, Nai herding his men like a hound with cattle, driving them down the road. He could hear the pursuing hooves gaining on him, the yelps of encouragement the foremost riders were giving their mounts.

Nai lifted his war-board up and over to cover his spine. Coal was running bravely, but the pony was bred for endurance not speed, and the leading lancers were drawing ever nearer. Immediately in front of him Racwant looked back, the bubble-blowing eyes wide with terror and exhilaration, and saw Nai’s danger.

The dun faltered momentarily as Racwant dropped the reins and swung his shield over its head. Nai could see what he intended, had no voice with which to stop him. Racwant hurled his spear over the dun’s rump and Nai heard it hiss past him as he ducked. A clatter and scream from behind told him that it had struck its target, but the effort of the throw had made Racwant’s pony swerve, throwing his rider to the right. As Nai straightened Racwant slipped slowly from the saddle, unable to regain his balance.

Arms outstretched to save himself, Racwant tumbled head first. He hit the ground and at once rolled to clear the road. Nai, handicapped by his shield, was past before he could help. He brought the shield round with savage speed, relying on Coal’s good sense, turned and flung at his pursuers. Racwant was curled at the edge of the causeway. Nai fumbled awkwardly for another javelin, saw a lance stab down and rise with its blade dulled. Filled with a cold fury he cast and cast again into the knot of lancers. Racwant slithered down the side of the embankment, his arms and legs flopping loosely, and was swallowed by the flood water.

The pursuit slowed. Ahead was another widening in the road, and there the survivors waited for Nai to reach them.

“They are too good for us,” somebody said.

He could smell the fear on them, stronger even than the sweat on the ponies.

“We’ve damaged them,” he growled with what remained of his voice. “Not much longer. See, they come at a trot now. One last volley, and we run in earnest.”

They launched their spears at long range and most rattled from upraised shields without doing any damage. Then they were off again at a full gallop, Nai peering anxiously over his shoulder to be sure the enemy were following. The ponies, even Coal, were blowing hard now, though he knew that in his mount at least there was plenty of life left. As he rode he cursed himself for losing Racwant, for shaking further the confidence of his already doubtful troop. If the enemy chose to abandon the chase he would not now be able to rally his men to harry them a second time, and so lure them down onto the Saeson spears.

Slowly he allowed himself to hope. The pursuit showed no signs of abating: the last brief halt had been to permit the javelin men to overtake the lancers – something which should have been done much sooner. He wondered whether Wethenoc was the leader; he had thought the former monk too cunning to make such a simple error.

The end of the causeway was close. Here the road climbed into the hills, and here, hidden around the first bend, would be the Saeson spears, backed by Llywri's bowmen and the British farmers.

A javelin struck a man ahead of him. Another scraped the rear horn of his saddle, skittered along the surface of the road in a shower of sparks. He turned and threw into the face of the foremost rider, felt Coal leap over the body of the man ahead, swayed as the weight of his war-board dragged him down, recovered and gave all his attention to the road.

Coal grunted and panted as the ground rose. Bare branches slashed at his face; the black pony twisted and turned in a burst of speed, weaving with the curving road. Before him were bushes and cover, and a great voice bellowing wordlessly.

The pony swerved to the side. Men lifted from the ground and levelled a thicket of long spears. He ducked under a low bough, eased Coal to a halt. Behind him he heard the screaming begin as the enemy rode into the ambush.

* * *

Echel and his kin had done their best to improve the wagon, but at the end it looked and smelled like a farm cart, despite the rugs and wall hangings. Gwenhwyvar lay upon a thick pile of furs and blankets, protected from the worst of the jolts. Eurgain and Anna sat with her. From time to time Anna mopped the sick woman's brow, or pulled the blankets about her shoulders.

"Either sweltering or chilled to the bone," murmured Gwenhwyvar. She squeezed Anna's hand in thanks. "Only a short while now."

She roused against the pillows, listening to the cries from outside. "Something has happened. Eurgain, will you see what it is?"

A leather curtain hung at the rear of the cart. Eurgain brushed it aside, blinking in the bright daylight, and jumped to the ground. Seradwen and Bedwyr sat upon their horses a few paces away, staring intently toward the front. Another man was with them, very tall and gangling, sallow skinned and grey haired. At the sound of Eurgain's approach he turned, and she thought he had the saddest eyes she had ever seen.

"How is she?" he asked.

"Near the end," said Eurgain, knowing it was true yet hoping that by saying it she might make it untrue.

The tall man nodded. "I still fear my father's curse," he said to himself, his glance wandering to the casket Seradwen kept upon her saddle bow.

"You are the Heron lord," Bedwyr said firmly. "This is your land now: the tor and its shrine are in your care. You are not your father."

"You are right," said Pabo. "I am not."

"There's Nai." Seradwen lifted herself in the saddle to see more clearly. "He seems unharmed."

The shouting grew louder. Eurgain heard the thunder of shields beaten with weapons and the scream of injured horses. The war cries of the Saesons settled to a steady rhythm, a deep growling like the barking of dogs: "Out! Out!"

All she could see was the rear of the formation, a jostling mass of untrained men adding their weight to the fighters before them. But she knew Ceolric was there in the front line, standing by his brother, with Thurstan and Guthlaf beside them. She knew, because

Ceolric had explained it to her, that for as long as the line held all would be well. If it broke the horsemen would ride through, the fight would dissolve into dozens of individual combats, and her people would lose.

Her people. They were her people now. They might be slow to trust a stranger, suspicious of outsiders, but once they knew you they were kind. Even the thralls were not badly treated, better than in some of the places she and Ceolric had stayed during their journey. The Saesons were also fiercely loyal. Hildeburh had kissed her before they left, kissed her and told her to come back safe, and Eurgain did not think it was simply because of her friendship with Bedwyr. “For your own sake, kinswoman,” Hildeburh had said in her forthright manner. “And bring Wermund and his brother home as well.”

“What’s happening? Gwenhwyvar wants to know,” she asked.

Pabo was the one who answered. The others were intent upon the fighting, Seradwen gnawing her lower lip and Bedwyr clutching the hilt of his sword.

“The usurper’s men rode into the trap. Llywri and his bowmen shoot from the wings, the Saesons hold them to the fore. They cannot disengage because the hindmost riders press them on. I think we have them.”

“I cannot see Angus,” said Bedwyr.

“There’s Regin,” exclaimed Seradwen. “He angles across the front.” Her voice rose. “He is going for Nai.”

* * *

Once safe under the trees Nai dismounted. He found Llywri shouting commands at the archers and slingers, bouncing up and down with excitement, the words slurred by the missing teeth. The missile men were too engrossed in choosing their targets to pay much attention, which was probably as well.

The man from Cunetio to whom the old Saeson had given the bow was standing to one side. At the sight of Nai he made a face of disgust.

“Such slaughter,” he said. “I am sorry. I find I am a man of peace after all.”

Nai nodded, patted him on the shoulder.

“You did it, you did it!” shouted Llywri. “Ach, Nai, we have them now.” The scar on his cheek was red and angry, and he waved his sword wildly in the air.

The great spears held the horsemen at bay, even the lancers. The javelin men cast their missiles, but most were stopped by the big shields of the Saesons and they were unable to create a gap in the line. When a Saeson did fall, another man stepped forward to take his place. Some of the riders were trying to retreat, but the archers and slingers had taken the hindmost horsemen as their first targets, so that the way was now blocked.

“Which are their leaders?” demanded Llywri. “Point them out to me.”

“That one with the sword on the grey pony,” growled Nai. His throat hurt and he could barely speak. “And the leather cap and yellow shield on the bay.”

Wethenoc and Lasrian. He felt some sorrow as he indicated them to Llywri, for Wethenoc at least might have been a friend had things been different.

Llywri bustled among his men, passing the word. The bowstrings thrummed, and Wethenoc fell into the confusion of feet and hooves, feathered by half a dozen shafts.

“Christ have mercy,” said Bolanus.

“Keep clear if you’ll not be useful,” snarled Llywri.

Nai took Bolanus by the arm and pulled him away towards Coal.

With Wethenoc’s death there was a change among the horsemen, a shift in the heaving mass as the riders brought their mounts under control. A horn blew and they began to flow back from the Saeson line, ebbing like the tide against a sea wall. A roar went up

from the Saesons and they took a pace forwards, then another, holding their formation though they were clambering over the dead.

“We have won,” said Nai, wondering why he felt so empty inside. He swung himself into the saddle and drew his sword, readying himself for the pursuit.

“Look,” said Bolanus.

A rider broke free of the fray, angled across the Saeson front, coming straight for them.

“Nai!” he screamed, audible even above the noise of the strife. “Nai mab Nwython! Coward!”

Nai closed his eyes. When he opened them Regin was still coming, and he went forth to meet him on the edge of the trees.

The first blow, with all the speed of Regin’s horse behind it, landed with tremendous force on Nai’s shield. He rocked in the saddle, arm numb, while Regin passed behind him; wrenched Coal’s head round and parried the second strike on his sword. The blades rang like bells and he reeled again, narrowly avoiding the third blow.

Regin whooped in derision. “Not so good face to face, eh?”

Nai struck at the other’s neck. Regin laughed and beat upon Nai’s shield, playing it like a drum, sending shivers through Nai’s whole body, then suddenly whirled the blade high and brought it down at Nai’s head.

He would have died then but for Coal. The black pony jiggled away so the sword fell harmlessly between them, carried his master in to the attack, pranced away as Regin countered.

“Your mount saves you,” grumbled Regin. The bard’s deep and melodious voice was unchanged by the strain of battle.

He sliced low for Nai’s leg, sent the blade flickering like lightning up and down the shield, probing for a weakness. Nai held him off while the horses circled, trying to catch the blows on the metal boss rather than the wooden boards and for the most part failing. His wrist ached and his breath came in shuddering gasps. The shield shook under the battering it was receiving. The hide cover hung in strips and Nai sensed the boards were close to splitting apart.

“Truly the sword is not your weapon,” Regin said with grim satisfaction.

The bard smote the shield a final time and it fell into two pieces, one still attached to Nai by the strap. Nai shook his hand loose, tossed the fragment at Regin, who batted it away with his blade and moved in for the kill. Coal reared and lashed with his forefeet, but the other pony danced aside. Regin’s sword soared in an arc at Nai’s flank; he swivelled so the leather war coat bore the brunt of the blow and lost his balance.

A voice cried out in the distance, then for a moment all was still. The scent of mud and grass was in his nostrils, and his eyes opened upon a tangled forest of green and white. Empty handed, he forced himself to his knees, swaying as he waited for his death to fall upon him.

Regin’s pony blundered past him, the saddle vacant. The bard lay upon the grass with a long shaft sticking from the socket of his left eye.

“God forgive me,” said Bolanus. “And have mercy upon his soul, poor man.” He put a surprisingly strong hand under Nai’s arm, helped him to his feet. “Who was he?”

“That was the son of the Protector of Dyfed,” said Llywri from behind them. He slapped Bolanus on the back. “Still, Vortepor has plenty more. I hope for your sake they are not a vengeful lot.”

“Lady, I have come to pay my respects while we wait for the road to be cleared,” said Pabo, lifting the leather curtain. “The enemy is routed and our forces advance upon Glasdun. Of Angus himself there is no sign, but Regin the Dyfed bard and – ” he snapped his fingers “ – ah yes, a man called Wethenoc are both dead. On our own side the casualties are lighter than we deserve, Bedwyr says, though we have lost my trusted servant Racwant, which is a great sorrow to me.” He turned to Eurgain, whispered: “What else was I supposed to tell her?”

“Who you are,” she hissed.

Lying on the covers at the far end of the wagon, Gwenhwyvar announced: “Pabo mab Melwas, I know you already.”

Pabo scrambled clumsily into the cart, landed in a sprawl of arms and legs. He wrinkled his nose at the underlying smell, gathered his composure. “Not I trust by my resemblance to my father.”

Gwenhwyvar laughed. “No, by your resemblance to yourself.”

He straightened, banged his head against a roof strut. Crouching, he summoned what dignity remained. “Lady, there is a thing I must say. My father quarrelled with you and with the Amherawdyr Arthur. That quarrel was his and his alone. I had no part in it while he lived, nor have I any part in it now.”

“I know, Pabo,” she said softly. “I know.”

He started to stand again, remembered in time. “Had you wed my father I would not have lived. Why then should I see you as an enemy? Neither you nor Arthur did me any harm; nor have I forgotten your forbearance after my father conspired to bring about the death of Cei. You could have destroyed us utterly, yet you did not. For that mercy, and for the many others you have shown us over the years, I thank you.”

Gwenhwyvar made to speak. He continued talking, nervous but determined.

“I am sensible of the fact that after today I shall own my seat in Ynis Witrin to the warriors who fight in your cause. I have no illusions they are here for me: they are here for you.”

“For themselves,” she murmured.

“No,” he said, and suddenly a shy nobility entered his ungainly form. “No, Lady. It may seem so to them, and that is a part of your strength. But the truth is they would none of them be here had you not summoned them. The Saesons would still be debating their strategy, waiting for the summer and the start of the campaigning season. Glewlwyd’s heirs would be busy devising defences for their farmstead, and the other farmers would be waiting for a leader.” He grimaced sourly. “And I, I would be sitting in exile bewailing my lot while my followers melted away to serve this Angus or find another lord.”

“We are moving,” Eurgain called from outside the cart, and a moment later there was a jerk and a creak of wheels. Pabo clung awkwardly to the side of the wagon, loosening a hanging, sat hastily on one of the rugs that hid the rough planks of the floor.

“How strange that Arthur’s queen should make her final journey in a farmer’s cart,” he mused aloud, then blushed crimson as he realized what he had said.

Bedwyr put his head through the curtain. “Lady, we ride ahead to secure the way. Pabo should accompany us.”

“Go, with my blessing, Creyr Tigern,” said Gwenhwyvar, and Pabo beamed at her.

* * *

Most of the others were mounted on fresh ponies, but Nai stayed with Coal. He was shaken and bruised from his encounter with Regin, and the replacement shield he had taken from one of the dead sat awkwardly on his arm.

“You do not have to come.” Bedwyr peered at him anxiously. “You have more than done your share. Somebody must remain behind to protect Gwenhwyvar.”

Nai glanced at the cart, easing its way down the hill with a bodyguard of farmers and wounded Saesons. “They have no need of me.”

“And I do? Well, perhaps you are right.” Bedwyr reached out and touched his shoulder, eyes twinkling. “Although I do have Ceolric and his brother and many other stout fighters with me.”

“Having come this far I will go on to the end,” said Nai.

The sky had clouded during the fight. The flood waters were grey now, not blue, and their surface was ruffled by a strong wind blowing from the north. The road was scattered with bits of equipment abandoned by the retreating horsemen: shattered war boards and damaged spears, saddlebags and quivers, all cast aside to lighten the load.

“I do not think they have tasted defeat before,” said Bedwyr. “This looks like a panic stricken flight, not an orderly withdrawal.”

“I thought they were supposed to be great warriors,” said Ceolric, bouncing uncomfortably on his pony. “The best, was that not the boast of this Angus?”

“Taken one by one they are very good,” answered Bedwyr. “And that is their failing. They are individuals, not a unit. They are great warriors but poor soldiers. I saw that at Tingyr’s farm, when Nai and I surprised them. They came at us in pairs, not all together. If they had acted as a unit they would have cut off our retreat. It was then I knew how to defeat them.”

Ceolric frowned. “I thought the art of the warrior was to fight alone.”

“Only in the tales,” said Bedwyr. “Only in the tales. Think about it. A horse occupies more space than a man on foot. In the shieldwall, up to five spears in the front line can attack the same enemy. That is why cavalry must stand off and break the line with javelin play before they charge home, otherwise they will always be outnumbered. And numbers are what win battles: not the numbers on the field, but the numbers engaged at any given moment. Unused troops might as well be a hundred miles away for all the good they will be.”

Ahead of them a man was sitting by the side of the road. Nai stared in disbelief, laughed aloud and urged Coal into a gallop. “I thought you were dead,” he said to the wet and dishevelled figure. “I saw them stab you before you went over the edge.”

“You did. I had to swim for it.” He rubbed his shoulder where the leather jerkin was ripped and stained with a mix of blood and water. “We marshmen are hard to kill. Have you brought me a horse?”

“We will find you one,” said Wermund as the rest of the party drew level. He gestured at one of the Saesons, who climbed down with an expression of relief, rubbing his tailbone.

Racwant tried to mount. As he lifted his arm to seize the saddle he gasped and swayed.

“You should wait here for the others,” said Pabo. “They will bind your wound.”

“No,” answered Racwant. “My place is at my lord’s side.”

The Saeson gave him a boost up onto horse’s back. Racwant slumped, jaw working against the pain. He drew a deep breath, straightened slowly and winked at Nai.

“I can still blow bubbles from my eyes,” he said.

“A very useful accomplishment,” Bedwyr responded gravely, and led them forward along the road.

They crossed the islet where Nai and Racwant had first met the lancers, and swept on towards the villa nestling under the tor. From a distance the house seemed peaceful, so that the men began to mutter among themselves and cast about for some sign of an ambush, or a gathering of their enemies on the slopes of the tor.

“They are either inside, preparing a defence against us, or they have fled,” said Pabo. His face creased in worry. “I had not expected Angus to yield his claim so easily.”

Bedwyr pointed at the heights. “If he is not inside, he will be up there, where Gwenhwyvar and I must go. We are not finished yet.”

The road swung to the north, so the wind was in their faces. From this angle the lower slopes of the tor formed a false summit, half hidden in the trees. Smoke blew across the hillside, and Bedwyr waved a small force up the incline to investigate.

“Movement,” said Nai, indicating the old villa.

“Who is it?” demanded Bedwyr.

“They are fighting in the yard.” Pabo lifted himself in the saddle and peered at the shadowed house and its outbuildings. “I rather think,” he added with an edge to his voice, “the men of Glasdun have decided it is time for the overthrow of the invader.”

“They would have been foolish to have begun earlier,” growled Nai.

The mournful eyes turned upon him. After a moment Pabo nodded. “You are right to rebuke me. In fact, what I should do now is hasten to them and inspire them with my presence.”

Before anybody realized his intention he kicked his horse into a gallop and careered along the road, elbows flapping.

“My lord,” shouted Racwant. “Wait!”

He too urged his pony forwards, but as he passed Bedwyr he reeled in the saddle, his face bone white, and would have toppled had the older man not caught him.

“Go! Quick!” called Bedwyr, waving the others on. “I will see to him.”

The cavalcade thundered down the road toward the house, the Saesons yelping as their horses caught the excitement and began to run in earnest.

Men were fighting among the barns and ruined walls of the old house, leaping and ducking between the huts. At first glance Nai could not determine who was for whom. Then he saw the tall figure of Pabo standing in the middle of the yard, the breeze ruffling his grey hair, rallying his followers to him. Many of those who answered his call were carrying farm tools, hooks and scythes, but a few were warriors, presumably the remnants of his warband who had taken the opportunity to rise against Angus.

The confusion lessened. One group, better armed and more competent, were falling back on the house. The other coalesced about Pabo, shouting and cheering. A great many bodies were left lying in the yard, and most of them clearly belonged to the locals.

The newcomers swept into the struggle, the Saesons hurling themselves from their ponies in their eagerness to come at their foes. Nai stayed mounted, using the advantage of height to seek familiar faces. He saw Lasrian, slowly retreating to the house with a knot of men, and Isag, his back to one of the low walls, fending off three of Pabo’s followers. Even as Nai watched two of them fell, and the third fled to the safety of the company around the Heron Lord.

Nai rode at him, skirting the skirmishes between them. Isag leant against the wall, eyes darting warily from side to side.

“What will you do? Kill me from a distance with your spears?” he demanded as Nai approached.

“You deserve no better.”

Isag laughed, a hoarse and hopeless sound. “We would have built a kingdom. Such things demand firmness. Ask your Saeson allies what they will do when we are gone.”

Nai flung his leg over Coal’s head and jumped down. “You burned women and children.” He drew his sword and paced toward him.

“Nai, Nai,” chided Isag. “I humiliated you in the practice hall. Do not be foolish.”

“Did I not wound you the other day?”

Isag bared his teeth. “A scratch. It has not stopped me dealing with these.” He kicked one of the bodies at his feet.

“Then it will be a fair fight.” Nai cut at him and Isag warded the blow with his shield.

“A man must follow his lord,” he said.

“Angus was not your lord. You chose to follow him.” Nai moved closer, the anger flaring within him. “Look where it has brought you.”

The last time they had fought, with wooden swords under the gaze of Angus mab Connor and his assembled minions, Isag had humiliated him. Then Nai had been nervous, unsure of himself. In the back of his mind had been the advice his old master had drummed into him when he was a boy learning how to handle a blade: “Always hold something back. The stranger you are sparring with today may be trying to kill you tomorrow.” When it came to it he had not needed to worry about revealing too much of his skill. Isag had avoided his clumsy attack and proceeded to make him look a fool. The fight had been over in moments.

Today he wanted this man dead, wanted it so badly the longing sang through his entire frame. Isag had become the symbol of everything he loathed: the blind obedience to an ambitious master; the willingness to hurt the innocent to achieve an end; the contempt for others in life and in death.

Nai flung himself at the man, the sword which had once belonged to Bedwyr whirling in rapid arcs that touched and drew blood; stepped back to compel the other away from the wall, struck and struck again, letting the blade itself guide him, up and under the rim of the shield, licking at the thigh. Isag staggered, regarded him with a new respect. “You have learned,” he started to say, and Nai shifted to the left, feinted at the neck, hit the sword arm hard as Isag countered, rolled the blade over for the throat.

The man fell, writhed on the ground beside the bodies of those he had killed earlier, his blood mingling with theirs on the dark cobbles. Nai stepped on Isag’s sword hand, put his blade beneath the other’s chin and pushed down till he felt the iron grate on stone.

Panting, he looked about him. The fighting had moved toward the house; he could see the backs of the Saesons and hear them howling their war cries. He whistled and Coal came to him. Once mounted, he stared across the yard at the struggle taking place around the steps leading to the double doors.

The doors were wide open and a succession of men were limping through them, disappearing into the depths of the house. One man held the steps, and even at a distance Nai recognised him.

He had a sword in either hand and he stood like a rock, a solid mass of a man with a bald head and a fringe of white hair floating about his ears. The swords were never still though the man himself scarcely seemed to move, the blades revolving in opposition or tracking each other through the air with tremendous grace and speed. The Saesons ran at

him, singly or in pairs, and they died beneath those swords, warding one and falling to the second.

Nai had seen Isgofan, this man's pupil, had seen him fight in his prime and thought him deadly. He had seen Bedwyr, the last of Arthur's Companions, slay Isgofan amid the windy ruins of Caer Cadwy on the shortest day of the year, and till now he had believed Bedwyr, even in his age, the most dangerous man in all Prydein with a blade.

But now he looked upon Angus mab Connor, Angus of the Eoganacht Maigi Dergind i nAlbae, Angus of the lands of the Children of Eogan in the Plain of the River Oak in Albion, Angus with his glory upon him, and knew that he was wrong, that there might be one man in the world who was a match for Bedwyr mab Petroc.

Two more Saesons tumbled down the steps, their lives stolen by the twin swords. Another pair prepared to take their place, and with a gush of horror Nai recognized them both. One was Thurstan, the warrior he had encountered after they had found the chalice, whom he now considered a friend; the other was Ceolric, young and tall against the loom of the dark building.

"No!" shouted Nai, sending Coal leaping toward the house. He seized a javelin, tempted to put it through Ceolric's leg though the youngster would never forgive him, but the risk that he might miss and hit some vital part was too great.

"Angus!" he bellowed, his voice coming to him in his desperation with a strength it had not possessed since Eremon the Abbot's kinsman had struck him down. "Angus false abbot! Child slayer! Woman burner!"

Ceolric and Thurstan hesitated at the foot of the steps, wheeled to see who was shouting. Nai threw his spear, plucked another from the quiver, hurled it high so it plummeted down upon Angus.

The double blades moved. The left struck the first spear and deflected it into the wall of the house; the right caught the second and knocked it at Ceolric, who leapt aside.

In the sudden silence Angus sheathed both swords. He turned his back upon the Saesons, upon Nai who had a third javelin in his hand, and strolled through the double doors. Without haste he pushed them shut behind him, his face calm, and those outside heard the bar drop into position.

"Round the side," shouted Pabo. "We have him in a trap!" Nai and Ceolric exchanged a glance as the others began to run.

"He will have a way out," said the Saeson youth. He smiled. "I think you saved my life."

"I could have had him then at the end," said Nai. He looked in wonder at the shaft in his hand. "An easy throw."

His arm began to shake with a life of its own, and Ceolric had to help him down from the saddle.

CHAPTER SIX

1

Seradwen rode beside the slow moving wagon as it laboured along the road. One axle had begun to squeak shortly after the descent from the hills. Although one of Echel's cousins had managed to slap some grease around the wheel, the noise still ground through her head, worse because it had become unpredictable.

The remaining Saeson foot and their farmer allies marched in loose order around her, guarding the cart and its contents against an attack that seemed less and less likely as they neared the villa. She had seen Bedwyr a few moments earlier, returning along the road with the young man Pabo had named as the new leader of his warband. The young man had been barely conscious, and Bedwyr had handed him over to the care of his wounded friends. Then he had waved at her briefly and clambered aboard the wagon. From his lack of concern she assumed Nai was unhurt, and that the assault on the villa was going well. Of Gwenhwyvar she had heard nothing for some time, but on the last occasion Seradwen had put her head through the leather curtain she had thought the journey was killing the older woman.

She shifted the casket onto her lap. So much concern over so small an object. She could take it out and drop it onto the road, now, and make an end of it – except she had the feeling that would not work. Either the chalice would not break – fragile glass though it seemed – or else nothing would be changed by its destruction. The ritual was important: the chalice had been won by the walking of a labyrinth, and it must be unmade in the same fashion. After all, wine did not become blood simply because one said so; the right words had to be uttered, and the participants had to be in the correct state of mind. Hence, presumably, the labyrinth: the ritual use of space.

“Seradwen.”

She turned, seeking the origin of the voice, saw Llywri beckoning to her from beside the road.

“I have a woman who insists upon speaking with the Lady Gwenhwyvar,” he said. “She claims to be a friend of Wermund and Eurgain. My men found her on the hillside.

Seradwen stared at the old woman standing a few paces away between a pair of Llywri's warriors. She was taller than either man, and despite her patched and ragged cloak gave the impression of an honoured guest waiting with her escort, rather than a prisoner between two guards.

“Was she alone?”

Llywri nodded. “Yes, though one man thought he had seen something scurrying away among the apple trees.”

A coldness ran down Seradwen's spine. “What manner of thing?”

“Bent over, lopsided.” Llywri seemed surprised at her interest. “A large dog, perhaps. The woman had lit a fire and the smoke was gusting across the woods.” He gestured indifferently. “Whatever it was, it was no danger.”

“You have searched her?”

“Of course,” he said, showing his impatience. “Why do you not ask Eurgain whether she knows her? Then we can find out if Gwenhwyvar is willing to see her.”

The old woman was watching intently, though at this distance she would not be able to hear them above the noise of the cart rumbling down the road and the chatter of its escort. But it must be obvious they were arguing. Llywri wanted to be with Pabo and his old acquaintance Guthlaf, taking part in the triumphal entry to the villa, not loitering at the roadside debating with Seradwen.

What bothered her was the mention of a lopsided creature scurrying away through the smoke. Nai had seen a figure scuttling around the side of the ruin when they had found the chalice. It was absurd, and yet ...

She laid a hand upon the casket, saw the woman watching hungrily. She knows, thought Seradwen. She knows I have the chalice. I have just told her, as clearly as if I had spoken, that the chalice is in this box on my saddle bow.

Llywri squinted, picked at the scar on his cheek. “Where is Eurgain? In the wagon?”

“I shall find her.” Seradwen wheeled her horse, chased after the cart. She called, and Eurgain lifted the curtain.

“Somebody is asking for you. She wants to speak with Gwenhwyvar. Can you vouch for her?”

Eurgain peered at the roadside in puzzlement. Suddenly her expression lightened with recognition.

“Yes,” she said. “I know her. I think she may be – ” She and flushed, added so quietly Seradwen could barely hear her above the sound of the wheels: “I think I may know who she was. Let her come.”

Seradwen beckoned, and the men, walking briskly, brought the old woman to the cart. The grey hair swirled about her face, disguising the furrows and the hooked nose. A long thin hand reached up and clasped Eurgain’s.

“Well, child,” she said in a resonant voice that reminded Seradwen of Regin with his bardic training, “you have powerful friends, the like who may say come and he comes, or go and he goes.”

Seradwen ran her tongue across her lips, feeling she had missed something. ‘I may know who she was,’ Eurgain had said, which made little sense.

“My sins are grievous,” said the old woman. “But they may yet be forgiven.”

She sprang over the tail of the wagon without any great effort, paused and looked at Seradwen. “It is not my place to say, but perhaps you should join us, and bring yonder box with you.” She moved further inside and the leather curtain fell to behind her, shutting off Seradwen’s view.

By the time Seradwen had hitched her pony to the rear of the cart and scrambled aboard herself – with rather less ease than the other – the old woman was seated on the floor. Bedwyr was staring, open mouthed, as disconcerted as Seradwen had ever seen him. There was an odd illusion of privacy about the two of them, though Eurgain crouched against one wall and Gwenhwyvar lay upon her couch with Anna at her side. Eurgain looked both engrossed and fearful; Anna was blank, as if events had passed beyond her comprehension and she had given up the struggle to understand.

Gwenhwyvar appeared stronger than she had seemed in days, her eyes shifting eagerly from one to the other.

“For years I thought you were dead,” said the old woman. “I thought you died at Camlann.” Her voice cracked, lost its resonance, and Seradwen wondered whether she was weeping under the veil of grey hair. “If you hate me I will understand.”

Bedwyr shook his head, and he was weeping, unashamedly, the tears cutting runnels through the road dust on his cheeks.

“I do not hate you,” he said, and for all the tears his voice was strong and steady. “But why did you leave, without a word? And why would you not see me, afterwards, when we had won the chalice?”

The old woman ran a hand across her face. “I am sorry,” she said. “I did not expect you to be here. In this wagon, now, I mean. I knew we would soon meet, but I meant to be better prepared. I sent you a message. Did it reach you?”

“The boy in Lindinis,” said Bedwyr. He closed his eyes and quoted: ““I shall cling to you as the ivy clings to the tree.””

“It sounds foolish here,” the old woman said shakily.

“They killed the boy, did Dirmyg and his friends. Killed him and claimed I had done it.”

“I know,” she said. “And I knew you had not done it.”

“But I did kill your brother.”

“In vengeance for Cei. And Cei was slain in vengeance for my father, Pedrylaw mab Menestyr. And so it continues.”

“Teleri,” Seradwen said aloud, but neither paid her any attention.

This was the woman who long ago had come to Caer Cadwy and the court of Arthur the Warlord of Prydein. In the guise of a bard she had evoked the oldest of all names for the island: Albion. She had persuaded Arthur the time was ripe for Prydein to be united under one ruler, and had offered him a trial at the Sovereignty of Albion. On an isle far to the north-west of Britain was a labyrinth guarded by a clan of tattooed warriors: the Plant Menestyr, the Children of the Cupbearer. Only the sovereign lord of all Albion could walk the labyrinth and live, and in token of his success he would bring home with him the chalice from which the clan received their name. Arthur had been injured and unable to essay the trial, but Lleinawg the Dancer had been his substitute, and he had been mortally wounded at Teleri’s hands in the final stages of the test.

Because Teleri, who had become Bedwyr’s lover, who had sent Arthur and his men to the labyrinth, had also been the daughter of Pedrylaw Menestyr, the leader of the tattooed men.

“I ruled them for a long while after my brother’s death,” said Teleri. “I had to. There was no one else. But as I aged my powers waned. My nephew Dirmyg ousted me a year or more ago and I was fortunate to escape with my life.”

“I never thought you were our foe,” said Bedwyr. “Not even when I saw you with the spear down in the hollow, about to slay Lleinawg. I trusted you, and if my trust ever faltered – and I confess it did – then I had faith in Gwenhwyvar Thrice Royal, whose judgement of another has never been known to fail.”

On her couch Gwenhwyvar grimaced. “Except for Medraut, until it was too late,” she murmured, but the former lovers, intent upon themselves, did not hear.

Seradwen tried to remember the tale as she had heard it from Nai, who in turn had heard it from Bedwyr. Arthur had been wounded in a fight against raiders from the sea in the far northern waters. His followers had abandoned all thought of continuing the quest,

and set sail for home. A great storm arose and wrecked the ship carrying Arthur and his closest companions on an unknown shore. Cei was lost, Arthur insensible, Bedwyr himself drifting in and out of lucidity after a blow to the head. The survivors were taken prisoner by the Children of Menestyr under their leader Pedrylaw, who agreed that the trial should take place, and that Arthur would be allowed a substitute.

Seradwen clutched the casket to her, remembering what had happened.

Lleminawg the Dancer had descended into the deep hollow or old quarry where the labyrinth wound its convoluted course: a single path circling seven times around the pit, rising and falling so the way crossed itself in eight places. At each of these junctions stood a priestess armed with a question to be answered before the seeker could continue; and down in the darkness was a ninth guardian bearing a spear with a cruelly barbed blade, and a final question. This ninth priestess, Teleri hidden behind a helm-mask in the form of a snarling boar, had attacked the unarmed Lleminawg, and his captive friends upon the rim of the hollow had despaired.

At this crucial moment Cei appeared. He flung his sword down to Lleminawg, fighting off the Children of Menestyr with his bare hands. Lleminawg struck the boar mask from Teleri's head and, lost in his battle fury, would have slain her had Bedwyr not recognised her from the rim. Bedwyr's shout made Lleminawg avert the killing blow. Dazed and half-blinded, Teleri lunged with the spear, mortally wounding Lleminawg. He dashed her to the ground with the flat of his blade and went on to claim the chalice for Arthur, while on the heights above Pedrylaw Menestyr attacked Cei, who slew him with his hands and cast him down into the depths.

"I wondered if you would come." Gwenhwyvar's voice broke across Seradwen's thoughts. The former lovers, who seemed to have edged closer together though she had not seen either move, sprang guiltily apart in a manner Seradwen would have found amusing elsewhere.

"How could I not?" Teleri asked bitterly. "So much of this was my doing, my pride."

Gwenhwyvar laughed: a clean clear sound that cut through the close atmosphere of the wagon. "You flatter yourself. For what exactly are you claiming the credit? The twenty years of Albion's empire? Arthur's Peace, which lasted nigh ten years after he was gone? Your failure to restrain your kindred, so they have cost me son and friend?"

Teleri blinked, clearly unaccustomed to being challenged. "Our failure to perform the original ceremony as it should have been performed."

"You mean the sacrifice?" Again Gwenhwyvar laughed, and with her laughter came the scent of newly mown hay, filling the stuffy wagon like a benediction. "I know about the sacrifice, Teleri. So did Arthur. We always knew. We also knew that you, as High Priestess of the Children of Menestyr, would remain in the Western Isles and not return to us. We even knew that you would not make the voyage north in the company of Arthur and his Companions." She leant forward, the colour burning high in her cheeks. "You have nothing for which you need to atone, so far as Arthur and I are concerned. None of it was your fault. You did not fail." A small smile crept across her lips. "Of course, Bedwyr is a different matter. There you may need to make an explanation."

Teleri's brown eyes flickered as she stared at Gwenhwyvar in sudden curiosity. "You knew? How much did you know?"

"Enough," Gwenhwyvar said lightly, "to decide that we could trust you for the good of the realm." She lifted an eyebrow. "Do you think Arthur would have claimed the sovereignty if he had not believed Prydein, Albion, would benefit by it? He was not

blinded by ambition, whatever his foes may have said.” Her tone changed, became brisker. “Now, Bedwyr. You owe him an explanation for your abrupt departure from his tent all those years ago.”

Under them, while they waited for Teleri’s response, the cart creaked and the axle squealed. Seradwen could hear voices shouting, very far off. Nearer to hand a man was sobbing as his wounds were probed, and his friends were trying to comfort him, telling him to hold on, it would be over soon, but she guessed for him those moments would be stretched into an eternity of pain. She looked at Bedwyr’s face and saw a different kind of pain etched there: loss, grief, doubt.

According to the story Nai had relayed to her, Teleri had accompanied Arthur’s army on its march west from Caer Cadwy to take ship for the Western Isles. One night Bedwyr had returned to the tent they shared and found her gone without warning.

“I smelled someone in the tent,” said Bedwyr. “A faint odour of grease and sweat. One of your kin, yes? I assume they presented you with a choice.” He closed his eyes. “A choice you have abided by.”

Teleri made a small gesture of despair.

“It was not her choice, not in the way you mean.” Gwenhwyvar’s voice was loud in the quiet of the wagon. “Let me guess, Teleri. Your father came to you, there in the midst of an armed encampment, walking past the sentries as if they had no relevance for him. And he told you something which compelled you to go at once, without any kind of farewell, not even to Bedwyr. He told you that if you did not come there would be no trial, that all you had worked for would be wasted. I can think of nothing else he could have said to make you run like that, not unless we all misjudged you utterly.” She smiled, and Seradwen saw the radiance of her beauty that had survived beyond age and the death of the man who had loved her. “I too have my pride, Teleri. I do not believe I misjudged you.”

“You are right.” Teleri bowed her head. “And afterwards, afterwards it was duty held me to my people. I had taken from them the chalice, the guarding of which was all their purpose. Without it their lives had no meaning. They were no longer pre-eminent among the tribes of the north-west. The Attecotti were never a single nation, only a loose alliance bound together by their faith in the Children of Menestyr. Once there was no longer a cup for the Cupbearer, the alliance dissolved and my people began the long slow dwindling into the dark. My hope was that I could lead them forward, but the weight of the past was too much. But I tried, at least I tried.”

She raised her head and looked at Bedwyr. “Do you understand?”

He reached out to her with his damaged left hand. “I understand perfectly. For us also the weight of the past has too often seemed unbearable.”

Gwenhwyvar granted them a moment’s silence before said with decision: “We have a chalice to unmake. We must decide what is to be done. And this kinsman of Lleminawg: is he still loose?”

The last part was spoken with such contempt that Seradwen could not restrain a smile, and in the talk that followed she forgot all about the figure Llwyri’s men had seen fleeing through the orchard.

As day fell to dusk and the servants lit the cressets around the yard, Nai and Seradwen stood together gazing up at the darkening bulk of the tor.

“Angus is up there,” Seradwen said. “Gwenhwyvar seems to think it unimportant.”

Nai studied the path leading up the shoulder to the summit. Behind him he heard the sounds of rejoicing as Pabo’s followers (and it was remarkable how numerous those followers had become since the recapture of the villa) made welcome their Saeson guests and other allies. Gwenhwyvar had been carried inside on a makeshift litter and given a room in which to rest; Ceolric and Eurgain were exploring the house with Pabo himself as their guide; Llywri and Guthlaf were exchanging reminiscences by the fire in the feasting hall. He did not know where Bedwyr and Teleri had gone, and he hoped nobody else did either, that they would be allowed a little time alone before the end.

The path was blocked near the top by a wooden palisade, behind which, presumably, lurked Angus and those who still clung to him. Some of the defeated warband had fled into the marshes, or along one of the other roads, but Llywri had gleefully assured Nai that the whole country was up in arms against the invaders and they would not get far. Five or six figures had been seen running with Angus toward the tor, and it was assumed they had taken refuge on the heights. The truth of the matter was that nobody, Nai included, had any great wish to face those twin swords again this day. If the problem did not resolve itself Angus could be dealt with tomorrow, but for the moment there was a house to be put in order and a celebration to be arranged.

“He’ll probably sneak away during the night,” Llywri had said optimistically. “Rot him.”

On either side of the path the ground fell away very steeply, so that the palisade did not need to extend very far. The hill’s natural defences were enough against most attackers; anybody trying to reach the summit plateau by any route other than the path would be forced to use their hands to clamber up the final stages.

Nai sipped from the goblet of wine they had brought with them and passed it to Seradwen. He stared again at the hill. The terraces curved broadly around the tor, seemed to cross and recross at random. He blinked, shook his head, strained to see against the shadows of dusk.

“I cannot make sense of it,” he said.

“The labyrinth?” Seradwen drank in her turn. “It is there. At least, I think it is.”

Nai studied the terraces more carefully, and suddenly the pattern became visible. The way wound in and out exactly as he had heard it described and seen it drawn: a backtracking spiral twisting deviously in seven circuits to the shadowy heights, marked along its course by yellow stones.

“It will be clearer when the moon rises,” said Seradwen. “That is when they want us to play our parts.”

“I still do not understand. You, me, Ceolric, Eurgain.” Nai counted them off on his fingers. “Teleri, Bedwyr, Pabo and Llywri. With Gwenhwyvar that makes nine, which is the right number. But who then is the supplicant? Who will be our Lleminawg and dance the labyrinth?”

“One will come,” said Teleri from behind them.

“Can you not guess?” Bedwyr indicated the top of the tor. “Who is the only one of our enemies left in the field? We destroyed Teleri’s kinsmen at Caer Cadwy, and Bolanus neatly disposed of Regin mab Vortepor. Only Angus remains, and he wants the chalice so badly I can feel his desire beating down upon me from his refuge.”

“Can you?” Seradwen asked with interest.

Bedwyr smiled. “Yes. It burns within him. Can you not sense it?”

Even as he spoke a light flared upon the hilltop. Seradwen gasped and sipped the wine; managed a small laugh as she gave the goblet to Nai.

“Soon,” said Bedwyr. “Soon.”

* * *

Not long after moonrise Nai and Bedwyr took the path up the shoulder of the hill until they came within range of the palisade. The stakes shone very white in the moonlight, cast long uneven shadows down the slope.

Bedwyr hailed the summit. “Angus! Come forth!”

A cloud passed across the face of the moon, plunged them into darkness. When the light returned, Nai heard the voice of Angus ringing down the hillside.

“What do you want?”

“We offer you safe conduct.”

There was a long silence. The wind blew, stirring the short grass. Somewhere in the night below an owl hooted: a long ululating hunting cry.

“Safe conduct where?”

“To essay the test of sovereignty. Is that not your desire?”

The gate in the palisade creaked open and Angus walked slowly toward them, his shadow lengthening and falling across them as he came. He stopped a few paces short with his hands on his hips, close to the hilts of his swords, and scrutinised them both.

“Nai,” he said coldly, inclining his head. “Let me see. Eri, Regin, Isag and half a dozen others. Was Wethenoc your work as well? I underestimated you after all. And you, Bedwyr. You killed Isgofan. I did not think there was a man now living save myself who could take him in single combat. I have a score to settle with each of you. Now, what is your proposal?”

He turned slightly so the side of his face was bathed in the pale moonlight, and Nai saw the mass of seams and scars that fissured the skin.

Bedwyr cleared his throat. “We offer you the same trial Arthur had in the Iardomnan, here, this very night.”

“And if I succeed?” The voice was hard as rock.

“Then you take the chalice and your men and go where you will.”

“And if I refuse?”

“Then you may either surrender to Pabo’s justice, or sit upon your hilltop till lack of water drives you down – or we grow tired of waiting for you.”

Angus chuckled. “No choice at all.” He stared behind him at the gateway, looked again at Bedwyr. “My kinsman Lleminawg was a young man when he danced the labyrinth in the far north. I am not so young. Seven times around this hill in the dark is a fair distance.”

Bedwyr made a gesture of acquiescence. “You may use a horse, though you will have to dismount where the going is rough. We will even provide you with a mount. And since the way is no longer always clear, we will put men and torches in the difficult places.”

“You have thought of everything,” Angus said contemptuously. “What is to prevent me from taking this horse and riding away into the night?”

Bedwyr’s face was drained of expression. “How far do you think you would get?”

“Very well,” Angus said. “I agree. Make your preparations. I shall be ready when you summon me.” His gaze flicked across them, relentless and assured, then he turned on his heel and was gone.

“He did not ask what would happen if he failed,” said Nai as they trudged down the hill.

“No more he did,” said Bedwyr. “No more he did.”

* * *

The victory celebrations were well under way when they reached the villa, and it was a while before they found sufficient sober people to act as guides and torchbearers. Each swore a solemn oath to give safe conduct to Angus and any witnesses he brought with him. Since some of the helpers were Saesons and some Britons, they used at Teleri’s suggestion the old wording, “I swear by the gods my people swear by.” Listening, Nai remembered the oath Cei had made Melwas take in this very hall over forty years earlier, and wondered how many of the locals were swearing by the white sow.

When at last all was ready they walked to the foot of the hill. Gwenhwyvar was carried on a litter by Echel and his kinsmen; they and the torchbearers went ahead to find their places. The moon was high now. Fragments of cloud trailed across its face, but every so often it rode free of the wrack and shone sharply on the tor, illuminating the broad terraces as bands of silver against the darkness of the slope.

“Now you can see it clear,” murmured Seradwen.

“Yes,” grunted Nai. In his head he was frantically repeating the words he was to utter when Angus drew near, fearful he might forget them, and remembering the instructions Teleri had whispered privately in his ear. He did not understand them, but he trusted her; and besides, he was fully armed with spear, sword and shield.

At one time, Teleri had told them, the route was marked along its length with standing stones large and small. Most had been lost over the years. A few remained, and the first of these indicated where the course began.

Nai knelt and ran his fingers over the rough surface, feeling the grain of the rock and what might have been old carvings, long weathered away into the merest trace of themselves, hollow ghosts in the stone.

“This is the quarry in the Iardomnan,” he said, and saw Pabo peering at him from his heron height with an expression of great puzzlement. “I mean, this is the same, except it is a hill.”

He came up from his knees and seized Bedwyr’s arm, grappling with the idea, aware Pabo thought that he was muttering nonsense. A great abyss had opened up and he stood upon the brink, his footing no longer solid but uncertain. He had been treating this like an exercise, like a game, as when a warband divides in two and one half attacks the other with blunted spears – a complicated and possibly lethal game, yet a game all the same, played out to humour Gwenhwyvar who was dying.

Only it was not a game. It was real. He had known the quarry in the Western Isles resembled the tor, as an image seen in water might resemble the original, but this rock, this very stone, yellow in the moonlight with its faint tracery that might once have been carving, had been in Bedwyr’s account of the Iardomnan.

For a moment all went fuzzy and there was a humming in his ears, as if he were about to faint: then with a jerk everything fell back into place, save that the shadows on the hillside seemed sharper.

“One reflects the other,” Bedwyr said calmly. “What was done in the north may be undone in the south.”

“The crossings,” said Nai. “I did not realize until I saw them. They are mostly together, though the path winds far around the rear of the tor.”

“Yes.” Pabo’s mop of hair bobbed eagerly. “That was always part of the design. Whatever ceremony was enacted here was meant to be watched, to be witnessed, from here or from the summit.”

“To your posts,” said Teleri.

They scattered along the slope, spreading out at each junction or beginning of a new way. Teleri remained by the lower marker, which was the entrance; Bedwyr, Seradwen and Llywri went up to the highest levels, on the shoulder or false summit, not far from the palisade. Nai and the others were between them, Nai on the level of the second terrace, and Eurgain on the third, where Angus would begin his first circuit.

The gate in the palisade opened and Angus descended, accompanied by Lasrian and two others. When Lasrian passed Nai he sneered, but Angus remained impassive, as befitted a man walking to his destiny. Since Nai had seen him earlier he had donned a coat of mail, blue-grey in the moonlight, crossed by double baldrics from which hung the twin swords. His cloak was a deep red with a hint of purple, almost black, and he walked with his head high, his bald scalp gleaming. Above him the cold stars glittered through the thin clouds.

“I am ready,” Angus said into the silence. He mounted the horse Pabo’s servants brought to him, and took the first step upon the path, the pony’s hooves ringing on the stones as he set it up the slope to Eurgain, who stepped forward to bar the way.

“Who comes?” she demanded.

He flung back his head and cried out in a great voice so all the hill reverberated with his shout:

“Am I not a candidate for fame, to be heard in song? Am I not Angus of the Eoganacht Maigi Dergind i nAlbae?”

She drew aside and allowed him to pass. Round the tor he rode in a sunwise direction, guided by the torches, humming and chanting, and soon they heard the sound of him arriving from the east.

Nai leant upon his spear. “Seven possessions to a king,” he said.

“Not hard to name,” said Angus, giving the traditional answer, the one his kinsman had given thirty years earlier. “A sword, a spear, a knife, a whetstone. A mantle of royalty, a game board for wooden wisdom. A chalice. And an eighth possession a king must have: an heir.”

He went on his way, circling the tor widdershins, till he reappeared below Eurgain and dropped down toward Teleri.

“Who am I?” she asked.

Angus patted the neck of his pony, glistening with sweat. “Not hard to answer. You are Medb, the intoxicating one.”

“Harsh shall be thy drink from my cup – it will be mead, it will be bitter, it will be wormwood,” she said.

He shouted in horror and would have struck her, but she leapt aside. A bird rose croaking from the trees at the foot of the hill. Angus screamed again, sent the horse galloping around the outer circuit of the spiral, careless of the darkness, shrieking and wailing as he went.

From among the trees where the bird had been disturbed shuffled a figure, crook-backed and slow of movement, as if every step were filled with pain. It clambered toward Teleri, who bowed deeply at its approach and gestured it on in silence.

Nai watched it coming. He squinted, the hairs prickling on the back of his neck, tried to discern its features. He gripped the spear shaft tightly in his right hand while the

left fiddled with his shield. A cold wind blew down from the heavens, chilling him through his cloak, and he was afraid, more afraid than he had ever been.

The horse jogged around the hillside from the east, Angus grim in the saddle. He answered the question Pabo directed at him, glanced at the struggling figure as he overtook it and climbed the slope beyond Nai to Ceolric.

Distantly, Nai heard the challenge and the reply. The figure was almost upon him now. It paused, lifted its face, revealing lines etched mercilessly in the moonlight, held out a hand.

Nai summoned his courage. He reached out and clasped the hand, the fingers cold in his own, pulled the other to him.

The figure's breath was hot on his cheek as its full weight fell against him. The free hand gestured imperiously, and Nai put the spear shaft in its grip. The pressure on him eased as the figure shifted its weight, using the spear as a staff.

Nai straightened. The other was panting hard, leaning heavily on the spear. Nai saw a tangle of white hair, a wild beard, staring eyes liquid in the moonshine; saw that under the bundled layers of clothing the creature had some deformity of the hip which caused the awkward gait and prevented it – him – from standing upright.

“Can you understand me?” he asked.

The white head dipped.

“Teleri told me to take you to Gwenhwyvar. She is on the southern face of the hill, a little way above us. Can you manage?”

The creature paused, seemed to deliberate, swung the spear butt forward, prodding at the ground. Nai took the other arm, and together the pair of them moved across the slope.

Despite frequent halts for rest they soon reached Ceolric. The man was more agile than his gait suggested; the slowness, Nai quickly realized, stemmed from exhaustion.

“Nai?” Ceolric said doubtfully at the sight of the double headed monster battling toward him. “Who is this?”

Nai shrugged. “Teleri says he is important. Help me. We must find Gwenhwyvar.”

“It would be faster if I carried you.” Ceolric crouched before the figure. “Will you ride on my back?”

The creature returned the spear to Nai and put his thin arms around the Saeson's neck. Ceolric stood to his full height, and Nai caught a flash of teeth against the darkness. A strange sound came from the stranger, a kind of whuffling and grunting. After a moment Nai saw that he was laughing.

“Have you seen Lasrian and the other two?” he asked.

Ceolric rearranged the stranger's arms, which were pressing on his throat. “Not since they walked down with Angus.”

“Neither have I.” Nai peered about him anxiously, squinting against the torches. “They are not below. They disappeared while we were all watching Angus.”

“Then let us make haste,” said Ceolric. He began to run along the fourth terrace, following the route Angus had taken earlier. The stranger bounced on his back, gurgling happily like a small child. Nai trotted beside them, searching the shadowed hillside for some sign of the missing men.

Angus was high above them. Nai could see the lights dipping under the summit as the horseman passed, skirting the patch of badly broken ground under the plateau. The circuits were shorter now, and thus faster, though in places Angus would have to dismount, which should slow him a little.

“I’d be happier if Bedwyr were with her,” he said.

“She has Echel and his cousins,” panted Ceolric.

Nai shook his head. “She planned to send them away.”

Ceolric stumbled on a rut. “Why?”

“She is dying. She wants an end.”

Above them the bank grew steeper. Ceolric came to a halt, looked up. “We would have done better to stay with the path. It is almost sheer ahead.”

“There you are!” said a voice. “Nai, we have been looking for you.”

“Go, Ceolric, go!” Shouted Nai. He unslung his shield and turned to face Lasrian.

The former monk grinned broadly, his sword naked in his hand, his two comrades close behind him. “What have we here? Who is the cripple?”

“You gain nothing by this.” Nai backed along the terrace, opening the space between them. “The hillside is full of our people.”

“But they are not here, are they?” Lasrian stepped toward him. “You are alone. Even your Saeson friend seems to be deserting you.”

Nai risked a glance to the side. Ceolric had scrambled up the bank, out of reach of the swords. The stranger’s arms seem to have locked about his neck, and he was fighting to free them so that he could lose his burden and return to Nai’s aid.

“Keep going!” Nai shouted.

“I left you once before,” snarled Ceolric. “I’ll not do so again.”

“Watch him,” Lasrian said to his fellows. He seemed to glide across the ground, suddenly looming large before Nai. “Drop the spear and use the sword.”

His voice was filled with contempt.

Nai shifted his grip on the spear, fingers sliding without thought to the thread he had bound round it to mark the point of balance. He threw, not at Lasrian as expected, but at one of the others, sending the man staggering. He rolled to the side, catching Lasrian’s vicious cut on his shield, tugged the sword from his belt.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw Ceolric launch himself from the bank, Dyrstig raised above his head. Lasrian came at him with a series of smooth blows that thundered on the war-board and drove him back. One slipped past his shield, tearing his cloak, and scored his arm as he twisted away.

Lasrian laughed, came in again, pressing hard, blade whirling with practised ease. Nai felt a numbing shock in his ribs, just above the old wound from the spear thrust he had taken last summer, and he screamed aloud as the pain bit him and his vision blurred. Again Lasrian laughed, moving in for the kill.

Nai reached deep, found the anger and let it sweep through him, the blade suddenly feather light in his hand, swayed aside so Lasrian’s sword clove the air, struck himself for the vulnerable neck, the force of the blow spinning him round. He lurched as Lasrian fell, cut upwards into the groin of the man who hurdled Ceolric’s body, and hacked again into the man’s knee as they went down together.

He could hear the sea, roaring loud in his ears, washing the strand clean of the dead. It was cold and lonely on the shore, waiting for the tide to take him. He released the sword hilt, fumbled for Ceolric across the carcass of the man he had killed, found the Saeson’s face with his fingers and was content.

Seradwen sensed the change within the hill, like something slowly waking from a long sleep: something old and hungry, better left undisturbed. The wind was strong on the higher slopes, tugging at her cloak, carrying with it the ghosts of strange sounds, like the peal of far off bells or horns blowing in the distance. Clouds gathered around the nimbus of the moon. The torches to her left, where the ground was uncertain, flared wildly, casting a fiery gleam across the uppermost terrace, painting it with the colours of war. She could hear the thunder of hoof beats as Angus completed his circuit, the howl of his voice as he answered Bedwyr's question; and underlying it all a deep rumble as if the tor itself shrugged within its doze, as if something far below the surface were swimming up towards the light.

The sky was darkening, the stars vanishing little by little. Only the moon swam through the fast moving clouds, tinged them with beaten argent at their edges. When she closed her eyes she could see its glow streaking her vision. The wind blew back her hood, tugged her hair, buffeted her body. She staggered, and the whole hill seemed to sway with her, to dislocate and drop, shivering with the impact.

"Now!" she heard Angus scream above her.

The gate in the palisade opened with a crash. Men sprang through, blades molten silver, ran across the hillside. She stared, not understanding what Angus hoped to gain by this, and the world opened out around her so she saw everywhere at once: Bedwyr drawing his blade and bounding in her direction; the torchbearers (too far away to be of any help) shouting in consternation; Angus forcing the labouring pony down the steep slope, abandoning the labyrinth and the ceremony.

"Run," shouted Bedwyr. "To Gwenhwyvar."

The moon vanished behind a thick bank of cloud and they were plunged into night.

His blade wove through the darkness in a sequence of whirls and slashes, shimmered as the light fought free for an instant. He was dancing against the dark, she saw, every movement economical, perfectly timed. Around him the attackers stumbled and collided as he floated between them, the sword lifting and falling, unhurried, deadly.

"To Gwenhwyvar!" he shouted again, and she woke from her reverie, slithered on the grass as she followed the route Angus had taken down the hill, slipping and sliding in her haste as her momentum took her and brought her to the brink of the escarpment above the boulder where Gwenhwyvar waited.

Seradwen caught herself on her hands. The moon shone forth from the cloud, and she saw far below the flood waters stretching into the night, a sheet of silver marred only by the black tops of the drowned trees, like pimples of darkness on a field of glory. She dashed from her eyes the tears the wind had made, screwed her courage tight, and leapt for the ledge where Angus stood, the pony lame beside him.

She was falling, flying, the cloak billowing out around her like wings too weak to break her fall. She glimpsed Angus's startled face, then landed hard on sharp rocks, grazing her knees and elbows. Angus strode across, and she had time to curl into a ball, protecting her stomach, before the first kick landed.

"Enough," came Gwenhwyvar's voice, loud above the bluster of the wind. "She will not harm you."

Angus snorted, but he left her alone. Cautiously she lifted her head.

Tumbled boulders created a shelter, a cave in miniature. Gwenhwyvar was seated at the back, her face bleached of all colour, feathered with shadows, her eyes huge, white hair coiling to her shoulders. On her lap she held the chalice.

"Give it to me," said Angus. "It is mine by right."

“You have not completed the labyrinth.”

Angus laughed scornfully. “Games. You never intended I should succeed. Your witch woman down below made that clear. Give it to me. I claim it by right of blood. Lleinawg my kinsman won it from the Clan Menestyr while Arthur lay helpless.”

“What will it profit you?” asked Gwenthwyvar. “You cannot escape the tor.”

“I think I can,” said Angus. “By now Lasrian will have killed Nai and the remainder of my followers will have dealt with Bedwyr. Not even he can defeat a dozen trained fighters.” He smiled triumphantly. “You see, you misjudged our strength. Without Nai and Bedwyr, Pabo and his Saesons will let us leave.”

Tears sparked in Seradwen’s eyes. She had seen Bedwyr beset with attackers and she did not doubt the rest of Angus’s statement. Lasrian she remembered from the monastery, and although Nai had learned much from Bedwyr, she feared the worst.

“Do you think so?” Gwenthwyvar appeared unmoved.

“Why should they fight? They are scattered across the hill, or drunk in the hall below.”

“Well, perhaps you are right.”

Angus moved toward her. “Give it to me. It is mine.”

For a long while Gwenthwyvar did not move. Then she held out the chalice. “Take it, Angus of the Eoganacht Maigi Dergind i nAlbae. Take it.”

The honey glass flared in the shadows, the flaw at the heart writhing with a life of its own. Angus wrenched it from her grasp, stepped back from the hollow under the hill, out into the moonlight that streamed down onto the ledge. The chalice lit with liquid light.

“Whom does the Sovereignty serve?” murmured Gwenthwyvar.

Angus ignored her, lost in contemplation of his prize. “I have it,” he said.

A shape shuffled along the terrace and out onto the ledge, stood for a moment waiting to be noticed. Angus turned, stared.

“What’s this?” he demanded of Gwenthwyvar.

“Do you not recognize him?” Her voice was very calm.

“Why should I?” growled Angus. “I saw him earlier, but he is nothing of mine.”

“Are you sure?” she said.

Angus glared at the misshapen figure in its bundle of rags. “Who are you?”

Over the whine of the wind Seradwen heard a snuffling and snorting. Angus drew a sword and menaced the newcomer. “Speak or die.”

“Why do you not offer him the chalice to hold?” suggested Gwenthwyvar. “Perhaps it will grant him speech.”

“And have him run with it?”

“I do not think he is likely to run.”

Angus grunted. He stared at the bent shape and hesitated. His gaze flickered from Gwenthwyvar to Seradwen, back to the shape. He shook himself, like a man waking from a dream, and held out the chalice at arm’s length.

The figure took it between thin hands, grumbling to himself. Slowly his head rose until he was looking Angus in the eye.

“No!” exclaimed Angus. “You are dead.”

The newcomer coughed, gazed down at the chalice as if puzzled by its presence, mumbled anxiously to himself. His face swung to Gwenthwyvar in the darkness at the rear of the cave, and he started to limp in her direction.

“You are dead!” repeated Angus. He seized the figure by the shoulder, wrenched him roughly round.

“I did not die.”

For a moment Seradwen did not know who had spoken. The speech was soft and slurred, hard to distinguish above the wind.

“I did not die,” the newcomer said again. “And I refute your claim upon this chalice.”

Angus seemed bewildered. His mouth worked though no sound came out. The man continued limping towards Gwenhwyvar, the chalice between his outstretched arms, its light dimming as he passed beneath the shadow of the boulders.

“Look out!” screamed Seradwen.

In desperation Angus lunged. The sword took the man in the side, the long blade slipping easily into his flesh. The man gasped, turned and somehow pulled himself off the blade. At once his clothes were saturated with blood. Wheezing, he sank to his knees, proffering Gwenhwyvar the chalice.

“Now it comes full circle,” he said.

“Lleminawg.” Her voice was tender. “Lleminawg.”

“You died!” screamed Angus. “You died!”

“No,” said Lleminawg. “I was never meant to die. It should have been Teleri, at my hand, and she has spent her life atoning for that error.”

He slumped, slipped from his knees to his side. From deep in his throat came a droning sound. “He is coming,” he said, so faint Seradwen could barely hear. “You would be wise to run.”

“Who?” demanded Angus.

“The one who was the best of us all. Bedwyr.”

Angus croaked with laughter. “I left a dozen of my finest to finish him. He will not come.”

Lleminawg’s face twisted in a smile. “Not enough, cousin. Never enough. Bedwyr is coming one last time to protect his queen.”

Angus drew his second sword, looked wildly about him. “Lasrian!” he called. “To me, to me.”

“No Lasrian either,” mumbled Lleminawg. He closed his eyes.

In a swirl of his cloak Bedwyr leapt down from the escarpment and landed staggering on his feet. He had lost his shield, and his chest was heaving. His blade was black with blood.

“Tell me,” said Angus, recovering his composure. “What does a one handed man do when faced with two swords?”

He struck with lightning speed, driving Bedwyr back into the rocks where Seradwen lay, the twin blades wheeling in unison, beating out a pattern on Bedwyr’s sword. She could hear the older man struggle for breath as he gave ground, twisting away from the rocks but being pushed instead toward the crumbling edge of the plateau.

“Even in your prime I could have taken you,” sneered Angus.

Bedwyr made no reply. Angus’s expression was eager, but Bedwyr’s face was impassive as he danced from under the whirling swords and slipped away from the edge.

He was between Angus and Gwenhwyvar now. Slowly Angus began to back him into the darkness beneath the boulders. Bedwyr’s sword seemed almost leisurely beside the rapid energy of the other’s twin blades, yet somehow he blocked or dodged every blow. At last Angus paused.

“You are better than I thought,” he acknowledged.

“He is Bedwyr,” said Gwenhwyvar.

“He is old and tired,” Angus said with contempt, renewing the attack. He grazed Bedwyr’s shoulder and shouted in triumph. Gradually he was wearing the older man down, while his own strength seemed undiminished. Little by little Bedwyr retreated into the hollow, his body merging with the darkness, till all Seradwen could see of him was the flickering blade.

“How much longer can you last?” mocked Angus. “Your legs fail. Your strokes weaken. Can you keep my blade from your body?”

Seradwen could hear the ragged wheezing of Bedwyr’s breath, magnified by the tumbled boulders. She squeezed her eyes shut, unable to watch. “Please,” she murmured. “Please! Not like this.”

For the second time Angus shouted with triumph.

Seradwen opened her eyes and saw the change in the man’s stance as he readied himself for the kill. Suddenly he moved forward into the darkness, where only his bulk was visible, the twin swords swinging from either side.

Somebody screamed.

The wind whistled through the rocks. A dog barked down in the valley. Voices called on the hillside, far away.

Angus staggered out into the moonlight. His arms hung by his side as if they were too heavy to lift. He stood, swaying back and forth like a tree in a gale.

A moment later Bedwyr followed him into the light. In his right hand was his sword. In his left, clutched loosely and already sliding from his grip, was a war-knife. The sword rose. When it fell Angus fell with it.

Seradwen ran to Bedwyr, flung her arms about him before he folded.

“Conceit,” he gasped. “He had to kill me with a flourish.”

He sagged against her. “Should never believe all the bards put in their tales.” The knife slithered from his grasp. “A thumb and a finger. A few heartbeats, I told Nai.”

She was not sure if he was laughing or crying as she helped him to Gwenhwyvar.

“Lleminawg?” he asked.

Gwenhwyvar nodded. “He came back for the end. He is gone now.”

He roused himself. “What of the others?”

“Nai and Ceolric are safe. Wounded but safe.” Teleri rounded the corner of the escarpment, carrying a burning brand, her long grey hair flowing loose in the wind. “When I left, Pabo was arranging for them to be carried down to the villa. They will live.”

“Is it time?” asked Gwenhwyvar. “I am very weary.”

“It is time,” said Teleri.

Seradwen stepped back while the three old friends regarded each other. Bedwyr knelt and kissed his queen. Teleri laid her hand upon his shoulder and he covered it with his, the left hand, the broken hand.

Gwenhwyvar beckoned to Seradwen. “Come, child, take it from me.” She lifted the chalice from her lap.

For once Seradwen did not protest. She took the cup, the glass fragile beneath her fingers, and did not need to be told what to do. She carried it out of the hollow, out onto the shelving hillside, and looked across the flood waters where the mists were rising to the far blur of the hills, and while she looked she let the chalice slip from her open hands down onto the stones, and it shattered with the sound of bells ringing.

When she turned again to the cave Bedwyr was weeping openly, and Teleri was by him, the two of them kneeling before the Queen.

And she saw that Gwenhwyvar's head had fallen to one side, the long pale hair veiling the face, and that peace had come at last to the White Phantom.

A great sigh passed across the hillside, fluttering her cloak, and the first soft drops of rain kissed her cheek.

The End

GLOSSARY OF PLACE NAMES AND TRIBES

Albany	Roughly, a term for what is now northern Scotland.(Later applied to all Scotland.)
Albion	Earliest recorded name for the island of Britain.
Aquae Sulis	Bath.
Armorica	Brittany.
Attecotti	'The Old Folk'; inhabitants of the Western Isles and western coasts of modern Scotland. I have assumed they were a confederation of some of the older Pictish tribes.
Bannog	Southern boundary of Pictland; the ranges of hills between present day Stirling and Dumbarton.
Britannia	Roman name for Britain.
Caer Cadwy	South Cadbury in Somerset.
Caer Vadon	Bath.
Calchwinyth	"The limestone (or chalk) hills." The south midlands, including Dunstable and Northampton.
Camlann	Arthur's last battle: site unknown, I have placed it on the edge of the Somerset Marshes.
Cant, Cantware	Kent
Cerdicesora	Seat of the Saxon Cerdic at top of Southampton Water, near Netley Marsh.
Claudentum	Bitterne.

Corinium	Cirencester.
Cunetio	Mildenhall, Wiltshire.
Dewr	Roughly, East Riding of Yorkshire.
Din Erbin	Fortress on eastern side of River Dart, Devon.
Dumnonia	Cornwall, Devon, Somerset and part of Dorset.
Dun Eidin	Edinburgh.
Durobrivae	Water Newton.
Duroliponte	Cambridge.
Durotriges, land of	Dorset, with parts of south Wiltshire and south Somerset.
Dyfed	South-west Wales.
Eburacum	York.
Elmet	Region in and to east of the Yorkshire Pennines, including Leeds.
Gewisse	Another name for the West Saxons.
Glasdun	Glastonbury.
Glevum	Gloucester.
Gwynedd	North-west Wales.
Iardomnan	The Western Isles and parts of Western Scotland.
Ierne	Ireland.
Isc, or Ux	The Rivers Axe and Exe.
Isca	Exeter.
Isle of Bulls	Island opposite the mouth of the Elbe, sacred to the god of the Frisians.
Lesser Britain	Brittany.
Lindinis	Ilchester.

Lindum	Lincoln.
Loidis	Area around Leeds.
Londinium	London.
Mona or Mon	Isle of Anglesey.
Oak, River	River Dart in Devon.
Penhyle	A settlement at the head of the Porthyle estuary.
Penwith Point	Southernmost point of Britain.
Peryth	Literally, 'the lords'. The Parisi: a pre-Roman tribe living between the Humber estuary and the North Yorkshire moors.
Picts	Collective name for tribes living north of the Forth-Clyde Isthmus.
Porthyle	An estuary in South Devon.
Pritdein	The land of the Picts.
Prydein	Native name for Britain.
Rheged	Roughly, Lancashire and Cumbria.
Sallow Wood	Great forest of Selwood on the western edge of Salisbury Plain. It ran north and south roughly along the present Wiltshire-Somerset border.
Saxons, Saesons	General term for Germanic invaders of Britain.
Scotti	Irish sea raiders.
Summer Country	Roughly, Somerset.
Weala	Saxon term for a foreigner, particularly applied to the native British.
Wectis	The Isle of Wight.
Ynis Witrin	Glastonbury.
Ytes	The Jutes: one of the invading Germanic peoples.

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