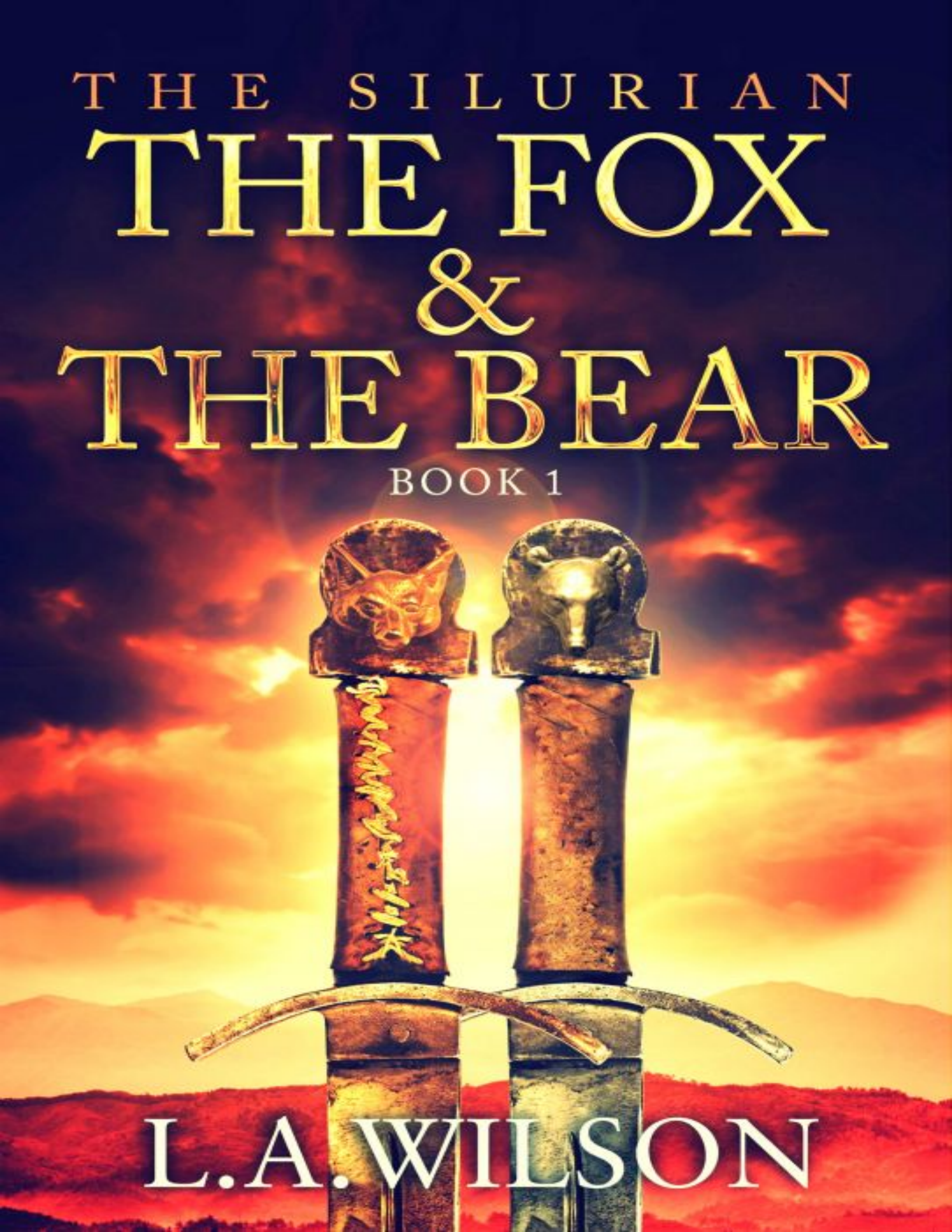
THE SILURIAN

THE FOX & THE BEAR

BOOK 1



L.A. WILSON

THE SILURIAN
BOOK 1: THE FOX and THE BEAR

1 IN THE SILURIAN SERIES

10TH ANNIVERSARY EDITION

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"The Silurian is art - it is in a different space from the usual publisher's requirements. For some time art in all areas has been going unrecognised. The Silurian will burst out from your computer in a blaze of fire and passion. And it will reach those, like me, who are searching desperately for nourishment - heart and soul nourishment - the real thing, not endless disappointment. The Silurian lives and will be known!"

Reviewer, Mary Josefina Cade - author of 'The Bermondsey Grail'

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Part one of: THE FOX and THE BEAR

"On second thoughts, let's not go to Camelot; tis a silly place."
King Arthur, Monty Python and the Holy Grail

1: THE WONDER-BOY

Crows gathered in great flocks overhead as we searched the battlefield through the dead and dying. Some of the birds landed on bodies and I slashed my sword at them, trying to send them back from where they came. I watched them scream up again into the sky before I turned to look for my brothers.

All around me men were dying, their voices dying, already dead men, telling the crows they were ready to leave their bodies for the Otherworld. And as I waited for Cai and Medraut to reach me, as I watched them stepping over these dying men, I shook, and trembled. I was afraid, my heart wouldn't stop thrashing, and I thought I was crying. This was a terrible battle, our first as new warriors to the field, and I had never seen anything like it before. The horror of it, and I stood waiting in terror—for Arthur was missing.

He was out there somewhere amongst the bodies, and so far, we had not been able to find him. And so I stood where I was, shaking, frozen in fear. I could not go on if Arthur was dead, if he had been killed in this terrible clash of arms, where the dead smelled like blood and not men. I swallowed hard and began walking my way towards Medraut and Cai. When I reached them, me and Medraut fell on each other and held on tight.

I sobbed at him, "Where is he? Please don't say he's dead. I'm begging the Goddess of War! Medraut, please say he's not dead."

"I know, Fox, I know, we will find him."

"Not dead!" I cried at him.

"Na, not dead, not Arthur. He's too young, too clever; this was his battle, he won it, how can he be dead, he won it, Bedwyr! Look at me; this is his doing."

We fell on each other again, trying to still our torment.

Cai joined us.

He said, “Aye, Arthur’s doing and he will have to pay for it.”

We looked around us, everywhere, bodies of the dead and the screaming of those still alive.

Medraut said, “We should put some of these men out of their suffering. I will do it,” and he walked off to put his spear through the chest of a Saxon under his feet. And as he did, he turned back to us and cried, “You know, I saw him earlier, somewhere over that way, he lost his horse too. Fox, come with me.”

Again, the three of us began searching for Arthur. We would not give up till we found him, and as we walked over the dead, with Medraut killing more wounded Saxons on the way, with the sky turning black above us and the bloody crows screeching, I thought I was dying.

I walked like a dead man, for if this was battle, then it had broken my mind, my heart, my reason, and my love. Arthur.

I began to lose my temper. It was naught but fear and horror inside me, and I wanted no part of it. For I trod on the severed arm of a man lying under me, and I almost spewed up my guts to see it. I cried out in horror, a wail to the crows, and Medraut held me up as the sky darkened even more. Black rain-clouds above—it was turning to winter already! And I felt tears of fear fall down my face. I still held my sword, gripped so hard it chafed the palm of my hand. So many dead, I could smell them, the dead. And the carrion crows of the Dark Goddess, Morgen, she sent clouds of ravens, wheeling and cawing over our heads, making my skin crawl, their wings black like the sky.

I sank to the ground in despair.

A day of destruction and despair was this battle.

The sun was going down and the bitter wind snapped at my cloak. If Arthur was dead, then this day would also be my last in this dark world. For I would impale myself on my own sword and follow him, I would. There was no doubt in me that I would, for I would not let him go alone across the divide, alone to Avalon. I would go with him. He would wait for me on the shore, and we would cross the water together. For we were brothers, bound together forever; my foster-brother, my life. A sour taste from inside came

up into my mouth and gagged me. I spat on the ground and came back to my feet.

Medraut with me, and we carried on searching, and every step we made, he cursed, “Piss on their filthy Saxon blood! Saxon bastards!”

And he kicked one of their dead, a dead Saxon under our feet.

I looked down at the man, and there he was, Arthur. Lying next to the Saxon Medraut had just kicked. I dropped to my knees, dropped my sword and turned him towards me, saw his face covered in blood. I lowered to feel for his breath, touching his chest to see if he still lived. I felt a beat, a soft beat of his heart, steady but slow.

“He’s alive!” I cried to the ravens that were waiting to pick at his flesh. “You cannot have this one, he’s mine and he’s alive!”

His helmet was split in half and lying on the ground, his head was split too, but it seemed his helmet had taken most of the blow.

Medraut called out for help and men came running. One of them shoved me out of his way as he fell on his knees at Arthur’s side. I watched helpless and in pain as the man tended him, one of our troop doctors, now ordering him taken off the field at once. More men came. They lifted him, his body was limp, and they carried him towards the wains on the edge of the battleground. I jumped up and followed. Medraut and Cai came with me, both of them protesting in anguish when their troop captain found them, and ordered them out to their horses. It was time to evacuate the field, but I had to stay with Arthur. The men carried him roughly and this I did not like.

I cried at them, “Be easy with him!”

But he did not wake even when they dumped him in the back of a wain. I climbed up inside with him; put a hand against his face and called, “Arthur? Are you going to wake up now? Come on, don’t do this to me, wake up!” And I felt confused, why was he not waking up? I looked out of the open carriage doors; saw Medraut and Cai with the rest of their unit running for their horses.

Lord Darfod, our druid and Ambrosius’ chief physician, rode up to join me. He said, “Bedwyr, does he live?”

It was so good to see him!

Lord Darfod was the best doctor in Britain.

I answered him, “Alive, but why isn’t he waking?”

The war-horns were blowing the signal to move out, and all the warriors began wheeling off the field.

"By the Old Gods, I do not know why he isn't waking," Darfod answered me as he pulled closer alongside our wain on his horse.

He trotted behind, saying, "If it is a head wound, it will bleed heavily, but he should have woken by now. The Greek doctors are whispering about a koma, the long un-waking sleep. If this happens, he may never recover his senses."

"But that's impossible," I said to him.

I was more afraid than ever. Arthur was too young for this! He was only fifteen. I was only sixteen, and I could not even speak well because my mouth was so dry with thirst.

"How can a man sleep and never wake without dying, Lord Darfod? This is madness. Please make him wake." But despair took me, and I broke open and cried. Lord Darfod saw me crying, and I did not want to cry in front of our druid. But I gave myself away and cried like the boy I was, for Arthur, he was my life, my foster-brother. I cried for him because he was everything in the world to me.

Darfod said, "Boys your age should never be allowed to lead battles. This will cause problems for you, Bedwyr, with your father. And Lord Ambrosius should be ashamed for letting both you and Arthur take this field. You are too young to fight against Saxons like Hengist, and as a noble entrusted to his care by your clan, this will lose Ambrosius the support of your father."

Nothing Lord Darfod said made sense to me. All that mattered was Arthur and here the druid was, babbling at me about my father! I looked back at Arthur; he was half asleep, half awake, he was in a dream, sleeping with blood on his face. And no matter how much the wain bounced and rocked, he did not wake up. A groom rode over with his horse, bringing my own with him. All around, I was crowded by warriors, smelled them like I had smelled the dead on the field. There was blood still on my boots.

Lord Darfod rode off somewhere and left me. I felt sick.

I began to shake.

I could not believe we had survived this battle. If this was what battle was really like, it was naught but hell-fire on land, and I sat and trembled, for the fear of it was still in me. But I had survived and I knew I had fought

well, despite my youth and inexperience. I had fought as well as any other man around me. For this I should feel proud, and I did, but I was still afraid, for one battle always led to another, and others we would fight, if only Arthur would wake up!

I put a hand on his sweaty brow, he moaned when I touched him, and I knew he was struggling to come back to me.

Another medicus came running.

He climbed into the carriage with me and began binding Arthur's wound, a deep gash there on the left side of his head. We were now off the battlefield altogether and moving from east to west with all our surviving host and our wounded. We had battled in the country south of the great Arbus-water, where the Germani were again trying to take our lands, where the terrible Hengist had joined alliance with the Inglass, their forces cut to pieces by a fifteen-year-old boy. I laughed about it to myself, thinking, Arthur, what have you done now? It was not as if he had never done anything extraordinary before in his life. Once, when he was twelve and I was thirteen, he rescued seven of our men from Saxons who had taken them captives and put them to work as slaves, and even before that, he had been amazing his elders, and angering his father.

Arthur was starting to rouse himself now, and I made sure I kept close at his side as we made our way back home, victorious. I stayed with him all the way, looking into his face. Blood was dried and smeared down into his lips, and I tried to wipe it away, touching his face with my fingers wetted with my spit. I did it gently, so as not to hurt him. I wanted to lift him up into my arms and cradle him to my heart, to wrap my arms around him and tell him that I needed him.

What if he died? Could he still die? I cried. I had cried for him before in my life, for the way his father had abused him when we were boys, and I had cradled him through all of his pain, for if I lost him, my life would end with his. And the going did not get any better till we made a course south on the Roman road to Viroconium, and for most of the time Arthur slept, though he woke often, opening his dark eyes and looking at me as if I was a stranger to him.

I sat next to him. I told him over and over, "We're nearly home. Hold up, brother, we are nearly home."

He looked at me, he said, "So glad they didn't kill you…"

Three long days.

And by the time we finally got him back to barracks, the orderlies wasted no time in bundling him away into a warm room with a fire and women to fuss and feed him. Aye, this was good and I began to feel better myself, as they fed me too.

Often, I would stop eating when I worried, and other times, I fell into a black sorrow of despair for no reason I could find, but now, with Arthur beginning to recover his senses, or so I thought, everyone important in Viroconium came to see him. Ambrosius the Supreme Commander of Armies in Britain came and looked down at him, as he lay still in bed.

"Now Arthur, how is your head?" the Commander asked him.

"It's still there, my Lord," Arthur answered.

"Still sharp-mouthed, I see. This is a good sign. I have written to your father about this, and yours too, Prince Bedwyr. I hope your fathers will fathom the reasons for putting you both to battle on the front-line. How else will you ever learn?"

"The Fox need not have gone," Arthur told him. "Lord Pedrawg will not like his son being used for front-line battle. I warned you of this, my lord."

"Then he should not have put Bedwyr into my army, boy. Be quiet now and get some rest."

Lord Ambrosius put a hand on Arthur's shoulder; looked at me with a hard eye, and then went marching out of our room.

But Arthur did not pay attention to the old man's words; he only looked at me and said, "It's a good thing you were not killed in that battle. Your entire clan would rise against him if you had. Not least having me kill him myself if you were killed."

"He's angry at you for taking that battle off him. You bested him in war, Arthur! You bested the Supreme Commander himself, you took control and you are only fifteen, do you think he will stand for this? When you get better, he will knock you down to a foot-soldier."

"He trained me for this himself, right?"

"You are too brilliant for him, you outshone him. And your first battle. And I curse the rotten gods for making you brilliant and then splitting open your head. What were you doing? You don't fight Saxons in single

combat! You were almost killed, you bloody fool. Do you think I can stand it if you die, if you die and leave me?"

He laughed a little. "I did go wild, aye? I thought I saw Hengist himself, but it wasn't him. I didn't kill that Saxon who brained me, someone else did, I don't know who it was. I fell in a swoon."

"Well, it doesn't matter now; just do what you are told and get some rest." I was still angry with him for almost getting himself killed. He was too brilliant to get himself killed. He needed a rein around his neck, or else, have me at his side so I could always protect him on the battlefield. He would take me to war whether I wanted it or not, just so I could protect his disobedient hide. He would take me to war and force me to fight and watch men die. Oh aye, I could see all of this coming—sons put to battle in the wars of our fathers, and where Arthur went, so did I, and he would get himself killed, and kill me along with him. I did not fathom why I loved him so much.

I said to him, "You deserve to shine, not die at age fifteen."

"I won't. Fox, stop looking at me like that. Bugger off looking at me like that, or I'll throw you out! I'm not going to die yet."

"I'll let you sleep, you prick."

So he slept. Over the days that followed, he slept a lot more, and his skin grew pale. Even though his skin is Silurian dark, he grew ashen pale, and I was sure he was going to die. It was not unusual for men to die long after taking their battle-wounds.

This was my fear—that death would claim him before he could fly. That wicked wound on his head, it began doing things to him none of us could have foreseen. He was not healing right, as the very next morning when we were alone together, when our woman healer had gone to make us some porridge, I saw his body shaking as he slept. Not all of him, only his right arm and right leg.

He started convulsing on the bed before me, like a man felled in battle and dying. He began moaning. I did not know what to do, so I stayed with him till the convulsion stopped. And when it stopped, he slowly opened his eyes, unfocused, like a baby just squeezed out of his mother's body and born. I knew he couldn't see me, because even though he gazed right at me, he looked as if he did not know me.

But he said, "I was looking for you…"

He was all pale and groggy like a man drunk.

His lips were so dry I lifted his head for a drink. He sipped it, and said again, “I was looking for you, Fox.”

“I’m here, where do you think I was?” I gripped tight to his hand and started to shiver too because it was so bloody cold in this room. I told him, “I’m going to light the fire then get the doctors. Lie still, don’t try to get up.”

I pulled out of his grip and began at once to build up the fire. My hands were shaking when I put the logs on the flames.

I said, “What do you mean, looking for me?”

“My head is pounding!”

I stood up and went to him, looked at him. He seemed half asleep again and I leant down and shook him. He opened his eyes.

He moaned again and said under his breath, “Let me go…” and he went suddenly quiet and still.

“Arthur…” I dropped down beside him, shook him again, but he would not respond. I would not lose him, not ever!

So I got up and ran from the room. I could not find anyone in charge, so I ran to Caan, our drill-master, and told him to send help, then ran back and was on my knees again at Arthur’s side. Some of the wives of the camp had come in to help nurse him, one of them was already there when I got back. She was trying to rouse him, to feed him with her hot broths, but he was limp in her strong hands.

She said, “He is starved. Once he eats and drinks he will feel better. He is suffering, poor lad.” She spooned beef broth between his lips and he tried to swallow. I told the woman, “That blow to his head has knocked him brainless. I’m scared.”

As I spoke, a crowd of men came rushing into the room. Master Caan and Lord Darfod, after them, two Greek doctors with their orderlies, also Ambrosius’ personal favourite kinsman, Cynan Aurelius, sent everywhere as the Commander’s representative whenever Ambrosius did not want to make himself seen. I wondered if the old man was feeling guilty about Arthur’s wound, for he had not come to see him since that first visit of his. All of these men wanted to throw me out so they could work, but the woman healer stopped them.

“Can you not see the bond between these two boys?” she cried at them. “See how Arthur needs this boy? Leave him alone!”

I loved her for saying this, though it failed to make Arthur any better. The doctors doctored, but his illness went on for another fortnight, though he was well enough to sit up and drink and eat again. He ate everything the women put in front of him, because he was so savage for life that food went right in and never came out again, or so I believed; for this friend of mine did not shit but twice a week, if ever.

So he was allowed only barley-water to drink and blood-sausage to eat, and he did eat, starved like a wolf. He held on to every nourishing morsel, growing like a light, forcing everyone around to love him. Men, women, boys and girls, and even the dogs loved him to madness. He did this to everyone who met him.

Relief came when Master Caan said I could leave off duties till Arthur was up and running around again, because like the woman said, me being with him seemed to help make him get better. And he did that too. Finally. He got so better he started telling me all about the battle he had won. He seemed to believe it had only just happened, as if I had not even been there myself.

Told me all about it in rapid speech, barking like a dog, his mouth always working at a full-charge gallop, “I won that battle, didn’t I? It was me, wasn’t it? This means big things. It means I can go all the way, it means all the captains—”

“It means that wound on your head is no good,” I warned him. “No good at all. It’s going to keep making you sick, I know it.”

“Fox, shut up, will you? Don’t you want to hear the rest of my story?”

I laughed and he went quiet.

So quiet I had to make him get out of bed and start walking. I needed to help him stand and walk, and I felt the heat of his body, felt his limbs trembling with the effort, yet he persisted and persisted till he dropped. He dropped onto the bed and his eyes closed and he stopped breathing. He started to shake in his right arm and right leg. Again I had to run for the doctors. But it was Lord Darfod, our brilliant druid who made the diagnosis of the falling-sickness.

“And there is nothing we can do about it,” he told us. “This is the Will of the Old Gods, something that will always happen for the rest of his life.

He will slip away from us and go somewhere else, until he drops and falls and shakes. It is the falling-sickness. That ridiculous Romani-priest of Ambrosius' said he has a demon in him, but it is not what that idiot man said, but from the wound he took to his head, and it will always be so."

Darfod put a hand over Arthur's and squeezed his fingers, said to him, "It does not hurt us, save only to stand here helpless and watch you suffer. How do you feel now, boy?"

"I'm having visions," Arthur told him. "And colours, and I can fly. So why are you fretting over me? Have you all gone feckless?"

Everyone laughed, except me. I was stunned by the changes in him. He was still himself, of course, but ever since he won that battle and took that blow to his head, something inside him had been unleashed, and I was afraid of where he would lead us next. Surely he would lead us all somewhere unknowable, and all we could do was follow…

2: REJECTING the SON

Another seven months went by and Arthur fully recovered, though he still had terrible bouts of falling-sickness. And as the world was harsh and violent, our moments of happiness and joy were rare. Everything soon went dark again, for when Arthur was about to turn sixteen years of age, his father, Lord Uthyr Pendragon arrived in Viroconium for a war-council with our Commander.

On a crisp cool spring morning, he came with a band of followers. With him came Lot, his brother and Medraut's father, at his side. Lord Uthyr had sent letters to say he wanted a private meeting concerning his son in the presence of Lord Ambrosius Aurelianus, and my father, King Pedrawg ap Bedrydant, king of Dogfeiling in Gwynedd. My father being high chieftain of the Stag Clan, my kinsmen, we were all of us kinsmen-allies to Uthyr Pendragon of Rheged. And as my father was Arthur's foster-father, he rightfully belonged at all meetings concerning him. Even I was to be there, called in as Prince Bedwyr of Dogfeiling, as I was, though always I preferred to be called Fox, the name Arthur had given me when we were boys. I was the Fox and he was the Bear.

Yet as we dressed for our meeting, the Bear was so uncomfortable about seeing his father again that I saw his hands shaking when he was doing up his belt.

He said to me, “He’s going to hurt me. I can sense it. I can always sense when Uthyr’s going to hurt me. This is his final cut.” And he made a cutting sign across his throat. “He’s going to try and break me in front of everyone here, in front of you, my foster-father and Lord Ambrosius, even Medraut. All of you.”

“Why?” I said.

“Because of the battle I won, why else? Uthyr will see this as a threat to his own power, that me, his only son, is a greater warrior than he is. Now he fears me, he will reject me outright so he can fight me legally. You watch, I bet you, Fox, he will reject me today.”

A hard look came into his eyes when he said this, but I knew him well enough to know his look was one of sheer pain. Uthyr did not love him. Uthyr was waiting for his chance to reject him, and I thought he was right. The time had come for Uthyr Pendragon to cast out his own son for fear of his growing power.

Crows were cawing over in the trees when we left together to go and join the meeting in Ambrosius’ campaign room in his private villa. And when we walked in, everyone was already gathered. Uthyr and Lot both seated behind a long-table, facing Ambrosius and his attendants. Behind Uthyr stood his own warriors on guard, his Gododdin Guard of the Clan Lothian, powerful and hardened warriors from north over the great Wall, from the land of the Votadini, our forefathers.

With us was Medraut ap Lot, and in the background as a witness stood Ambrosius’ priest of Christ, Calros Clement of Eburacum. Next to him stood Lord Darfod ap Luca, our own mediator between Uthyr and Ambrosius’ opposing camps.

And dominating the room was Uthyr’s old Red Dragon banner, hung up on the wall behind him as a challenge to Ambrosius of the Cornovii, whose banner was Roman—the Roman Aquila. Still the Pendragon banner was taken with Uthyr wherever he went; so beautifully embroidered, hand-stitched by Arthur’s mother, Igrain, herself. And there in the middle of the room waited a single chair, facing the table. I knew at once this single chair was meant for Arthur. No one needed to tell him to go and sit on it, which is what he did without comment. He sat staring not at his father, but at the banner, the Red Dragon there on the wall in front of him.

The room was dark, just one small window above to his left. Arthur sat in a shaft of light, while all the rest of us waited in shadow. And even though he sat in a shaft of light, he looked darker than any of us, with his thick straight black hair and ebony-black eyes, his skin a deep honey-brown when he got out into the sun, and his hair had grown since his illness and he wore a band around his forehead, holding back his fringe. Handsome, even more so than his blond-haired angel of a cousin, Medraut, the son of Lot. For all of us, it was easy to see Uthyr had eyes only for his son. Arthur, sitting before him with his legs splayed open, arrogant, staring back at his father. While in the shadows and against the wall I stood next to Medraut, as we boys were not allowed to sit.

Medraut nudged my arm and went to say something to me, but his father stopped him, "Do not speak, Medraut, or I will throw you out."

Medraut fell silent, and Uthyr glared at us, then began it.

"I see, Ambrosius, you have failed to keep this—this black-dog son of mine under control. Did I tell you to let him go to battle, and win them? Why did you let this happen?"

Ambrosius replied at once, "I am the Supreme Commander of Armies in Britain, my friend, and you were the one who put your son in my army. I knew you did not expect Arthur to become so brilliant at war. I suspect, Uthyr, that you were hoping he would be killed in my battles, and not your own. You are a devious ally to have. What I do with my enlisted men is my own to command, not yours."

Uthyr smarted at this truth.

No, he had not expected his son to be so brilliant at war.

He said, "Well, that may be so, but I asked for this meeting so I can give you all a formal declaration…and have your lawyers note this down. I no longer recognise Arthur here as my son, born of my loins. He is Silurian born, born on Silurian soil of a Silurian mother of Silurian descent, aye, his Silurian bloodline is noble, but even so, he is no longer a member of my nation, but his mother's and her Clan of the Bear. To her side he is legally bound. I reject him. And in exchange for my son, I want my nephew, Medraut. He will come back with me today to Luguvalos."

Medraut jumped forward, crying, "No! I want to stay with Arthur; fight with him! And I cannot do this from the north! Please, uncle, let me stay here with Lord Ambrosius' army."

Uthyr growled back at him, “No, lad, Lot and I want to train you to fight the Picts, not Saxons. Leave fighting the Germani to the southerners here. To Arthur, the Silurian, and Aurelianus of the Cornovi. We Gododdin stay in defence of the North where we belong. So, Medraut, you will come back with us when we leave here, boy, and so should you, Bedwyr. Are you not also Gododdin?”

I glanced at my father when the Pendragon spoke to me.

My father stepped forward on my behalf and said, “My son will stay where I put him, Uthyr.”

My father then glanced at Ambrosius when he said this, and I sensed something between them, an unspoken conflict.

Ambrosius nodded to Uthyr, “Prince Bedwyr will stay with his foster-brother and they will both continue to fight in my army. They are both enlisted men: sons who you yourselves gave to me for training, for war and leadership. But if you want to reject your son from your own clan, Uthyr, what is this to do with me?”

“Nothing, other than I wish you to keep my son here under your full control. Keep him under control, and do not give him a command. Let him be a soldier and nothing else.”

All the time as the men debated, Arthur sat restless in his chair, biting his jaw closed, dying to have his own say, but keeping still till the right moment.

“So be it,” Ambrosius said.

And this was when Arthur finally broke.

He jumped out of his chair and advanced on his father, who sat behind his table, saying to his face, “You don’t know what you have just done by rejecting me! You don’t know what you have done to yourself.” He glanced at the Red Dragon on the wall. He said, “I want that banner. And I will take it from you one day soon. My mother made it, and I want it. It should be mine.” His hand clutched into a fist, and he burned his father with his black-eyed stare, so that the great Uthyr Pendragon paled.

“Medraut, in exchange for you,” Uthyr replied. “And you will never take Igrain’s Red Dragon from me.”

Arthur seemed unable to breathe when his father said these words, but he answered, “I am Igrain’s son. I am hers, you just said so yourself, and

what she makes is rightfully mine, my inheritance as a Silurian. She made me. She made the Red Dragon and one day it will be mine."

Uthyr turned white with rage.

He answered, "When I went to Igrain after she had given birth to you, all I saw was blood. You had split her open and blood was everywhere! You, Silurian, you split her open. You came out the wrong way! You came out feet first, as if you dared to stand on your own two feet from the very moment you were first born. So bright, so clever, so different from the rest of us. You split her open and killed her. You will take nothing of hers because you killed her."

"The Red Dragon, Father, it's mine," and Arthur turned away and walked out of the room, leaving us all standing, with Uthyr breathing hard like a bull in a charge. Ambrosius was forced to dismiss us before more trouble could come. And when we filed outside, we found Arthur gone down in another of his terrible falling-sickness seizures. And Uthyr just had to come out of the villa right at that moment and see his son convulsing on the ground.

He cried, "Aye! He's got a demon in him all right. Punishment for being so arrogant and killing his mother, my lover. Take him, Ambrosius, and let us see what you can do with a monster like him. No more leading battles for him. Or better still, put him out with your dogs. Even wolfhounds love him more than I do."

Uthyr turned then and walked away, taking his followers with him. I moved forward and lifted Arthur from the ground when his seizure stopped. Together we saw Medraut being dragged away, held between his father and uncle.

Medraut called back, "Arthur! Don't forget me! Come for me! You hear me! Come for me!"

So Medraut was suddenly gone, and we helped Arthur to walk. We tried to put him back to bed for the rest of the day, where he complained of a headache. Lord Darfod gave him a drink with some potion in it to ease his pain, and he drank it down in one gulp and almost choked himself doing it.

"Ambrosius said for you boys to take a full day off," Darfod told us. "Said why not go out riding later for some air and exercise. But he wants you back on duty tomorrow. But wait till this drink clears your head, Arthur,

before you get on a horse. I do not want you dropping off if the sickness comes on you again."

"It won't," he answered.

And he looked at me with a veiled smile.

Go riding? Riding was freedom to us. The two of us alone and away from barracks, just us, the Fox and the Bear. Out into the wilds, where I saw the fire inside him burning. There was a fire inside him. I believed his heart was made of flames and his blood of molten steel. He rode his horse harder and faster than any other barrack-boy, and grown men stood back when they spoke to him, because to touch him would set afire to a man's skin. But on that day's ride together, Arthur kept his flames to himself.

All day we stayed out. And when evening came, still we did not go straight home, but picked up our horses to a run, racing each other over the flats towards the Wrekin, chasing in circles, tighter and tighter till our horses were almost up each other's arses. We laughed and laughed, going around and around till we were giddy.

I stopped, breathing hard. Arthur looked at me.

"What?" I said. But he kept on looking deep inside me.

He said, "I think, one day, I will die in your arms…one day."

And it turned unbearably cold. Mist began rising over the fields.

He said, "Let's not go back tonight. Let's stay out all night, out here."

"We cannot," I warned him. "The old man will flog us, and we will get broken to foot-soldiers again. We haven't got any blankets, we'll freeze."

"What if we go after Medraut like he said? My father will take him to Deva before going home. We can sneak up there and steal the Snake back again."

"Don't act mad, Deva is leagues away. You're feeling wild tonight because of what happened today. I know what you're like when you get like this, so dangerous." I moved my horse closer to him. I said, "What do you mean, die in my arms?"

"You know we are going to die in battle one day, don't you?"

He leant towards me and whispered, "I dreamt it. You are going to hold me while I die."

He shocked me, like a knife cutting deep and I answered, low, "No death can separate us, you know that."

And we were so alone in the world, so cold in the air. Cold over the ground. Cold under the trees and it was dark.

I was shot through with fear.

"There's no meaning in the world," I found myself saying. It came out of my heart. "No meaning if you die. It would be worse than this black sky over us now. I would feel as if I was that empty blackness. If I had life and you did not, I would hate it. Don't say these things to me."

Somewhere in the forest a dog-fox barked and a black shape of an owl flew over the treetops. Our horses hung their heads and we sat on in the night. We were afraid.

A moment later, he said, "You saw what my father did to me. It hurts so bloody deep inside me, my mind. Fox, I dreamt I died in your arms."

"Listen to me," I whispered. "You took a bad wound on your head. Ever since then you have been having weird dreams, and now you have falling-sickness. When you went down from that blow, you were probably only dreaming of dying. But I was there next to you. It was just a dream. Come with me, let's go home. We are in the shit-heap now!" I turned and took the reins of his horse, just so he would follow me and not linger in the night-time cold.

The gates were closed by the time we got back to barracks. The gatekeeper snorted, and wouldn't open on purpose to spite us.

But Arthur turned on him, "Open the gates, now!"

And damn his manky bones, the man did as he was ordered.

We rode in, and Caan, our drill-master, broke us immediately, though he did allow us some supper. I was put on all-night guard duty. And sometime when I was about to fall over asleep, holding onto my spear as a prop, I felt Arthur come and take hold of me and lift me back on my feet. We were both rugged up with heavy cloaks and he stood grinning at me in the dark.

"Look at the stars!" he said, cold breath on the air. "Sky full of stars." He was amazed. He said, "You know what Caan did to me? He's making me sleep with the new boys in the barrack dorm instead of my own cell. He knows how I hate that. Those little brats won't let me get any sleep, and tomorrow I have to polish every bloody horse-harness in town before noon. Then I have to polish his boots, but I'm going to put shit in them instead," and he burst out laughing at the top of his voice in the middle of the night.

“Be quiet will you? I’m supposed to be on guard and you’ll get me broken worse than I am now!”

“I cannot sleep.”

“Oh, and no one else can either?”

“No, those little runts keep jumping on my bed and asking me to tell them stories, so I told them about the haunted forest back home, when we used to see the water-monster from the lake, walking through the trees at night. It scared the living lights out of them, poor little lads. I should not have done that, now they won’t sleep, and neither will I.”

He fell quiet, ashamed of himself for telling the new boys in our care naught but ghost stories.

I said, “I’ll give you a hand, polishing tomorrow.”

He said, “No, you’ll be asleep all day, get some sleep.”

“Go back. You can shove the boys off back to bed now. Get some sleep yourself.”

“No, every time I sleep I have dreams in fabulous colours, dreams of a far distant place. Fox, I think I’m dreaming of the future.”

“Sweet Jupiter’s hairy balls! Don’t start that nonsense again. You know I do not like prophecy and superstitious lies. It’s all dark and eerie out here. Look at those shadows; they could be full of Saxons.” He went quiet, then said, “Saxons…” He hesitated a moment before saying, “See you tomorrow,” and walked back to the barrack dorm.

3: ARTHUR GROWS

A few days later, we were suddenly released from barracks, for a message had come from my father asking to have me and Arthur sent home at once. My mother was dying. Well, my mother had been dying for a long while now, so slowly it was a snail-crawl to her grave. So my father’s request to call us home for mother’s death-day did not come as a great shock to me. Lord Ambrosius gave us unlimited leave.

And once we were home again in my villa in the mountains of Dogfeiling in Gwynedd, we spent all of our time in with my mother. All of her sisters were already home, with my uncle and his wife, and my two cousins, Lucan and Manos. The villa filled up and no one could move. Everyone came to see her die, my mother. It was harsh.

We sat at her bedside, me and Arthur, and watched her dying. She never moved. She seemed deep asleep, breathing as if asleep. Her sisters washed her body even as she was still alive, preparing her for death. Watching this made me cry. Washing her body like they did, softly, gently, lovingly, it meant she was soon to pass over and I cried. We all sat and sat. Everyone wept.

I…I looked at Arthur and he looked at me, the tears on his face were like my own. I looked at my father. He was not crying. As king of the Stag Clan, he would not cry. And when it grew very late in the night, my father told us boys to go to bed.

Arthur got up and kissed my mother's cheek, then I kissed her. But Arthur was feeling her death deeper than I was. Her death was going to break him. Another mother he would see to the grave, for his own mother had gone to her grave so young, only nineteen years when Igrain died. And this time, it was my mother, his foster-mother, and by the time we came out of her sleeping-room, Arthur was ashen white. We said goodnight to my father, who said that tomorrow, Medraut was coming over to be Uthyr and Lot's representative at my mother's funeral, for it was certain she would die this night…

So when it was very late, when Arthur and I were alone in our outhouse room, I looked over at the big pallet-bed where we used to sleep as little boys. Still there and covered with deerskins and blankets of spun wool, so warm in the freezing mountain night. We would have to share it again. The first time since leaving home as thirteen-year olds to go into Ambrosius' army. We were the lucky ones though, because our room had a large brazier and it was warm enough to sleep naked.

Arthur slept. I did not. I lay awake, listening to him breathing, asleep at my side. I watched the low light from the fire over the walls and ceiling, the room quiet, though I heard the soft wind outside, the spit of burning wood. My mother ill and dying.

Arthur slept naked, facing the fire, away from me, though he threw his right leg against my left. He was sixteen. I was seventeen.

Sometime in the night, he turned over to face me, and all I could feel was the heat of his naked body, flushed as a forge as he moved closer to me, and I gasped when I felt his body roll against mine. My heart thrashed in

my throat. We were too old now to sleep together in such a way. We were not little boys any more.

I turned away from him, and darkness fell in the room as I heard his breathing stop. He stayed this way for a moment, till I thought he had died, but he gave out a sharp breath and started shaking on his right side. I turned back to him and put my hands on his shoulders and gently held him down till his shaking stopped.

He disappeared into sleep, immovable sleep.

And as I watched him rest, I felt again an old trouble inside me rise up to choke me. I felt a hard lock form in my throat and a heaviness in my chest. I looked at his face, and thought about his life…more pain in his life than whatever I had known, even with the misery of the coming death of my mother. And as I watched him sleeping, I thought of him being rejected by his father, the punches he had taken from Uthyr's fists when he was only eight-years old, and this falling-sickness that gave him visions only he could see and sounds only he could hear. He slept on at my side and I watched him, feeling strange things as I stroked the hair out of his eyes. And as I looked at him, I knew I needed him more than my own life, and yet he tortured me, confused me, drove a great wedge into my mind and a sweet spike into my heart. I stroked his hair; I looked down at his face. He was so fast asleep nothing could wake him, not even the owl that suddenly went screeching outside our tiny window, an omen of coming death and I was afraid. I pulled back from him and tried to sleep…

...and when morning came, it was a horrible morning, lashing with rain, and the cold went into my mother's heart later in the day and killed her. We all gathered together by her deathbed, and when she passed, I saw a look of peace touch her face. A smile touched her lips as I fell at her side and took her cold hand and wept. I cried and cried on my knees, listening to the keening of her sisters, a banshee wail. I cried and Arthur stood at my side. His hand came down on my shoulder, but he did not move and he did not speak. Not even when Medraut arrived did he speak, but went out and sat before the fire in the main room while the rest of us cried on at mother's bedside, mourning. The rain came down all day. A day that was a lifetime to me. Finally when I came out of my mother's death-room, I found Arthur sitting still and staring at nothing, with Medraut standing at his side, watching him. But Arthur said nothing.

He stayed silent for another three days, till we took him outside to my mother's funeral. It was still raining; the hillsides ran with water, the rivers full, the streams gushing, the lake misty. The ground under our feet had churned to mud, and when she went down into her grave, only then did Arthur break. Rain in his face as he went down on his knees at her graveside. We stood watching him. Watching as he pushed his hands into the soil of her grave. But still he did not cry. My father picked him up and we all walked home, bolted inside to change out of our wet clothes, to find something to eat and wait for the sun to come back. And this was just what happened.

The next day was like heaven on earth. The sun blazing out of a clear rain-washed sky, the air so clear and fresh my sorrow lifted, and I knew somehow that my mother would be happy to lie under the soft soil of Britain on such a glorious morning. I felt sad about it, but happy, and going outside, I found Arthur and Medraut sitting together on the log-seat, eating porridge. The horrible sadness seemed gone from Arthur this morn. I found him and Medraut smiling about some private jest. The Snake was telling him about the goings on in Uthyr's camp, and when I sat down to join them, they told me they were going hunting.

I swore at them, "You bastards! I have to go with my father today to visit some ol' mad relative of his. Why can you not wait till another day? I want to go with you."

Medraut said, "It has to be today. I have to go back to Luguvalos tomorrow. Sorry, Fox." He shrugged, and a smile came on his lips as Arthur looked at me with a cock-sure grin. I thought, bugger you two with sharp sticks. They took up their pig-spears, got up and left me sitting alone. They went away up into the hills over my villa.

I did not see them again till the following afternoon.

Over the time they were away, I worried. I worried and fell into the black sorrow that came on me whenever I worried. My mother had just died, my father was black and bitter, my clan was brooding: they were soon to go to battle again against the Gaels, and I was grieving and Arthur and Medraut were so bloody good together they shook the ground they walked on, I knew this. I hurt inside, a kind of jealous pain, and I never once took a bite of food while they were gone. Together, they were the light and the dark, bound together forever. Though it was the blond and beautiful green-

eyed Snake who was the dark one. And my sorrow, a terrible aching black sorrow came again when I thought about the brilliance of Arthur and Medraut together, how they worked the army to perfection, while I hated every stinking moment of army life. Hated it from the very first day I had been sent through the gates of the military city of Viroconium, south of Deva, at age thirteen.

Why had my father put me to Ambrosius' army in the first place? I was old enough now, I thought, to be suspicious of the actions of battle-chieftains, and my father was king of the Stag Clan of Gwynedd, ally to Lord Uthyr Pendragon, allied to Lord Ambrosius Aurelianus, and my father had put me in his stinking army, contracted and enlisted, legally. For wherever Arthur went, I went as well. And I was beginning to rebel. Ambrosius had put me on the front-line! That man surely did not care for the lives of the sons of nobles, and Arthur and Medraut had left me to rot in this feeling as I grieved for the loss of my mother.

And just as I was about to go and look for them late the following afternoon, I saw them chasing down from the hills, out of the trees, shouting and yelling, brandishing their pig-spears at me. They came running up to meet me, wild as painted Picts.

My father came out of our house at that moment, and stood with me, ready to pounce on them, as I could see he was now as mad as all bloody hell-fire for them staying out all night, without permission. They came running home, all sweet and full of themselves.

These two cousins, who were under my father's care, had not come home the night before, so again Arthur was in trouble, and I did not care, because I had stayed awake all night fretting about him, starving myself for him. Bastard!

We stood waiting as they came running up to us, filthy with sprayed pig-blood, and I could tell straight away from Arthur's look that something had gone on between him and Medraut overnight. It was all there in his smile, the enigmatic smile he always used.

And the first thing that happened was my father stepped forward and clouted Arthur hard across the side of his head. The side where he had taken his battle-wound. Arthur staggered back from the blow and almost fell. I jumped to help him, but he righted himself and brought up his spear and dived its point at my father's chest.

He stopped within inches and warned in a savage voice, “Do not ever hit me again, Pedrawg! That is the last time I will ever let any man hit me. I am not for hitting any longer, and whether you acknowledge it or not, my lord, I am still the son of Lord Uthyr Pendragon, your ally.”

“He rejected you, boy.”

They both stood in silence, eyeing each other. The moment was black. All around us the world had stopped. Arthur standing before my father, immovable. My father relented first.

He moved aside, saying, “Arthur, you know well enough you were supposed to have come home last night, but you disobeyed me. Medraut, there is a horseman waiting to escort you back to Luguvalos.”

He then turned away, back into the house.

After the door slammed shut, Arthur cursed, “Jupiter’s balls, that hurt!”

Medraut put a hand on his shoulder. “Are you all right, cousin? What a bastard for hitting you like that. I can tell your father if you want, when I get back. Uthyr will not like—”

“Leave it,” Arthur told him.

“Come on,” I said to Arthur. “Let’s go back inside; you have a lot of explaining to do to my father. You shouldn’t have done this to him. What if something had happened to you? You want to put our clan into conflict with Uthyr?”

Arthur steeled himself and glared at me. He came following me inside, Medraut with him. When we got back into the house, my father was sitting in front of the hearth, frowning. He looked at Arthur and Arthur looked at him. My father said, “Arthur, you are no man’s to control any longer, and I can no longer foster you. I have just lost my wife, and Bedwyr his mother, and you run off into the wild and stay out all night with your cousin here. So it is good that while you were gone yesterday, a messenger came with a letter for you, from Ambrosius.” He stood up and took a black-leather wallet out of a bag, which hung over the back of his chair. He handed the wallet to Arthur.

Straight away Arthur took the letter out and pulled open the Eagle seal. I looked over his shoulder, the letter was written in formal Latin. And I could not read formal Latin. The feeling in the room went from cold to hot

in an instant when Arthur explained, “I’ve been ordered home to barracks. Immediate return.”

“Good,” my father said. “The army is where you belong.”

Then Arthur looked at me, and I knew this was no ordinary mandatum. He opened his mouth, was just about to give me an order, but stopped. I was to him his friend, his brother-in-arms, foster-brother, his equal and he always treated me as such. Arthur would never order me. But the letter had fired him so much he turned to stand before my father and say, “Bedwyr and I have been ordered to return to Viroconium today, both of us, not just me.”

And this was when it all started. My troubles. The very moment when my black sorrow filled me, and drowned me. The moment when everything inside me changed, and even though I had been feeling black for days, this terrible crushing feeling I did not expect. It caught me off-guard, un-shielded, as it was so strong and evil.

There was a moment of silence and Arthur went on, “I am to lead a unit of my own. Ambrosius has given me my own unit to command…and against my father’s wishes.”

I could see the fire burning in his dark eyes, the look on his face, his first command! The way Medraut came and stood beside him, looking at him, awed.

The Snake said, “Wait till Uthyr hears about this! He forbade you a command; now look what’s happened, the old man has ignored your father’s order.”

Arthur looked at Medraut, then back at my father; told him, “We have to leave now.”

My father went and stood between myself and Arthur.

He said, “Ambrosius is using you, boy, to lead his skirmishes. Do you understand? I did not send my son into the military so he could be used as a common skirmisher, and Ambrosius knows this, and yet still he uses my son for front-line fodder. My son is a prince of Gwynedd! A Gododdin prince and he will stay here with his kinsmen.”

My father sounded hard; he stood in front of Arthur and stared him down, as if his foster-son had suddenly become our enemy. And here, my father cared so much for me that he would refuse Lord Ambrosius himself,

the Supreme Commander of Armies in Britain, the use of his son in battle. I was my father's son, a son of Gwynedd and Dogfeiling's prince.

Yet still Arthur looked at my father, resolute, till he relented.

He said, "I understand, sir," and he turned and began gathering his things to leave. He and Medraut both began packing their saddlebags as I stood and watched them, feeling torn. As even though I was Gododdin born, I was still enlisted in Britain's military. Maybe my father's greatest mistake was to send me into another man's army—and if I did not go back to barracks now, what would happen to me then?

Ambrosius would see this as a formal rejection of his alliance with the Men of Gwynedd. He would retaliate with accusations of my desertion, and my father would then have to pay a high compensation-price to keep me from being labelled as such; a deserter. And my good name and his would be disgraced and dishonoured in Britain. I would dishonour my entire clan, not just myself and my father. For not only would I be a deserter, I would be an oath-breaker, for I had sworn the words of the sacramentum to Ambrosius himself…so to stay behind while Arthur risked his life defending Britain, and upholding his own oaths, I would be shamed throughout Britain if I did not return with him now. Deep inside, I did not want to go. I hated the army with every bone in my body. A black meanness came over me because of it; because of my father's mistake of giving me to the military and not to my own clan. I watched my father's face. I watched Arthur.

They said nothing to each other. It was a deep rend between them, and I stood in the middle. I wanted to stay with my father and be his son and heir, to ride with my Gododdin cousins and fight the Gaels: Lucan and Manos, sons of my father's brother, Tannan, were their leaders and I wanted to fight with my own clan. I hated the army, and Arthur had stayed out all night with the Snake; for a fleeting moment I hated Arthur too. He wanted to take me back to the army with him and make me suffer. Yet he did not protest or order me to follow him.

He knew what the future would hold for us and he no more wanted me to be there on the front-line than did my father, which was why Arthur said nothing more, and made no protest. But right at that moment, I could not see a way out. All I saw was my only friend who was more powerful

than any other sixteen-year-old in the land, and it struck me hard. I wanted to stay at home.

When Medraut was ready to leave, he said farewell first to my father, then to me, and went out. Arthur followed him. I stood and watched them through the window; I saw them step out into the street and walk downhill, heading towards the main village square where the Snake's escort waited to take him home to Luguvalos.

Also there was a unit of mounted riders, sent up by Ambrosius to accompany Arthur on his homeward ride. A few paces down the hill, I saw them stop, saw them hug each other. They clasped hands in the way of warriors, saying farewell. Medraut then pulled away and walked on down the hill. Arthur turned and came back into our house, and gathered up his gear.

I said to my father, "You know I have to go. I'm contracted to Lord Ambrosius. Father, you gave me to him yourself."

He nodded to me. "I am sorry for this now, and I cannot keep you if you decide to go back; you are a man now. This is your choice, Bedwyr. If you want to stay, it will cause a lot of trouble, but if you want to go back, I will not stop you. Decide now. Will you go, or stay?"

"I have to go," I answered him. "I swore the sacramentum to Ambrosius himself, and he is my Supreme Commander—and to break my oaths would shame me. I will go back."

"Then let me look at you, a strong lad, my son…"

Arthur stood and watched as my father took me into his arms and hugged me long and hard, kissed my forehead. He hugged me farewell, but he turned his back on Arthur. He went through to his private room and slammed the door on us both. I almost cried; now two fathers had rejected Arthur in one. My father turned his back on his foster-son. I could feel Arthur's pain. I felt it for him.

We looked at each other. He did not say anything to me, and we left the house and walked on down to join the troop for the long ride back to Viroconium.

4: TROUBLE BEGINS

We were well on our way on the southern road, and I did naught but get into a deeper and deeper fit of intense dislike for the men around me, for the army, for the way I had been pulled out of the loving arms of my father and my clan.

I felt out of place, pulled from my homeland and my kinsmen to fight far from home. I watched these warriors of Ambrosius as they rode, armed fully in case of attack. Swords and shields, riders older than ourselves, with Arthur there in the centre because Ambrosius had ordered them to protect him. I grew suspicious, for what was it Ambrosius wanted so much from this young Silurian? What in all bloody hell-fire did Arthur have that the rest of us did not?

There were thirty-five riders around him. Thirty-five! Just for him, when ten would have been enough on this road, which was safe and well within our own territories.

Arthur seemed unmindful to it all. Next to him rode Cynan Aurelius, ten years our senior and a favourite with Ambrosius. Cynan being a distant relation to Ambrosius' all but gone family, a last distant cousin, a remnant member that kept him clinging to the Commander's favour; more like a head-lice than a supporter of worth I thought.

And Cynan was a prefect, an experienced warrior, and the Commander's representative. Yet there was always something about him that seemed rotten to me: he was dark-hearted and loved to talk shit. He was talking shit to Arthur now as they rode in front of me. And I wondered why, as Cynan had always hated Arthur to the point of wild madness.

After a moment, when Cynan at last stopped talking, Arthur turned in his saddle and looked back at me. He dropped back then to ride next to me. I could not bear him, and as he joined me, I spurred my horse away from him, trotting forward down the line where I joined a group from our own barrack.

I rode with them and did not talk or look at Arthur again for the entire ride home. I could not fathom why I did that, why I rode away from him like I did. But I did not like him anymore, and because of it, I hated myself just as much, if not more.

Yet I could do nothing about it. I felt all twisted inside. I stayed twisted even when we got back to barracks. Our horses stabled, we were fed and watered like the animals, then sent back to where we belonged, slaves

to the army, fodder for the front-line. Arthur and I shared the cell at the end of the dorm, next to the drill-master's own room, where he could keep an eye on us. There was nothing in our cell save two pallet beds and piss-buckets: this was it, and I threw my pack down on my cot, then sat there, watching Arthur do the same.

He sat on the edge of his own cot and we looked at each other. He said, "What are you doing to me, Fox? I didn't force you to come back. You know I would never give you an order, and you could have stayed at home, and I would have fought on your behalf before Ambrosius to protect you."

"I came because I'm contracted to the army, and if I had stayed they would only have come and got me, so what's the point of me staying home? I cannot get out of this mess…I feel like I don't have a choice, and it's all happening because of you. I'm stuck with you!"

I jumped to my feet and advanced on him, stared at him as he sat there on the edge of his cot. I pointed in his face. "You…you lure me into a trap, and once caught, I cannot escape. Can't you just leave me alone? You keep on luring and pulling till you become…a force I'm not prepared for! Why do this to me? Stop doing it!"

He looked confused. "What are you talking about? I can't fathom what you're saying. I'm not doing things to you. What are you talking about?"

Oh, dear goddess, I heard naught but pain in his voice.

No, he did not know what he did to me. And I did not know that I had just ripped out his heart.

These things I learned much later…

But then we were saved from something far worse by Caan, our drill-master. He came charging into our room and told Arthur that he was wanted, that Lord Ambrosius himself wanted to see him. Arthur got up and left with Caan, and I sighed in relief when he went out.

All the next day I worked hard, mucking out horses like a stable-boy, doing jobs the older warriors would never touch. After this there was drill, practice in holding lines against attack, sword work, spear work, learning the hand-signals used by the cavalry, cleaning and polishing, then catching up on bloody Latin classes. I hated this, for I was beaten in Latin classes because I wrote left-handed.

The Romani Christian cleric, who taught us, constantly beat me for it; he hit me with a stick like I was a dog and called me names. Left-handed men, he said, were the Devil's men, sinister, and he cracked my head and my hand and I put down my stylus and refused to learn. I walked out of class; I always walked out of Latin classes, and everyone in barracks knew me as a left-handed trouble-maker, the Devil's own man. For their curses on me, I vowed never to go back to Latin, even though I would be punished for it. I went back to my cell in the late afternoon.

Then Arthur came in, riding into the practice-square with Gareth ap Gan, our trainee scout. He and Arthur were great friends. And Arthur himself, riding in all-powerful, raw and dark…and laughing.

I stood in the open doorway of our barrack, brooding, sore of hand and sore of head, and watched him jump down from his horse and come over to join me. He was still smiling, a smile that could cut through ice and melt snow on the frosted hillsides in winter. I lost the darkness in my heart from Latin class, also from the night before; our fight. His smile burned me. I could not help myself, I laughed and gripped his arm when he stood by me.

There was something brewing inside him.

He said, "I do not believe it!" He shook his dark head, adding, "I have my own unit, though of course still under Ambrosius' command. I'm leaving tomorrow on a four-week tour of Saxon territory…and he gave me a new war-horse, for me, mine, all for myself! It's like a dream."

"A new horse!" I cried. "Brilliant! I have to see him, don't you dare leave without me seeing him. Have you seen him yet?"

"Aye, he's chestnut brown, a hot-blood, but well-trained and fast. I rode him down the training ground this morning, but he's back in his own stable now over near Ambrosius' quarters. I'm going to name him, Calibus."

A new horse! It was every boys dream to own their own warhorse.

I laughed and whistled. The lads outside in the square went riding around and around, hitting each other, trying to unhorse each other. The day was glorious with summer; white clouds drifting on a soft sweet breeze, hot in the square when the others began calling us to join them. And it had hardly entered my bone-head about what Arthur had just said. I heard the part about the warhorse, but not the part about a four-week tour-of-duty.

So together we went out to join the group, and I jumped up behind Arthur on the horse he was riding now, not his new one, and we all galloped down to the training ground. Down on the field the trainers had set up their javelin-throws.

We jumped from our horses and ran for the javelins and began a competition in the late afternoon. The air was full of scents and buzzing insects, the sky full of larks and buzzards, soaring above us.

One after the other we launched our hawk-feathered javelins and none of them could beat me. If there was one thing I was good at, it was javelin throwing. The javelin had always been my best weapon, and I could use it like no other. Not only was I the best thrower, but the most accurate. I could hit the target middle-on, while all the others skimmed theirs past on either side. I laughed at them. They tried, but I thrashed them all. There was a trainer watching too, so I threw even further to impress him and I got cheers from the men.

And after I won five games out of five, everyone gave up and wrestled me to the ground. We all wrestled around for a while, then fell into the grass, spent. We watched the sky, listened to each other breathing, felt the coming twilight and we were hungry. Still we lay in the grass, and when the others got up and wandered off to gather their horses, it finally struck me what Arthur had said earlier. A four-week mission to Saxon territory.

This was deadly. At any moment he could be attacked. And the troop would return and tell me what I feared the most—that Arthur had been killed. I knew it was there inside me, but I found it hard to admit. The army would kill him. He was here beside me in the grass, and what he did next was reach over and grip my wrist.

He whispered, “He actually said to me that there’s no other alive in Britain who he’s more willing to have as an heir to the Supreme Command than me, because of the battle I won for him against Hengist. But I’m scared, Fox, I have to leave. I don’t want to leave. Sometimes I think I’m out there somewhere in the world, and without you, it doesn’t matter if I live or die.”

I had no words to answer him, yet I saw everything Arthur was; brilliant, beautiful, dark, and enthralling, like no one else in the world. The way he spoke, his voice, the way he walked…

I rolled over to look at him, found myself saying, “I…I don’t know what it is that you do to me, but it’s deep, and it’s like love. I don’t know what it is. I don’t know how to live with you, Silurian.” I put a hand on his chest. I could feel his heart thrashing in his chest. I told him, “I cannot live with you any more, you bore holes into me. I cannot bear you a moment longer,” and I got up and walked away from him, trudging alone back to barracks.

I never saw him again that summer.

It broke my heart, and as the weeks went by, hotter and hotter, I tried to stop feeling the pain, tried so bloody hard to stop thinking about him. But everything got worse and worse.

We were trained harder, and I started to drop behind the others in my work and training. I did not care. I had never fitted in with the barrack-boys or the army in general, though I knew myself a brave and willing warrior. I wanted only to go home to fight for my own Men of Gwynedd, as I should. I was a prince of theirs and I wanted to escape and go home. I grieved and grieved as everything began getting heavier and heavier inside me, blacker and blacker.

But one night Master Caan came to sit beside me as I daubed my boots, and said, “Wonder-boy is down near the Saxon shore, where the new settlements are. It is very dangerous territory to be in. I know Arthur is clever, but the old man pushes him too hard sometimes. He is still just a lad, still growing and finding his way. From what I know of Arthur, he is too wild to be a leader. He talks brilliant things, but can he put them into action, I ask myself.”

I stopped polishing and replied, “Master Caan, where were you when Arthur won that battle at River Glen? Were you dead, you old fool? Arthur can do anything. You shout too much and don’t see what’s under your very nose. I’m not sure it’s a good idea telling me what’s going on. I would rather not know.”

He snarled at me. “What I have seen, Prince Bedwyr, is you are insolent, arrogant, selfish and inattentive in your training. You are rebellious, insubordinate, and un-teachable. You are intelligent, but still falling behind with everything. You do not care. I’m surprised you are even bothering to daub your boots. I will discipline you if this keeps up. A week on full extra duties, and no princely privileges. Back out on the dorm for

you, dawn rising as you should. Now go to bed before I have you flogged for insubordination."

I threw my boots down as he left and cursed behind his back.

I was everything that was wrong; Arthur was everything that was right, and I was glad he was gone, for if he could see the way I was now, failing, breaking, sliding into darkness and rebellion, destroying myself, it would have killed him. And there was no way in the world would I let Master Caan batter me with extra duties or anything else.

I had come to the end. I had had enough. More than enough. Later that same night, I deserted the army. I did the very thing that would shame my name forever. I deserted, and I could not stop it from happening. Everything inside me went black, and so, during the night when Caan was sound asleep and snoring from too much ale, I took a messenger-bag from under his bed. He heard nothing, did not wake. I went down to the stables and took the horse I usually rode and walked him down to the main gates; here I told the gatekeeper that Master Caan was sending me on a special errand. I showed the keeper the messenger-bag as proof. He shrugged his shoulders and opened the gates, and I rode out, galloping off into the darkness.

I had no idea where I was going, no idea what in all bloody hell-fire I was doing; terrified to stay and terrified to go, I just ran with the horse till I reached the nearest forest and fell off, collapsed into the undergrowth and moaned aloud because there was no one to hear me. I felt broken in a black moment of misery and wayward confusion from which I did not recover for month after month, after month…

I did not go home. I was too ashamed to go home, so I became a fugitive, a deserter, low like a bandit on the side of the road who lay in wait for innocents to murder and steal from. Though I swear by the Old Gods, I did not kill innocents and I tried not to steal, but I did, yet only to stay alive. After a few weeks more of wandering, I had to sell the horse in exchange for food. From then on I trudged from village to town and back again. My boots wore to shreds and then I went barefoot. I sometimes managed to get work on outlying farmeries, and in villages, again doing those jobs no one else would tolerate if they could avoid it. I looked after pigs and became a swine-herder.

As I slept in barns, I had no way of knowing what was happening in the military world outside. I tried not to think of him, who Caan called, Wonder-boy. I was so bound within my own misery and how to survive for another day to allow myself to think of him. I forced him out of my heart, removed him from my soul and all my daily attempts to survive. I had decided somewhere in the deep black parts of my thoughts that I would sever myself from him totally, completely and forever. I would never again have Arthur as my friend, and I would refuse him if he and I should ever come together again. I believed I hated him.

5: BEING LOST

In early autumn, I walked broken and stumbling from hunger and growing cold into Caer Baddan, Aquae Sulis as we Roman-trained soldiers called it. And as I came near the city square, there, right there in front of me sat a group of mounted warriors, and when I looked up, there he was on his chestnut stallion. Fully battle-armoured and wearing a Silurian cloak in the colours of his nation; deep golden yellow with blue and black plaid. He looked powerful and strong. I gasped and dropped back out of sight, though I peered around the corner, my heart hammering. After three months of running and starving, I could barely control my emotions.

Seeing Arthur again, so strong, so powerful, and myself so low and miserable, it broke my heart. I could not control what happened next. I sank to my knees and cried in a dirty back lane. For he looked beyond power, like a prince should be. And myself, a true high-born prince by status, knew that before my madness, I was good-looking. And after so much anguish, I was filthy, dirty, unwashed, a miserable scraggly growth on my chin, my hair matted; broken fingernails and my bare feet cut and filthy as my body. I stank.

There was no way in the world I would allow him to see me like this…so I cowered back into the shadows and listened to the warriors calling to each other, knowing that I should be there with them. Then the sound of their horses moving out in an ordered trot.

I stayed where I was, unable to move and dying in the street; here I believed I had gone so far into the mire that nothing could save me. I knew I was lost, and I cared for nothing. I only cried about it, and wiped the tears through the dirt on my face, and shivered on the ground. Townspeople

walked by me, staring at me some, while others ignored me. A man kicked me, and said to get up and go find some work. That kick, it did something to me, more than just the pain and the humiliation. I finally remembered who I was. I was Bedwyr the Fox, Prince of Dogfeiling. I was second to Arthur of the Silures.

There were men in this very city, in the streets of Aquae Sulis who knew my name, knew who I was, as I had been in battle with Arthur. I tried to get up and when I did, I looked around and saw a taberna up the street. I headed there now, intending to ask for work. What I found was a young woman sitting on the doorstep. She looked up at me with eyes as sad as my own. She was dark-haired and dark-eyed, and pretty, though dirty like myself.

I went to walk by her, but she grabbed my hand and held me back; said to me, "My cunt for hire. What will you give me for my cunt?"

I said, "Do I look like a man who has money spare for coupling? Do you know if there's any work available in here?"

"Oh aye!"

I was surprised by her quick response. I had been expecting a flat rejection. She went on, "My father runs this place and is always looking for boys to help him. I can take you to him. He wants a boy to help lug the beer right now." She studied me a moment and said, "You will have to scrub up, shave, wash your hair. I will tell him you are a customer of mine. He always gives favours to my customers. It keeps them in the bar and drinking his ale."

She then led me into the dark interior of the taberna, introduced me to her father, Befan, who took me on right away despite my scruffy appearance. The first thing he did was order me out the back to wash and shave. He needed no brute like me showing him up in front of his clients, some of whom were warriors of Ambrosius, I was later to find out. I was to be smartened up, and I went with the girl, grateful inside, angry inside, for what had I come to now? Out in the rear courtyard, the girl filled a wooden tub with hot water, then asked me my name.

I told her my name was Darius and laughed about it.

"What are you laughing at?" she said.

"Nothing."

I stripped in front of her and got into the water. I cared not if she saw me naked. The water felt like sage-magic to me; the wooden tub deep and I found myself scrubbing at my filthy skin in disgust. The girl gave me a little bag with oatmeal in it to use as a cleaner, then ran off to find a razor and comb. When she had gone I slipped under the water and scrubbed at my hair, even my teeth. The bath made me feel better, but as I lay there alone, out in the back courtyard with a dog sniffing around on the ground, I remembered the sight of Caan's Wonder-boy on his chestnut stallion. I saw him riding out of town at the head of his troop with the standard-bearer riding behind him, flying the Aquila banner of Ambrosius Aurelianus, Supreme Commander of the mounted armies of Britain.

I began to brood over the details of him; the fine shield on his back, embossed with steel, a silver-tipped scabbard for his sword, the Roman gladius at his hip. A buckler on his arm, a light mail-shirt. And the helm he wore was Roman, a black horse-plume falling over the silver bowl of the helmet that had a small front visor. I had never seen him looking so striking, so vibrant, like a creature from Avalon.

I opened my eyes; saw the girl was back, offering me a razor and more oatmeal, blended with oils to make it easier to shave.

She watched everything I did, holding a mirror for me.

She said, "You have very unusual eyes. Where did you get such eyes?"

I could not be bothered to answer her. How does a man explain the shape of things? Yet under my scraggly beard was my face, handsome as a fox. Here again I saw my thick, curly, dark chestnut hair, clean at last; and aye, I do have extraordinary eyes. Eyes like a fox, the Silurian always said. It had been Arthur who first saw the fox in me, and named me such when I was nine years old. I looked again into the mirror, gazed into my own hooded eyes, light brown in colour and beautiful to look at, I admit that.

One time, a city doctor said I had eyes like an 'eastern oriental' with folds of skin that cover my lids, but I never understood what the man was talking about. Where he had seen this 'eastern oriental'. No one else I had ever met had eyes shaped like mine. So I shaved clean and smiled at myself in the mirror.

Good teeth too.

The girl said, “You are so handsome under this scruff, Darius. When you are clean, help my father, have some supper, then tonight you will sleep with me. Father demands it.”

I did everything I was told. I knew how to take orders, even if I did not like it. I was a trained soldier after all, so I lugged the man’s ale, helped him serve it to his customers, cleaned up after them, after which he fed me a huge meal of fish-pie and oysters, such food I had not had in months. Then he sent me to bed with his daughter when the taberna doors were closed for the night.

And that night I was the girl’s only client. I learned her name was Caryn. And she made me strip and get in beside her. She was eighteen, but had been in the business of pleasuring men for money or barter since she was thirteen. First she tried to relax me because I was so tense. She threw back the covers of the bed and stroked my chest, my stomach, before running her soft hands down the insides of my thighs. My rod was already standing up stiff for her to play with, and she pushed open my legs, slid down between them and began to lick me. She made me breathless. I gasped to breathe.

I let go of my hurt and pain and cried out aloud, not caring who could hear me, not even her father, for she was now sucking on my virgin prick like a lover—and I had known nothing like it before.

She had me begging her, “Caryn, Caryn, please, just do it!”

She sighed and came up to me, looked into my eyes; disheartened me when she said, “No—not the way you want.” She lay down at my side and rolled onto her stomach. She said, “You have to go in the back-door.”

For a moment I failed to see what she meant. Though when I understood her meaning, I did not care. I went into her back-door, as she called it. This way, there was no pregnancy. But as I went on, I found I could not finish. My moans of pleasure turned to moans of pain…the pain was grief. A huge grief in my body. What was the Wonder-boy doing while I was taking such pleasures? Was he dying in battle with a Saxon axe smashed in his skull? Was he dying even now?

I pulled out of her and slumped onto my back and began to cry. I could not help myself. And Caryn held me, soothed me, stroked my hair and face and kissed my lips. She never asked why I was crying; she did not

judge me. She only held me. I was so grateful to her for not asking, and I held her tight, a sweet girl in my arms.

And over the days that followed, Caryn did everything for me. She waited on me when she wasn't waiting on clients in the bar. After a while longer, I became obsessed with keeping her in our bed, and sometimes got up late in the mornings, and angered her father with all my endless pricking of his daughter.

Still I worked day after day, and her father gave me free ale, which I drank till I was drunk most of the time. I drank because deep inside, I was broken in half. Being with Caryn could not heal me, because at nights when she slept close against me, it was not her I thought of. And I cried when she was asleep, only because I had taught myself to cry quietly. And I used her father's ale to wash away my pain.

Every day, I swept the bloody floors and made ale and ran errands, for my payment was Befan's daughter, his food and shelter. And everyone still called me Darius. After a while the name stopped being funny to me; it spiked me instead. My time in this taberna seemed endless. I worked harder and drank harder as the days went by. And Caryn; we kept each other warm when winter came. We kissed for ages every night before I had her, before we fell asleep. Poor Caryn, I could see she was beginning to love me, and though I desired her, and loved the feel of her naked body under mine, even through all of this, inside me, it was dark and broken. I wanted her and did not want her at the same moment, and I grew ever more troubled because of it. I believed it was growing time for me to find a way to leave. One night late after the inn was closed, we were in bed, stroking each other's bodies.

She said to me, "I heard some men say things about war today. They said Ambrosius has put up a new young warrior before the chieftains as a possible heir to his command. I do not like this idea. I only like Ambrosius leading Britain. They say there could be a war because of it, that another is opposing Ambrosius' choice."

I tried not to show too much interest, but I had to probe. I had to find out if this new young warrior was the Wonder-boy, or if he had been killed and there was another to take his place. And the thought of a coming war chilled me. If the Wonder-boy was not dead by now, he soon could be. So I asked, "What new young warrior? Did they say?"

“No, Darius. Though they mentioned someone named Arthur a few times. And one said this warrior was stricken by the gods and is mad with falling-sickness. That’s all I heard and I don’t like it.”

“No, neither do I.”

6: BEING FOUND

Weeks went by.

I had settled into a routine and began to drop my guard. What I did was to take off the wristband I always wore around my right wrist; the reason being to hide the skin-brand I have there. I had the brand done when I was thirteen, a large fox-head, his slim body curling around my wrist, his tail in his mouth. I had it done after the Wonder-boy named me, Fox. It suited me. It was me. I was the Fox and somewhere in my distant emotions, when I looked at it, scrubbed clean as often as possible, it reminded me…of what I used to be. I wanted to be Bedwyr the Fox again, but I was not that man any more. I was still a deserter, and if Caryn was ever to find out.

But of course she saw it.

It was night, we were in bed, and I was drunk again. I only wanted to sleep. The work in the taberna was tiring me out at last. Soon, I knew, I would rebel. I put my hand over hers, where in the pale glow from the wall-light, she saw the skin-brand, now exposed.

She took hold of my wrist, sighing, “Oh, Darius, it’s so beautiful. Why have you hidden it for so long? A fox.”

“Nothing much,” I mumbled.

“Darius,” she looked at me, deeper this time. “Who are you?”

“Told you…just a bothie-boy from Gwynedd, coming south for work…”

“No, I think there is more to you…you have a bearing about you, a nobility I think it is, and I have noticed the way you quickly leave the room when any soldiers come into the bar. Why?”

When I looked into her dark brown eyes, I wanted to tell her, wanted to spill everything out of me in great long gasps of pain. My head was spinning and she was eyeing me, playing with my prick, nibbling my lips; I almost gave in. She was so warm, I wished I could give her more. But I couldn’t. I was too confused, too much in trouble, too horrified by my own act of desertion…why had I done it? To stop myself seeing Arthur die in

battle? Because I could not bear the loss of him? Our first battle and I had almost lost him then, but to go on seeing it again and again in the future? Please, I begged the goddess of war, do not let me see him die…take me in his stead…I love him.

And I found myself saying to Caryn, "I don't like the military. They abuse me. They want to use me to kill for them, put me on the front-line where I can see my brothers being killed before my eyes. I don't want to see. I don't want to see him die."

The words slipped out, and she took my face in her hands, said, "See who die?"

"Caryn, I'm drunk; leave me to sleep, please. I'm so tired."

She did as I asked, slipping down close beside me, and I pulled her close, and I was asleep in moments…

The following morn, I refused to get out of bed, at least till mid-morning, when Caryn brought me some food. And when I did go down to the bar, I found it full of soldiers. Instead of running from them, I started work serving them, with Befan scowling at me for being up late.

But as the day went on, I fell into a black sorrow I could not control; nothing could console me but ale. At last it was nearing the end of this bloody freezing winter, and the first signs of spring were growing in the hills, but I was still unhappy. Though Caryn tried to help me, tried to have me love her, I could not respond as I had in the beginning. She did not understand my suffering. I felt myself closing again. Caryn, I am sorry, but I'm going to hurt you, I thought, and carried on making a pig's mess of my life.

And as each day went by I began to do what I had long forced away. I started thinking again of the Silurian, but not just thinking of him. I wanted him back. I wanted to be back with him. But I did not know how. What would he think of me, that I had deserted him? I did what had always been unthinkable. I ran. Me, Bedwyr the Fox. Unthinkable. I was desperate, so I drank more to try and wash everything away. In my drunkenness I tried to find the courage to go back; to face the hell-fire of what I had done. Would he hate me? Would he see me as his betrayer? Did he baulk at the mere mention of my name? All of this went on in my mind and I drank. I still worked. I slept. I stopped mounting Caryn. She could see something was wrong and she cried a lot.

One day I became aware of coming summer, for a whole year had passed since I first deserted. During my absence I had turned eighteen, a winter child; a dark child of wicked hill-lands and black forests. The Wonder-boy, if he still lived, would be seventeen, a child of spring; a bright child, golden in his skin. So summer came again, and I was passed out drunk on a seat in the taberna on a quiet day with very few customers. It was dark and cool inside. My eyes were closed, and deep somewhere in a dream I felt something…felt someone take hold of my shirt and haul me out of my chair and stand me on my feet.

I tried to focus my eyes, and what I saw…the Wonder-boy standing before me. He laughed and smiled, turning to the others standing around him. Vaguely I could make out shapes in the darkness. One was Gareth ap Gan, the other was Cai Long-man. Valarius ap Weylin was there too, plus others I did not recognise, not even if I had been sober. But finally when it rang bells in my head who I was looking at, I staggered back and fell over a stool and dropped helpless onto a bench, so shocked I almost wept.

"I don't know why you bother," I heard Cai whisper to Arthur before he turned and walked away outside.

So I sat on the bench, my heart thrashing in my throat, and Arthur, himself looking like nothing on earth. He looked sun-browned, as if he had been out in the heat all June. He was dressed in light lamella armour, though he was without his helmet. He looked taller, imposing. He had cut his hair short. He was clean-shaven like a Roman. Changed, but still himself, still with his smile, his laugh as he threw himself down beside me and looked at me. I had to look away. I did not want him seeing the mess I was, my shame.

He said, "You don't need to hide from me." And he pulled on my arm, trying to pull me into an embrace, but I wouldn't let him.

"Let go. I…I'm not ready for this…"

"I've been looking for you all this time, but you hid yourself well. Come on, Fox."

This was when it hit me, when he called me Fox. When I heard his voice saying my name; no one could say it like he did. This was when I knew he was real.

I tried to get up, but he pulled me back down again.

"Fox," he said.

I was beginning to crack.

He told me, “We can stay for only one night if you’re not ready to go right now. I can see you’re not ready to just walk away from here.”

In the shadows I saw Caryn standing, watching. The look on her face was indescribable. She came and stood over us and said, “I know who he is!” pointing at Arthur. “Darius, you are a friend to him? And you never said, you never told me the truth. I see it now. You are Bedwyr the Fox!” She looked at me; she looked at Arthur and could not draw her gaze away from him. His hand gripped around my wrist.

He said, “What do you want to do? I have only till tomorrow, then I have to return to Viroconium. Orders.”

“Are you going to war?” I begged him. “What’s been happening to you? What’s Ambrosius done to you? Have the chieftains accepted you as heir? There’s pain in your eyes, did I do that? What’s happened?”

“Tell you later. Shall we stay or go? I have a troop outside waiting. If we’re staying, I have to stable the horses and find lodging for the men.”

It was still early in the day and I answered, “We go. I just have to… to…Caryn here.”

Arthur then looked at Caryn. He surely could see there was something between me and her.

He stood up and was about to move away to give us some time, but he stopped and whispered to me, “Do you think the inn-keeper will give me some free ale? You know? Because it’s me?”

He looked at me hard, and I just had to laugh at him.

I called, “Befan, please, give my friend a drink!”

I took Caryn’s hand and went upstairs with her…to say farewell.

She was already crying by the time we came into the little garret room we had shared all these months. I swept her into my arms and kissed her.

“You have to go,” she cried against my chest.

“I’m so sorry, Caryn, I’m so sorry I’m hurting you.”

“Breaking my heart is what you’re doing! I love you! Don’t go!”

“I have to. I must go back and face what I ran from. You know I cannot stay. If I stay, I would go insane and you would end up hating me. You have to say farewell now.”

“No, no, no,” and she started grabbing at me, pulling me back, trying to have me stay. But I pulled out of her grasp, all the time feeling wretched.

I went looking around for what few things I had gathered over the months and packing them into a satchel. I had managed to get new boots for the work I had done, but not much else. I did not even have a cloak. As I packed, Caryn stood sobbing, heartbroken. But the thing in me was boiling, the feeling to be out of here and away.

I was mad to get on a horse and ride as a warrior again, with the standard snapping over my head into battle, shield up and sword drawn. My hand aching to feel the steel gripped around my fingers. I could already feel the helmet hard on my head and my horse cantering strongly beneath me. No woman could give me this feeling. My hands shook as I laced my boots.

Swiftly I had to make myself sober, but my hands were shaking from the anticipation of riding out with a troop of warriors at my back and Arthur, I could not fathom how or why I had almost thrown it all away. Oh, goddess! I bounded down the stairs, mad to leave, and when I came down, there was Arthur and Cai, drinking at the bar. Wasting time, drinking. I grabbed Arthur's arm. He looked at me, could see it in my eyes and he put his tankard down and together we ran out into the square. Behind us, Cai moaned about the loss of his drink, but he came lumbering after us.

"Ride!" Arthur called.

And that is what we did.

He had even brought a horse for me, and for the first time in a long time I was up on horseback and heeling away, first a trot, then a group canter that had the people of the city turning to watch us leave, stopping in their tracks and some hailing us. I looked back once and saw Caryn standing outside the taberna door. Deep painful longing showed on her face, but nothing could stop me now. I felt the hurt of leaving her in my guts, but when Valarius lifted the Aquila standard and the townspeople came out to watch us ride, I went with regret and new-found power both at once.

We rode north out of town, then turned into the west and followed the river to the coast to the port of Abonae, riding for a long time under a hot summer sun, the wind in my face, the thud of horses' hooves beneath me. I had not been on horseback for such a long time, yet it was all still there deeply fixed in my being.

I felt the sun on my face, and I sweated with the effort. I was out of training, unlike those who rode around me, where I noticed for the first time two new faces riding just behind Cai; a tall thin blond youth with stringy

hair, and a smaller darker one, even smaller than Gareth, with dark curly hair and high cheekbones. We rode till we came to the coast road. Arthur took a turn to the north and we came trotting into a glade down by the beach of the Sabrina shore out from Abonae and the ferry that went over the sea to Venta Silurum. He rode into the glade, pulled up his horse and jumped off easily, all without a sign of tiredness.

With him went Cai and Gareth and half the troop into the bushes to piss away the beer they had earlier swallowed. I did the same, almost pissing on my own feet, as I was so tired, about to drop, and I was starving. Around me everyone began to move.

They knew what to do without orders and they unpacked their horses, posted a guard, the tall blond youth, and the rest of us found somewhere to sit and eat. As all of this was going on, Arthur went and stood by the banks of the estuary and stared away over the water. I did not know what I should do; I felt out of place, so I stood and watched him. Aye, he was taller than the last time I had seen him. I approached him, stood at his side and looked across the water, trying to see what he was looking at.

Reading me, he said, "Venta Silurum, city of the Silures. I've never seen it."

"Silurian territory, I know. But remember, you were born in those lands."

"In the black mountains Lord Darfod said."

It was a beautiful day and the smell of the water was rich and clean. Maybe he wanted to swim to Siluria, but then he turned aside and we went to have some lunch.

As we ate, Cai spent all of his time staring at me; animosity, rebuke, even disgust shown on his face.

I heard him say the same he had said to Arthur earlier; "I don't know why you bother with him, he's a liability." Then at me, "Arthur never once gave up on you, but I did."

The others watched and listened, maybe hoping for a fight, but getting into a fight with Cai was sheer stupidity. He could hit a man once with his massive fist and the man would ever get up again. I just did not have the weapons to fight him, but inside I felt he was right. I had done something unthinkable and had shamed all of my clan brothers; shamed myself even more.

Arthur sat quietly, changed somehow. When I looked at him, I could see it in his eyes. He said to me, “Bedwyr, these two here are Tegid ap Pedr and Llwch ap Rhys, they came to me from Luguvalos.”

Amazed, I said, “From your father’s camp?”

He nodded, aye, and his enigmatic smile, the smile I knew so well formed on his lips.

Cai said to me, very loudly, “Aye, they are like you…deserters.”

The two new boys stirred.

Arthur said, “Not deserters. Just clever. I have supporters over in my father’s camp and they chose me over him and came south to join me. That’s not deserting, that’s playing the right dice.”

Everyone sat quietly.

Here I supposed Arthur could sense the tension within us, and he stood up saying, “Pack up, we’re leaving, we can camp farther north and get up early in the morning and be home by sunset. I don’t want to rush these horses.”

We came to our feet, packing up and moving on, travelling north up the coast road, till we stopped to camp for the night in another oak-wood glade, somewhere north and west of Glevum, safe territory, deep inside Dobunni lands, allies of Ambrosius’ Cornovii.

But even here, Llwch stood on guard, for he seemed a natural-born lookout and stalker. What the other one was good for, Tegid, I had no idea, but he was quiet and minded his own business well. Then, when it was dark and we had a fire blazing under the trees, I found out what Tegid was good for. He brought out a pot from his pack and started cooking up some kind of camp-stew that he said he had learned from an old campaigner from the Continent.

We ate our stew from wooden bowls with wooden spoons, and after, we sat looking into the fire. Gareth, on my left, was as quiet as always, staring down at the ground. Cai stomping up and down, bored and wanting to go to sleep. Llwch roaming around on guard, Tegid clearing up, and then Valarius sitting on my right.

Arthur; he moved away from us and did what he did before, stood and looked into the west, with nothing to see in the darkness. I could sense something was badly wrong with him. I had felt it all along. I looked at Val, at everyone; everyone whose faces were shadowed and fire-lit. Val began to

tell me the story of what had happened to Arthur over the past year. And as I listened, my heart grew cold and heavy. A lump formed in my throat that wouldn't shift as Valarius told me how Arthur had been ordered by Ambrosius to lead an attack on a Saxon long-house, and how the Commander had ordered the killing of three Saxon girls they had taken as prisoners.

Val told me, "He tried to stop one of Ambrosius' men from killing the girls. You remember Cynan Aurelius?"

I nodded. Cynan Aurelius, Arthur's closest rival for the Supreme Command. So Aurelius was still a huge menace.

Val went on, "Cynan raped one of the Saxon girls, and Arthur saw him do it, saw him kill her with a sword blow to her skull. And what made it all so hard was the girls were looking to Arthur to save them, he could not, of course. But ever since then he's been quiet and subdued."

"He will get over it in time," Cai said, sitting with us and behaving himself. "Just give him some time. He'll get over it."

I said, "No, not something like that he won't. You don't know him like I do; he has a deep regard for women. He cherishes them; seeing women hurt is something he can never accept. This is bad, really, really bad."

Cai said, "Women are his weakness, they are his weakness. He cares too much."

Everyone fell quiet again.

Cai now going on, increasing my unease by telling me, "You should have seen what happened to him after he found out you were gone, deserter. He thought you had betrayed him, deserter."

I glared at the bastard. "I don't want to know!"

"No, course you don't. But you are not getting out of this without a scar. Running away, high-tailing it into the wilds and leaving him without his best friend? He went mad! What in all hell-fire did you do it for? I should thump you for it."

I saw his hand turn into a fist and I sat back, saying, "What do you mean?"

"It's true," Val added to my misery. "Arthur went off at Ambrosius to find you and get you back again, the ol' man couldn't cope with him, swearing and cursing and throwing things around and in the end, Ambrosius had him put in the cage and chained him to the wall."

“Chained him up?” I said.

“Oh aye,” Cai said. “Ambrosius had him arrested and put in prison for being insubordinate. They chained him to the wall and he fought like a bear to get free.”

Cai seemed delighted with it all. He always found Arthur a constant source of free entertainment. I did not like his enjoyment at all, and was finally feeling eager to thump him even if it meant myself being pummelled to raw red meat.

Still Cai gave me more. “He went on like that for three whole days. I think he thought maybe you had been taken hostage somewhere, maybe with Cynan Aurelius’ cronies, taken for ransom because you are a prince; we had to force him to see you had just run away, because you are such a bastard and a liability. Then he went all quiet, like he is now, only then could we let him out safely.”

I swallowed my horror, finding myself trying to say I was sorry, even to Cai.

As I was trying to get these words out, Gareth spoke up, “Now there’s going to be a lot of trouble, maybe even war. Arthur’s got Cynan Aurelius at his back, and my spies tell me it’s possible Ambrosius will choose Aurelius over Arthur to take the Supreme Command. Now Ambrosius thinks Arthur is too uncontrollable, and the way he refused orders to lead the attack on the long-house sealed it with him. I think Arthur’s going for a fall.”

“Shit!” I swore. “He will take the Command, you just watch and see. You bastards don’t even know him if you think that. I’m the one he needs to talk to,” and I got up and walked away from them, hurting; hurting myself for what I had done to him.

I found him standing by a tree and again watching the water, and when he heard me approach, he turned to face me. I could see he wanted in a desperate way to tell me what had happened to him.

I said it for him, “What happened at the long-house? Tell me, or it will eat into you forever.”

And Arthur did not baulk at telling me at once; “I should talk to you?”

I saw his pain in his eyes, his hurt, his anger. His feelings of betrayal. Would he hear my poor excuses? I looked at him with my own sorrow. I said, “No, you needn't talk to me. Things went wrong, Arthur, inside me. Everything went wrong with black confusion. Madness took me, not

cowardice, or a need to betray those I love, for I loved too deeply in the wrong way. Forgive me?"

He looked away into the night; he said, "Not yet."

"Then tell me of the long-house, and let me come back to you."

He sighed, and told me his story without a sound of passion, only smothered anguish. "Ambrosius; he ordered me to lead an attack against a single long-house; there was no one there, only a handful of Saxon men and their women. I refused his orders. I told him I would only attack military targets, not houses with women and children. I refused. So he led the attack himself, and I had to sit and watch it all happen. It made me sick."

I saw him swallow his pain, his memories.

He went on, "They set fire to the long-house and that's when I rode in. I thought I could control it somehow or try to stop the killing…" He slumped down at the base of the tree, sat still hanging his head, and covering his eyes with his hands.

He stopped for a long time, then said, "Our soldiers pulled the women out, three young girls around our age. Ambrosius ordered them killed. I tried to stop it, Fox, I did, but the men obeyed him. But the girls, they could see I was trying to fight for their lives and they were looking at me to save them…but I couldn't. They took the girls out into the woods. I couldn't see what was happening, but I heard screaming and when I went into the trees. I found him, you know, Cynan Aurelius, the one who's trying to take the Supreme Command. I saw him raping one of the girls."

He stopped again.

"Go on, what happened next?"

"I saw him split the girl's head open with his sword. He raped her, then split her skull. And I saw him do it. I went mad. The others had to hold me down; they had to tie my hands and put me on my horse and keep me a prisoner. Took me to Dinas Emrys and locked me up until I calmed down. Ambrosius wouldn't allow me to go back to Viroconium until I learnt my lesson. You know what lesson?"

He looked up at me as I stood over him. I shook my head, no.

"The lesson of Saxon women," he said. "Those Saxon women who settle in our lands; they birth the most dangerous kind of Saxon, he said. They birth the British-born Saxon. And that's the most dangerous kind of Saxon of all, as being born in Britain then gives them a claim to our lands.

So they must die. Even their children. I will never accept it. Not even if I take Supreme Command, I won't ever accept it."

I stood horrified by his experiences while I had merely gone mad. So we were quiet for a moment.

Till he said, "When I looked at the Saxon girl, Fox, she was lying there all broken and defenceless on the ground. I cannot forget it, the vision of it is stuck in my head and it's been there ever since. I felt alone in the world. You, my one true friend and brother…were gone." Anger sounded in his voice. He said, "Why did you do it? To me? To yourself, to your father?"

I swallowed hard and said, "All I can say is I'm sorry, from the bottom of my heart, I'm sorry. Something happened inside me; something went wrong in my mind, something dark and wild. I broke. I was so confused, torn between everything, you, my father, my clan, the army, everything. I'm sorry I went mad."

He gazed at me, then nodded. "I thought so. You are a strange breed, my friend, wayward and wild, and mad." He laughed a little. "Will you stay now, and be a good barrack-boy for me?"

He made me laugh; we both smiled a little. I was never a good barrack-boy, not even a good boy, and somewhere inside me, I knew I never would be. I put a hand on his shoulder.

I said, "One day I'll explain it better than now; for now I cannot fathom it myself."

He took my hand, and began crushing my fingers in his. "Such a cracked bastard you are, Fox; you don't need to explain it. Master Caan always said you walked to a beat all of your own, and you do; that no regulation army step could force you to be what you are not. This is what I have to learn to accept."

He stood up, and told me, "When I was captured there in Dinas Emrys, I wanted to tell you how I could have saved those girls, all too late now, but I could have saved them."

"How? What could you have done to stop it?"

"Because Ambrosius wanted me to take control of that attack, and all I had to do was accept it; accept the power he gave me, and I could have stopped them from killing the girls by being the leader he wanted me to be.

But I refused his orders and he took the power away from me. I could have stopped it."

I shook my head at him. "That's not the way to think, blaming yourself for the actions of others."

"I know, that's what Lord Darfod said too, said Ambrosius is losing control and is ill, that Cynan is getting under the ol' man's skin. I wanted Cynan disciplined for what he did, but Ambrosius ignored it all. In the end Darfod said it was the Will of the Old Gods that the Saxon girls should live short and die in violence, and so may we. I failed them, but next time I won't. Darfod thinks I'm a force to be reckoned with…he said I'm a rescuer, all I said was to go and find Bedwyr, and here you are."

"You should listen to Lord Darfod then. Because you are what he said you are, a rescuer. You did that to me today. You rescued me. And maybe that was what I wanted. You to rescue me."

We faced each other. We fell on each other and I held him so tight. Nothing mattered any more, for I was home with Arthur.

On the final leg towards Viroconium the next day, and coming closer to the city and its busy village crowds, I could barely cloak my fear. Riding in through those gates, those same I had ridden out of over a year gone in some kind of mind-madness, I could not bear it, but I had to face it. Face all those within the barracks. So ashamed I rode with my head down, hoping no one would notice me.

Just as we were about to reach the gates, Arthur pulled alongside me and said, "Don't sweat, I've smoothed it over with Ambrosius to have you treated leniently. We're lucky; I think I can pull you out of the really bad punishments." I tried to smile, but he said, "You have gone white. I told you, don't fret; you are with me, right?"

We reached the bloody gatehouse and there was a new gatekeeper; a younger man this time, haughty and smug, and I took against him at once, the way he looked at me, like his bollocks were up his arse instead of between his legs where they were supposed to be. Arthur gave the password and the gates opened and in we trotted, and all before anyone or anything could hurt me, he took hold of the reins of my horse and turned its head for Ambrosius' private quarters.

"The sooner we get this over with the better," he told me. "If you draw it out, it will be worse for you."

Having been gone so long, I really did not know what kind of power Arthur had over the old man now, but I soon enough found myself standing in front of him outside his quarters. Himself standing on the raised portico of his wooden-built villa. Lord Ambrosius Aurelianus, Supreme Commander of British Armies, all tall and thin and old with long grey hair.

On either side of him guarded his favourite attendants, including Cynan Aurelius; everyone standing in the late afternoon sun before Ambrosius could go in and have his meagre supper. Old Master Caan was here too, even fatter. The whole bloody time Arthur stood beside the Commander, looking at him with an unflinching gaze. I stood up straight, trying to pretend I was a good soldier. Ambrosius just stared at me with watery eyes.

After a moment of thought, he said, "So, the Prince returns." He came down from his platform and came and stood in my face. He breathed on me, "The only reason, boy, why I will not have you executed for your desertion is because you are a noble-born, a prince of my ally, your father. Who I must say, paid me a large compensation-price for your actions. To save your life. And to keep this little madness of yours quiet. Not to mention Arthur's various promises to me on your behalf. Now get out of here, and if you ever do anything like this again, you will be flogged to an inch of your life."

I shook in my boots, and as he turned away, he said, "Caan, break him to foot-soldier; have the drill-master work him over. Give him the Roman marching punishment, for as long as you want."

He finally turned away and went off with his cronies. I stood still and Arthur ran down the steps to join me, saying, "Perfect, that's good, he did want I wanted him to do."

I answered him, "He wants to flog me. And now Roman marching? You know how I hate marching."

"Fox, he was going to have you executed."

"I know, he told me."

"And your father had to pay him a huge compensation-price to keep this quiet."

"I know, he told me that too."

"And I bloody nearly had to prick his old hairy arse to save you, but he gave in to me in the end. Do the marching for now, and I'll see if I can get you off even that. See you later," and he ran back up the stairs after

Ambrosius and his train. I was in shock, so Master Caan grabbed me by the collar and marched me back to barracks. Now Roman marching. Marching was naught but hell-fire to me. My whole life I had suffered with pain in my left hip and knee for some strange reason, and marching made it hurt so bad I could be curled up in agony for days. My father once had a doctor tell him my pain was due to a misaligned hip joint. I had always walked odd, a kind of left-sided lope. And left-handed too. I was a misaligned warrior in more ways than one, and Arthur knew it. I was depending on him to get me out of my own mess.

7: WINNING the SWORD

I came across the practice-square, aching in every bone in my body, my hip burning in pain. Pain went shooting down my leg to my foot. Caan had been giving me the treatment all week. I marched and bloody marched, carrying a fully packed kit-pole and with a shield on my back, I had marched twenty-five Roman miles and I was dead and weeping with pain and heat when I got back to barracks.

Home, I threw the pole down and collapsed onto the floor, rested back against the wall, dying. The pain was so bad I was about to beg Caan for something to wash it all away, was about to start crying like a little boy and smelling my own sweaty stink when I looked up to see a dark figure appear in the doorway.

He came over to me and lifted me up and dropped me onto a pallet, looked at me seriously, his dark eyes alight.

He said, “It’s all over. I’ve mended it. You are free. You will never again have to answer to anyone here, not to Caan, not to any of his bully-boys, you are free. Come on, get up, I’ll help you.”

In vain he tried to make me stand, but I just could not do it. “It hurts too much, Arthur, please don’t make me stand. I’ve marched twenty-five miles today. Can’t you get me something for the pain?”

I fell back down again and he went away, came back with a bucket of cold water, put it down at my feet and I leant over and splashed my face and wetted down my hair. I grimaced in pain. While I was doing all this, Arthur began pacing up and down. No one was around; Caan had the boys all out somewhere, torturing them.

Arthur said, “I can get you to a warm bath, that will soothe the pain. Something happened and I’ve got you out of here.” He stopped pacing and pulled out a rolled-up scroll from under his belt, telling me, “Where’s Caan? I have written orders for him to release you. Look!”

He unrolled the scroll, and in bloody Latin words he knew I could barely read, he showed me the orders.

“You know I don’t read that Roman shit, what does it say?”

“It says to release you from under Caan’s charge and into mine. I did a deal with Ambrosius last night. I wouldn’t budge till I had you back with me, as my lieutenant. Do you understand, you brat? You are my lieutenant now, promoted, signed by Ambrosius himself. See!” and he shoved it into my face. He could hardly contain himself.

For me, it was taking time to sink in. I was in too much pain. I began unlacing my Roman hobnail boots, wanting to soak my feet in the cold water in the bucket, which I did.

I said, “Do not call me a brat. So you did a deal, you are always doing deals. It’s your strategy. Did you say I’m free of this bloody place?” It was finally beginning to shine in my head. “Free, forever?”

He said, “Forever. No one is ever going to take you from me again. We are one and the same, me and you. Only different sides to the same thing, like a coin with different faces, but still one thing. My lieutenant. You are coming with me now over to Ambrosius’ quarters where it’s a lot more comfortable than this pigsty.”

I looked at him, astonished, stammered, “But, but, but what deal? What deal could you have wrangled to get me out of this?”

This was when he looked away, out of the door towards the practice square. Evening light was falling softly over the hard-packed earth.

He looked back at me and said, “I have to marry his daughter, Lady Rhonwen. In exchange, I wanted you freed. He said no. I said yes. I said, if you want your daughter to marry me, I won’t do it unless Bedwyr comes to me. This went on for a long time, most of the night, he really wanted her to marry Aurelius, but I said, no, I’ll marry her instead, but only on my terms. The old man agreed in the end.”

My pain was gone and I roared, “You! Marry Ambrosius’ daughter?” We soldiers had all seen her many times around the camp and she was as

ugly as a horse's rear-hole. I just sat with my feet in the bucket and laughed. "You must be head-struck."

He started stalking up and down again in the way he did. "Where's Caan? I have to give him this order."

Up and down he paced.

"You really mean it, you are getting married? To Rhonwen? The girl is a horse's arse."

He turned on me; "That's not the point. The point is it gets you out of here; because by hell-fire, if Ambrosius ever finds out about the horse you stole, he will have you executed. If you want to come with me, I have to marry his daughter. Now listen, she's really not so bad. She was there last night at dinner and I can tell you, she's not so bad, and, and—"

And he buckled under my scorn; grabbed me and shoved my boots into my hands, saying, "Follow me or stay here and rot."

He walked out, bumping into Caan, who was coming in.

Arthur shoved his orders into the master's fat sweaty hands and said, "Say goodbye to torturing my friend, he's coming with me."

I took off when I saw the orders being read and the look on Caan's face. I took my boots and ran, following Arthur out into the square, then out again into the main street. As I followed him, I tried to put my boots back on, hopping and running before catching him up. He walked fast and I started to limp. All of the shops were still open and I wondered if I could get him to buy some powders for my pain, it was coming back again. But Arthur was serious and I pulled him to stop and dragged him down a side street.

I said to him, right to his face, "No, you are not doing this just for me, but for her."

He slumped against a building and said, "I know…I just couldn't let her go to that insane murdering bastard, Aurelius. Ambrosius wants her to marry him, but he's insane, a killer and a raper. I saw then a way out. If I offered to marry her instead, I could use the marriage as a bargaining tool to free you. It worked."

"No, no, the old man's been after you for a long time to marry his daughter."

"Aye, he has been after me for a long time to marry Rhonwen, then pitting me against Cynan, to see which one of us is the better match for her.

He put me to single combat with Aurelius while you were gone. I thrashed the brainless prick, and now, the Commander has accepted me to marry her. If I marry Lady Rhonwen, of course, I'll be above Aurelius in favour for the Supreme Command. If Aurelius gains Command, we're dead, all of us, all of Britain. And Rhonwen's really not so bad. She has beautiful fair skin. So she may not be a beauty, but there, I am doing it for her. Are you happy now?"

"I think you are brilliant."

And I could only stand and look at him, knowing what a prize Rhonwen had been given in him. When we faced each other now, we embraced in a tight hug, and I whispered, "I'm so sorry for what I did; it was all too much for me, and I lost my way. I'm sorry, I'm so sorry."

"I know, you hurt me badly. You have a lot of work to do to make up for it, but I know now you had to do what you did. Let's go. I'll get you a warm bath and something for your pain. You will be fine in the morning and then you can meet Rhonwen."

And Arthur did what he said; he came and pulled me out of bed early next morning and took me on a tour of the Commander's private quarters, took me to the stores and dressed me in fine warrior garb, full battle kit, a fish-scale armoured tunic, and new lamella riding breeches. My weapons were a gladius, a cavalry spear and a brace of javelins. The night before in the bath I had to shave, look neat and tidy, cut my hair to collar length, and with my hair now tied back, and carrying my new kit, I was taken to the tiny cell that was to be mine. Here I got dressed and followed Arthur out to breakfast.

We ate in a small officers dining hall. And Arthur spent a long time flirting with the serving woman; it seemed he did this to her every morning —flirting with her to have her serve him extra helpings. Roman toast was his favourite, but of course, the maid gave in to him and spooned him an extra round, and with extra honey.

I sat quiet, again feeling new and out of place. I was no longer a worker and barkeep myself, but someone who was served.

I said to Arthur when he sat down next to me with his over-large helpings, "What am I supposed to do all day, my duties?"

"Just behave yourself. Don't fret, there's plenty of work to do around here, you will probably have to go over to Caan and help him train his new

recruits, but he cannot boss you around, or at least you can let him pretend he's bossing you around. But most of the time we work with the horses, training them for battle."

Other young warriors were now coming in, all enlisted to Arthur's new unit, though all still under Ambrosius' overall command. Here I recognised most of them, as they had all been in training with us in previous years. Llwch and Tegid came in with Gareth and Cai, then Val alone. They joined us at our bench, and I knew none of them knew Arthur was getting married, the announcement of which was to come later in the day.

Everything was fine till Cynan Aurelius himself walked in.

I looked up at him from my seat as he came and stood over us, staring at Arthur with death in his eyes, eyes that I could clearly see held unspeakable hate, a desperate hate that bordered on madness, and I knew madness when I saw it.

Cynan said to Arthur, "One day, you Silurian pig spawn, I will mangle everything you touch, everything you think you own or command, I will find and destroy. You won't get away with this. You will pay. I'll have you pay so much you will beg me on your knees to be released from the torture I'll give you. You won't get away with this."

Arthur stood to meet him, face-to-face, taller than Aurelius by half a head. Told him, "One day, you murdering bastard, you will be calling me Supreme Commander, and when that happens, I'll make you pay for what you have done. I'm not going to let you take command. It's all over, Cynan, all your hopes and dreams. I've already beaten you once, and now I control your every thought."

Everyone was silent, looking at Aurelius, for he had no supporters here, and I turned aside and went on with my breakfast, the others followed my lead and we all went back to our food, ignoring the man, as he meant nothing to us. Arthur too sat back down and finished his breakfast, leaving Aurelius to stand like a frustrated fool.

After another moment more, he turned and stalked away.

Arthur slammed down his mug, got up, and said to me, "Ready?"

I shrugged, and followed him out of the hall, leaving everyone to sit. Later that same afternoon, all of us attending warriors were summoned into Lord Ambrosius' private campaign room.

We gathered, dressed in our kit, stood straight and waited, and when the door opened, Ambrosius himself came in with a train of high ranking captains following, with lawyers and priests and officials, and they all packed into the room so Ambrosius could formally announce that his daughter was going to marry the young Silurian warrior, Arthur, son of Uthyr Pendragon. Gasps went around the room before a chorus of congratulations and all the rest of it, with everyone congratulating Ambrosius as Arthur stood next to me, being polite and showing a spirit of graciousness in his seventeen-year-old self that had me watching in awe and bewilderment.

Everyone began talking and laughing.

Our friends were staring at him opened mouthed, stunned brainless that any man would want to marry Lady Rhonwen, the horse-faced daughter of Ambrosius Aurelianus. No one congratulated Arthur, all the attention was on Ambrosius, because at last he had found a dupe to marry his daughter and all the men were talking to him, while the rest of us had to stay in our formal ranks and not move.

A door then opened at the far end of the room and Lady Rhonwen herself came in, dressed beautifully and carrying a small dark polished wooden box. With her were two handmaids, both girls looking lovelier than Rhonwen by far. I studied her carefully, looking for the things about her that Arthur had said.

Aye, her skin was fair enough and unblemished, her hair was a fine honey blonde, which she wore long and swept over her left shoulder and down over her left breast, her breasts were large with a fine white cleavage. None of this improved her face. Her eyes were small and pale green, and she had a nose, more like a man's nose, big and with a hump; her lips were no shape really and no one I knew would ever cock her willingly.

But when she came into the room, Ambrosius called, "I present my daughter, the Lady Rhonwen," and she came forward and stood before Arthur, and opened the box she carried.

He looked down into the box, where lay a finely crafted solid gold torc, which she took out. She passed the box to one of her handmaids, reached up and put the torc around Arthur's neck. They joined hands, and she gazed at him in wonder.

He did not take his eyes off her face. Anyone watching would have believed he was desperately in love with her.

For Arthur, Rhonwen fell into a mooning trance of some kind, and Ambrosius said, “Now then, a formal engagement is made. The wedding will be on the First day of Augustus, here in the gardens by the chapel of Christ.”

Again everyone cheered and made a fuss, and all I wanted to do was get outside before I did something foolish. At last men were going up to Arthur and shaking his hand, smiling at him as if he was simple. He was polite and still held Rhonwen’s hand. Her small green eyes blinked at him, for it was obvious she was out of her mind in love with him. Outside in the courtyard a trestle-table was set with food and drink and everyone was supposed to go out and enjoy the engagement party.

My head was beginning to pound and I wanted to go and drink. Lord Ambrosius called everyone now to break up; dismissed us soldiers, and Cai went cackling like a goose at Arthur when he walked by us. Val came over and offered congratulations, as Val was always well-mannered, then Gareth, and all of them before they dashed outside to the food. When everyone had gone, Arthur finally let go of his reserve, he took Rhonwen and turned her to me. I stepped back.

But he grabbed me and pulled me closer, saying, “Prince Bedwyr, meet Lady Rhonwen,” and she turned to me, and smiling, bowed her head. For him, I took up her hand and kissed it. “My lady.”

We looked at each other. I had to get out of her way, so I saluted Arthur in Roman fashion, as he was my superior officer, a unit captain. I turned to leave and Arthur came with me.

Outside, I turned to him and said in a tight whisper, “This is for life; you are going to be stuck with her for life. You don’t love her. You cannot do this.”

“It’s too late now, I have to, what do you think it would do to her to retreat now like a coward? What would that make me? And I’ve managed to convince Ambrosius to invite Medraut to the wedding…it’s going to be interesting,” and he walked out after his blushing bride-to-be. And so, during the time before the wedding, I went over to Caan and learned how to be a trainer and drill-master; I took some of his new boys under my care

before we were rounded up by Lord Ambrosius and given orders to ride out, summer skirmishing.

On a sunny morning we gathered before the city gates, horses ready, with Ambrosius standing there, now giving a rolled-up parchment of orders to his future son-in-law.

Arthur took his orders and was just about to move to his horse when Rhonwen came forward and took his arm. Here I watched her try and kiss him goodbye, like someone who really did not know what to do in such a moment. I felt the urge to laugh at her, because she tripped over her own feet, not knowing whether to do what she wanted or not.

Instead, he kissed her on her cheek and there came a roaring cheer from the warriors watching. We took then to our horses and rode out of Viroconium in a mounted troop of eighty riders, all heading east, intending to move towards Saxon territory before turning south, due to return in time to see our leader so happily married.

All day we rode along the Roman road towards the old Roman camp of Letocetum, all without a great deal of talk, for we had a job to do: border patrol, scouting, and just generally being seen to be doing our job. Past Letocetum, we turned east again and rode for a few leagues before setting up camp.

Then we were up early and moving out at dawn as usual, rode for near on three leagues, crossed the Tamesis-water, moved off the Icknield Way, and stopped on a high hilltop. Here we looked down into a wide valley below; saw there was a rough-made road alongside the river, and on the road we saw men coming down into the valley, a large band of Saxon warriors on the march. The morning was overcast, but the early sun was trying to break through and the day would be sunny—sunny enough for a battle. I knew Arthur would not let this Saxon rabble go by unchecked.

He said as he looked down into the valley, “They’re heading for the river ford, there’s one of our villages there. They must be going to attack it. Gareth!”

Our scout rode up and Arthur ordered him to take Tegid and ride into the village and warn the inhabitants of a possible Saxon attack. Gareth saluted and took off at speed with Tegid at his side. Both of them the fastest riders we had; both of them small and light in build, they were no burden to their horses.

We watched the Saxons coming on for a while longer, counting their numbers. Greater than us, they numbered around a hundred and twenty men, all carrying shields and spears, and were moving at a fairly fast pace. As they came closer to us, we moved back out of sight along the ridge top and dismounted.

We gathered together and Arthur said, “The village is still a long march for them down the riverside, and if they keep to their course, as they will, we can stop them on this road before the ford. They are blocked on their right by this ridge that runs up into the western hills. Cai, take your men and cut off their rear, the rest of us will flank them on their right. We will wait till they reach the ford; this will cut them off in front as we defend that line.”

Valarius protested. “This is dangerous, Arthur.”

“Val, they will walk themselves out, it’s hours to the ford, but I’m not letting them get close enough to attack civilians. Come on now; keep out of sight till I move.”

The road below turned out long and winding in some parts, but it stayed mostly on a straight course southwards; the Saxons were trotting in their band, but were beginning to straggle out after another hour. We followed, tracking a course above them along the ridge top and keeping out of sight.

The sun rose to a warm morning and as the leagues dragged on, the Saxons began to straggle out even more, they must have been on the march for more than a day, for reasons we could have no knowledge of, maybe they were on a revenge attack for something done to them in the past. But whatever the reasons, they were determined and stuck to their course. Their leader, a tall well-armed man with a red beard, shouted a lot at the stragglers. As it neared midday, they came into a wide area with a crop field on their left. Ahead some short way was the river ford that they would not be allowed to cross. This was a sign we were nearing the village and it was here that Arthur moved.

Cai turned aside and rode down behind the enemy war-host to cut off their line of retreat, while the rest of us came down in single file in front, and when the Saxons saw us coming down out of the hills, they staggered to a stop and were about to charge us when their leader halted them. Some of them turned to the rear for escape, but when they saw Cai’s men forming up

in an attack wedge and their spears down, all lined along the length of the road behind, they turned forward, turned back, turned to the side, and as they did we rode down the full length of their band and turned our shields to their right flank in a cavalry testudo formation; we thrust out our spears through the gaps in our shield-wall.

And there, the enemy did what Arthur knew they would, they broke for the freedom of the field on their left, and when they did, we charged. As we came at them, they scattered without even attempting to cluster into a shield-wall like all Saxon war-hosts did.

The rabble of them scattered into the crop-field as their escape route, and Arthur led us at a charge, spearing them as they ran and using our wedge formation to cut through the stragglers. No cohesion amongst them, disordered, they fled deeper into the field. Arthur then ordered Val's unit to fight along the line before the ford, herding Saxons down into the river if they could and spearing them in the water. I kept always at Arthur's side, and as our unit moved in, more and more Saxons tried to flee back the way they had come, only to find Cai's men blocking their retreat.

I caught a glimpse of Cai jumping down from his horse and smashing a man in the face with the boss of his shield, then through the Saxon's chest with his gladius. Another warrior had caught his horse and Cai was up again, charging through the mass.

I pulled my spear upright, as me and Arthur rode down some fleeing warriors and impaled them through their backs before wheeling again for another charge, my spear down, Arthur's sword in his hand striking against unprotected heads, as so many of them had no helmets.

All around us, horsemen were moving in and out, Saxons trying to charge us, but we retreated too far out of reach, kept on their outer flanks and slicing through them from the edges of the field, cutting through their exposed sides. We kept to a constant round of retreat and attack, playing by training. Every time we regrouped, we charged again, keeping to an order that had the enemy constantly trying to defend.

Still they scattered before us, and when we thought it was dragging on too long and we would lose too many men and horses, Gareth and Tegid returned ahead with a small band of men on foot from the village. They came on screaming with whatever weapons they could find from home. Arthur turned and rode back to the reinforcements, dismounted and came in

on foot with the townsmen. Hand to hand he fought and I could not believe what I was seeing, for he was fighting his way towards the Saxon leader as our horsemen cut down their warriors from around him. I charged my horse forward, shielding him as he fought towards the red-bearded Saxon leader, who was being protected in the centre by a ring of his last remaining men.

I watched as Arthur attacked through the mass of them, three against him, two went down with spears in their backs, while the last smashed Arthur's shield with an axe. I forced my horse through, stuck another two Saxons with my spear, then took to riding in circles around Arthur as he continued to fight his way forward, all the time pushing in closer and closer to their red-bearded leader. I forced through on my horse, striking out with my sword.

With the townsmen now backing us, we numbered near a hundred fighting men, more than the enemy as we had cut so many of them down. Around us the battle was beginning to thin, and the enemy leader realised he was surrounded by our horsemen. From then on, we kept on cutting into them as they tried to retreat, Cai riding in from the rear and chopping his way through the remaining defenders, who were fighting for their very lives. Only a handful left standing.

Sweat stung my eyes as again I charged between Arthur and the red-bearded Saxon leader. I kicked another man in the face, then cried at Arthur, "Get back to your horse!"

The few remaining Saxons rushed in against us, there was nothing between Arthur and them save myself, the red-bearded leader screaming full in our faces to fight to the death. This was it, and Arthur leapt forward to meet his opponent. Red-Beard came at him, charging him with a spear. There I saw Arthur jump at the man within arm's-length, the Saxon's spear struck his shield and Arthur staggered back, jumped sideways and threw his sword against the Saxon's neck.

Everyone halted and watched as Arthur pulled back and thrust his sword directly through Red-Beard's throat, right through and out the other side of his neck. He put a foot against his enemy's chest to lever his sword out again, kicked the man down to the ground before mounting up behind on Gareth's horse; together they galloped out of the fight, where Arthur found his own horse and came riding back to join me. Together we made a final charge against the last remaining enemy, spearing and killing warriors

wherever they ran. The bare-headed ones were much easier to kill, especially at the back of their heads and necks, so easy to chop against as we rode down behind them, swinging our swords.

Three of our warriors were trained at horseback archery and I heard the heavy twang and wing of the arrows loosed beside me; thud, thud, thud the arrows landed into their targets, and Arthur turned back to me, and when he looked around, controlling his horse, the shock of battle's end hit us both. A sudden and hideous silence overwhelmed us as we steadied our horses, and we could see no Saxons left alive.

Up went our standard. Val, riding out to the centre of the field and stabbing the Aquila into the soil as around us we heard the moans and screams of the dying and wounded. Slowly our warriors began gathering together, horses lathered, men wet with sweat and blood, gasping to breathe, dying of thirst, finding our brothers alive.

Arthur dismounted and collapsed against the flank of my horse, breathing in hot gasps, holding his sword, his hand gripping my horse's mane. He looked up at me, said, "We did it…"

Around us our men gathered.

Still I sat on horseback holding my sword, before slipping it back into its scabbard. My hands were shaking so hard I almost dropped it, aware only of a burning thirst and the sweat in my eyes. As I looked at Arthur, he was gasping to breathe. Blood on his face, Saxon blood. He took my horse's reins and led us through the bodies till we came back to the dead red-beard. I sat watching as Arthur reached down and took the Saxon's sword, watched as he drew the sword out of its scabbard and held it up before him.

"Look at this, Fox," he said, turning the thing from side to side. "Look at it! It's the most beautiful sword I've ever seen. He must have been a king. I wonder who I killed?" He looked at me, awe on his face. "Who do you think I killed, who he is? I have to find out. Are there any Saxon survivors!" he called out to those around him.

"Can't find any!" someone called back, though they kept on searching, going from body to body and stripping them of their gold and silver rings and bracelets. I watched our men stripping bodies of their valuables, belts with bronze buckles, brooches, anything that we could use to trade for supplies or other necessities.

But the sword in Arthur's hand was magnificent, valuable, a beautiful cross-guard that ended each end with square heads, carved richly, a red gem embraced deep within the square heads, like blood drops flashing in the late afternoon sun. The blade was long, pattern-welded and highly polished, flashing out of a metal scabbard richly engraved with obscure designs.

Arthur gave the sword to me, and I took it, felt it brilliant and light in my hand, weighted perfectly, swishing through the air when I turned it. "What are you going to do with it?" I said. "You cannot wield it, not a Saxon sword in the hands of a British lord."

"Bedwyr, look at it, it's not Saxon. It has a metal scabbard. Saxons do not have the skill to make swords like this…"

So I looked closer at the engravings…took in a breath, he was right. This was no crusted and rusty Saxon blade. It was British, purely British. We looked at each other, then down again at the man lying dead at our feet.

"He must have stolen it from us," I said, "in a battle like this, only he took this sword from a British lord."

I handed it back to Arthur, for it was not for me to hold.

"Now I will claim it back for Britain," he said. "I won it. It's mine." He crouched down and unbuckled the belt and metal scabbard that went with the sword, thrust the blade back into its casing, got up and began walking his horse out of the mess of the field.

We had destroyed the farmer's field, whoever he was.

Val joined us, saying, "Eight…we lost eight men and three horses, not sure yet about the wounded. But you killed their leader! Arthur, are you listening to me?"

When the name Arthur was heard amongst the townsmen, they swarmed in around him, and a chaotic victory cry broke out among them. The men were ready to drag him back into town and make him their hero, as if they themselves had nothing to do with it. Such is the nature of men to their warrior lords. So with the help of the villagers, we went to gather our wounded, and carry our dead into the village, where they would be buried with honour.

But now we fell spent from our horses; took them to water and turned to the people for rest. We ended up in the headman's hut, with the rest of us spread outside to sleep under the trees, our wounded being tended by the village women. And we slept the sleep of the exhausted. And the very next

morn, we took our wounded on the long ride home after we had set fire to the field. There lay the dead of a hundred and twenty Saxons, including their leader. We had reclaimed from him the Sword of the British, as the headman called it, back forever in Arthur's hands.

8: NORTHERN AFFAIRS

Five days later we rode through the gates of Viroconium, elated as warriors always were when returning home in victory. We came home just in time for Arthur's wedding, which was due the very next day, and Ambrosius must surely have been wild at us for riding in so late. So everyone left their workshops and fields to welcome us back, all the boys in training and old warriors from the barrack.

Ambrosius came hurrying with his attendants, the city magistrate and his officials and we were surrounded and hailed as heroes. All my pain washed away as I basked in the adulation. And there was a lot of that! Far more than even I expected. In a mass of chaos and people we were herded into Ambrosius' campaign room; here we stood to attention before him. As soon as Arthur opened his mouth and said, "It was—" he was told to be quiet.

The telling of the battle was given over to Valarius, who was our teller of battles and his rendition was immediately written down by Ambrosius' lawyer, Padric. Ambrosius' court bard would then render us into battle-praise, and so it would never be forgotten, as what really mattered was winning, and Arthur seemed to be winning over and over again. And as this was going on, Arthur slammed the mysterious British sword he had won down on the campaign table before the old guard and their mouths dropped open when he unfolded it from an old horse-blanket he had wrapped it in.

There was silence a moment, then murmurings and gasps and Ambrosius said, "Where did you get this, from whom?"

Arthur told him, "I won it from their king. I killed him in single-combat and took this sword, finding it was not Saxon, but British, it's one of ours."

Another man said, "You killed a Saxon king?" He sounded doubtful.

I said, "Aye, he did. I was there and witnessed him do it, through the Saxon's neck with his sword single-handed."

The elders all burst out talking at once. Killed a Saxon king! This act was a massively important happening. And so whatever it was that Arthur had been to them before, he had now grown already to the status of a god-forged hero, a warrior endorsed by God himself.

Then the sword went up in Ambrosius' hand and he said, "I will keep this till we can find out where it came from, and how it came into the hand of a Saxon king. You are all dismissed! Out! Out and get clean, you boys all stink of horse-sweat."

We broke apart and squeezed and shoved out of the door. I was disgusted that the old man had taken Arthur's sword; it was his, for he fought for it in fair battle and killed for it. Angry, I turned to Arthur, saying, "What right has he to take your sword? After all the work you do for him and he steals from you to make himself look good."

But Arthur was not even paying attention to me; he had gone still and quiet, then broke into a huge grin. I turned. There behind me stood Medraut. The two cousins stared at each other a moment, stopped.

Medraut saluted Arthur in Roman fashion and said, "I hear you have been in battle, captain," and they fell on each other, hugging wildly, long lost brothers reunited.

When they pulled apart, I put a hand on Medraut's shoulder and he turned to me, a quick flash of anger in his green eyes; he stopped when he saw it was me, greeted me also with a tight embrace, before turning us to meet his escorts. There were seven of them, two of them with the same face, Dafin and Irfan ap Clare, identical twins. Meeting the son of Uthyr seemed to have stunned them; they stood making their salutes in awe, as Arthur asked Medraut where he was now staying.

"Outside the city walls in pitched tents, two of them, you'll see, beyond that wall, come over and join us," Medraut asked him.

"No," I answered for him. "We have to go and get scrubbed; we've only just ridden home."

Medraut looked at me with a cold stare.

Arthur backed me, saying, "He's right, got to go and get scrubbed, maybe later if Ambrosius doesn't grab me for something, which he will, I can tell you now. Why don't you come with us instead?"

The look on Medraut's face changed again. Dark to light, he followed us to the bath-house, sending his entourage back to their tents. And it was

true what Arthur said.

No sooner had he scrubbed clean in the baths and freshly dressed when a warrior came from Ambrosius and dragged him away, as he was wanted to rehearse for his wedding the following morn. He left in a rush, leaving me to deal with Medraut the Snake; always demanding, intense and living off his emotions, which always ran hot. He never did anything without heat and passion, and anything…anything at all could come out of his mouth; honey or venom, it mattered not to the Snake.

This time though, all he wanted was to hear about our battle. He judged me to see if I could measure up to what he wanted from me.

"I hope you looked out for him on the battlefield. I wouldn't like it if I knew you couldn't keep your guard up, you're a left-hander, you're a liability on the field. You turn your horse in the opposite direction to everyone else; I've seen you do that. Have you learned yet to turn right, not left?"

I did not bother to answer him, for I would not give him the pleasure of watching me justify myself.

But there was a truth in what he said. It had taken a lot of training for me to learn to turn my horse's head to the right, and not to the left, and go in the opposite step to the troop around me. Medraut went on when he knew I wasn't going to let him bait me.

"That's what I would do if I was in his troop, keep him safe. I wouldn't even bother to fight Saxons—just keep Arthur safe on the field. That's your duty to him."

Even though all he got from me was a grunt, deep inside I understood him. He said, "You know, Uthyr never speaks of him. Arthur is not allowed to be mentioned. I make a point of mentioning him as often as I can. I get hammered for mentioning him."

"You should try keeping your mouth shut then; but if Arthur is such an outsider to Uthyr, it's strange he lets you come to his wedding. Why did he let you come, do you think?"

"It would be impolite. Uthyr would look ill-mannered and with a grudge if he didn't. Fox, you are stupid."

Medraut moved closer to me now.

We were sitting on the benches by the baths.

He whispered, “Uthyr is afraid of his own son, so superstitious he thinks he got Arthur through some dark Silurian sage-enchantment, yet in secret, he still wants to know everything Arthur does.”

“And what about you? What have you been doing all this time?”

He looked at me as if I was a half-wit, saying, “Fighting Picts, and I don’t want to talk about it. But now there’s the Dal Riada, Gaels; strange people, savage as starving dogs. Uthyr is afraid they will form alliances with the Picts, it’s happened before you know, so I need to talk to Arthur about this.”

He looked around, as if he could find his cousin right here and now. Medraut always twisted around…like a snake. Sometimes he could move slow and seductive, like a snake. He could look at a man with a deep and flame-like stare, like a snake, unyielding, carrying within him the same kind of power that Arthur had, only not as strong.

He stared at me.

“All right,” I said, “talk to him later when he comes back, come over to us, I don’t think Arthur would want to spend his last night as a free man in your stinking tent. We have a cell to ourselves now.”

“I’ll do that.”

He stood up now and moved away, though he kept on looking at me as he went. Bugger him raw, I thought, for I could see he was judging me; judging whether I was worthy of being Arthur’s lieutenant or not. This was what I thought he was thinking about me now. I did not see either of them again till the following day, the day of Arthur’s wedding.

9: ARTHUR TAKES his ORDERS

The First day of Augustus, a special day in the Old World, but nothing felt special about this day for me.

Arthur was getting married. And Medraut, he bore it all without the slightest sign he was finding this wedding as painful as I was. For Medraut had always hoped Arthur would one day marry his sister, Essylt Fynwen, but there was no hope of this ever coming to pass now, not with Arthur already spoken for. So we all dressed for the occasion that was to come at noon.

The town was already crowded with people and guests. It started out quiet, till it turned into a big parade of glory for Ambrosius. Not only had he

snared a young and brilliant husband for his ugly daughter, but he had snared the very one who had killed a Saxon king in battle, who had won battles at fifteen, and who made Ambrosius himself look so good he shone in the sun.

There were musicians in town, drummers and flute-players and strummers. I stood with Gareth and Cai, listening to the music; then joining with Medraut and his little escort before we were herded into the square outside Ambrosius' villa, lined both sides like it was with an important guard-of-honour.

So Arthur and Lady Rhonwen were married outside the Romani Christ-church, in the sun, so the sunlight could shine on Ambrosius, shine on the sword he was wearing. The old bastard had come to the wedding wearing the sword Arthur had taken in battle, wearing it as if it was his own to claim, damn his thieving old bones. I stood in the guard to watch the ceremony. I let my gaze fall on the old man, as I thought him so arrogant for the way he frothed and strutted with Arthur's sword at his side, I wanted to challenge him, throw him down and take the sword and give it back to the one who truly owned it.

So I stared only at him as the bishop mumbled his Romani Christian marriage words over Arthur and Rhonwen, as they held hands like lovers, herself with garlands in her hair, and him in his best armour with a fur-lined Silurian cloak, looking so handsome she was drooling over him. I did not like it. I did not like her. I felt uneasy about her and him being forged together in wedlock, and the tension inside me was harsh.

Again I felt lost, confused and alone to see Arthur leave me for her. It was harsh. Then a cold wind came blowing over the walls and flapped the banners, making a noise that almost drowned out the bishop's words. He made them man and wife forever in Christian wedlock, that could never been broken, save only by death. And when they were bound, Arthur put a gold torc around Rhonwen's neck, like she had to him on their engagement. The bishop said they were joined as one under God and my guts sank.

After all this, the newly-weds went and sat on flower-draped chairs in the middle of the square to receive the blessings of well-wishers, who were allowed to approach them and give wedding gifts, as if they were the king and queen of some wondrous land.

This was the first time Arthur looked at me; he looked at me and nodded. I walked with him to his seat and stood at his side, his lieutenant. On Rhonwen's side stood her father. It was now well after midday, and people were moving in to give presents. And in the line that came forward was Cynan Aurelius.

He stood before Arthur and said so everyone could hear, "This is a marriage of convenience, convenience to you, a marriage to put yourself directly in line for the Supreme Command. You don't love her, so take the woman and weep. I will make you weep, Silurian." He bowed to Arthur in mockery.

Silence fell, then laughter when Lord Ambrosius answered him, "Is that so, Cynan? Is this not what all marriages are for…for bettering your standing in life? You did not bargain as well as Arthur did."

The hard mood only released when Aurelius walked away into the crowd and was gone. We all went back to the gift-giving, when after, finally, we were free to go and eat and drink. The wedding-feast lasted all night and I got drunk, so much so I had to leave before I spewed on my own boots and embarrassed myself.

Medraut went home to the north again the following day, and a fortnight honeymoon for Arthur and Rhonwen began, and whenever I saw him during the day, he told me she and him did nothing other than rut with the mad desire of their age; I did not believe him. I did not believe Rhonwen had the womanly power to keep him stiff and laid for hours every night, night after night. But he said she did. And I believed he was ribbing me, trying to boast his way out of a strange match that held no love for him. Still he insisted he poked her sideways and upside down every night, and all the rest of the boys were jealous. I was too, I thought, because none of us could ever get our pricks in without a great deal of planning and sneaking around, but Arthur was bending his new bride into every position he could invent every night of the week.

Liar.

And even though he delighted in giving us the detailed thrills of his sexual cock to cunt nightly feast, I could sense he was seeing her differently already. Rhonwen, he said, was not so ugly any more. With her clothes off, he said, he could see the beauty in her; there was a strange ugly beauty in her face that just was not there before. He cared about her, and she was

insanely in love with him. So his randy fortnight passed, calm before the storm. One warm afternoon Arthur came trotting over on a white horse to see me.

I was down with Master Caan and the new recruits as usual, and Arthur rode up to me and said, “We have a meeting with Lord Ambrosius. Now, Bedwyr. Come on, you can ride up behind me.”

He put down a hand and pulled me up on horseback behind him, and turned with a wave at Caan as we rode off to the Commander’s villa.

“What’s going on?” I asked over his shoulder.

“The ol’ man’s cracked. He’s planning a campaign, and you know what this means, don’t you?”

“Oh aye, he wants you to lead it.”

Arthur went quiet.

I said to distract him, “Do you think Rhonwen’s pregnant yet?”

“I think she would be,” he answered, “if it was not for the fact she keeps putting it in the wrong hole. She keeps putting it in her mouth. Rhonwen, I say to her, you don’t make babies that way; it has to go in where babies come out.” He laughed.

I thought about this for a while; about her with his prick in her mouth. I said, “Are you ready to be a father? Really, are you?”

“What kind of father would I be? Running wars and dying in them? Any child of mine would never know me. It’s a sad thought, but I have to give Ambrosius his grandsons, he talks about this all the time, he seems desperate for it to happen.”

“He’s getting old,” I said, “and he wants blood of his blood before he dies.”

“That’s right.”

“I don’t know why you’re so sad about it; we men get the best and easiest job in the baby-making effort.”

He slowed his horse, turned in his saddle and looked at me. “Fox, let me know when you get a woman, then we will discuss it.”

I frowned at him.

The day darkened, and by the time we rode up before Ambrosius’ villa, it was almost fully dark. We walked in through the high black-wood doors into his campaign room. The Commander was there, sitting at his huge table and reading parchments in Latin. Attendants were hidden in the

shadows. Arthur and I came in together and stood to attention before him, saluted him, and waited.

He said without looking up, “Right, let us get down to it. Sit, you two can sit.”

We sat on two chairs before his desk and waited.

“The sword,” Ambrosius started, “the sword you took from that Saxon, I have been unsuccessful in tracing its origin. It is a mystery. So I would like to ride out on campaign and see if we can flush out some Saxon war-hosts and take prisoners, try some interrogation. Though there have been rumours from Saxon lands about a power shift, a fissure created when you killed their king. I have also heard news that my great enemy may be dead.”

“Hengist is dead? But this brilliant news, my lord,” Arthur said.

“If it is true. Now, the other matter you put before me.” The old man looked at him. “I agree. We should ride south and inspect the site and campaign on the way home. If Hengist is dead, things will move on their side and now is the time to strike against them.”

“But we cannot afford to campaign now,” Arthur told him. “We have to save our war-hosts for the war against the Picts in the north; we must ride north and join with Uthyr, before the Picts can bring in Saxon alliances. If this happens we’re in deadly trouble. No campaign till then, Commander. It’s too taxing on our resources. We need all the men we can for—”

“Do not gainsay me, Arthur! Or else I will leave you behind, forever. You have to learn, if you are to be a leader yourself, to take orders, and take them well. I have planned this campaign, and we will ride out on September the First. You are to gather your units. You and I, we will ride south to Cant Moel and make it ready for reinforcement. This was one of your better ideas. Then on the way home, we will harry Saxon territory, and I want you to do this for me.”

Arthur came to his feet. “No, Commander, not now, not with the Picts in the north attacking British lands, you need me for this, and I won’t put my life and that of my men in danger just to annoy a few southern Saxons! Sir, this is not a good plan.”

Ambrosius too came to his feet, his face turned white.

He spoke low, “If you do not obey me, I will pass you over in favour of Cynan Aurelius. You are not Supreme Commander yet, and neither will

you be if you disobey me. I am Supreme Commander of the Britons, not you, boy. And just because you are my son-in-law, this does not mean I will not pass you over in favour of one who knows how to take orders from his superior officer." He came out from behind his desk and pulled up straight. He was still very tall and very lean.

He stood in front of Arthur and said, "You think you have won over me, but not yet. My captains will not accept you. You are still a youth of seventeen, and you think you are a general. You think you can give me grandsons? Will this make me weak-willed before you?"

Arthur answered him with ire, "You accepted me as your son-in-law because you know in your heart there's no other like me. As for Aurelius, he cannot even piss straight, let alone lead an army clean to battle!"

Ambrosius nearly fell over in rage; his voice dropped lower, savage, "You will obey me. You will do all of my work when and where I say it. You will lick the mud from my boots if I say it. You will ride out on campaign on the date I set, the First of September. Or else there will be no Supreme Command, no Cant Moel, and, you will not have the sword. Now answer me, will you lead my wars?"

All of the time I watched with my heart thrashing wildly. I could see the struggle on Arthur's face; him, biting down on his jaw to keep his mouth shut, struggling to obey, struggling to answer as Ambrosius wanted, but instead he stared back at the old man with black fire burning in his eyes.

He answered, "Sir, you are willing to risk my life? For what?"

"Will you lead my wars?" Ambrosius said, unyielding.

Again the struggle.

Again Arthur burned Ambrosius with his stare.

The Commander said, "Do you want my sword?"

"It is not your sword! It's mine. My lord, I won it in battle. It's mine. I want it back." Arthur turned then to the man standing in the shadows, to Ambrosius' lawyer, Padric.

"Draw up a legal deed," he told the lawyer. "A document that legally names me heir to the Supreme Command on Lord Ambrosius' death or until he deems me fit enough, until he gives me back my sword. Draw up a document that names me heir and no other. Magister Militum."

Ambrosius spat; "You? You want to be Master of the Military? You have to go one better than all the rest, do you not, Silurian?"

The atmosphere in the room cracked and spat like an invisible fire. I came to my feet at Arthur's side and Ambrosius knew his young son-in-law had many supporters.

"Last chance," Ambrosius said. "You either obey me, or it ends now. I will reject you as your father rejected you, and you will be outcast and left to wander in the wilds alone. As a Silurian, you, Arthur, are an outsider to me, a foreigner."

This was the killing stroke. Ambrosius knew this would bring Arthur down, and it did. He backed away from the old man and bumped into me. I held him by an arm and he looked wounded. Rejection, to be called a foreigner when he was born from the staunchest of British stock, from one of Britain's most fiercely resistant nations, the Silures. But to others, Arthur was still a black-haired, black-eyed devil from the black mountains of Siluria.

When the old man saw Arthur back away, he said, "I have made plans for you to obey. You either do it or I will destroy you. Now, will you lead my wars?"

"I will," and it was a harsh whisper.

But Arthur rallied and added, "But only if you do as I ask, Commander, please, draw up a legal document passing the Supreme Command to me along with the sword. If not, I will walk away from you, and you can fight your own wars and die doing so. You do all this to me because you know I can win and win again. You won't have such guarantees with Aurelius. He will not win your battles. He will lose them, and you will look a tottering old fool in the last years of your life. Do this one thing for me, and I will lead your wars—to victory, all of them."

Ambrosius nodded agreement.

He said, "I will think of what you say. Assemble your units; be ready to ride out on the First. You can go, both of you."

We saluted our Commander, and I pulled on Arthur's arm to leave as commanded. I had to bodily pull him away from Ambrosius' stare, pull him out into the air of a dark day. Here I led him down the portico to our cell and pushed him inside. He was in a kind of trance, and he just stood still and stared at the floor, trembling.

He whispered, "He called me a foreigner; what does he mean to do to me?"

I told him what I knew. “He knows where you hurt the most and he strikes into your deepest wounds. Your father rejected you because you are different. Ambrosius uses that same rejection and that’s mean. Meaner than anything I’ve seen for a long time. Hold up, Arthur.”

But it was too deep, his wound. It was far too deep and he had been pierced into it again and again. He sat down on the pallet that used to be his before Rhonwen and went very still and quiet. I thought he was going into another falling-sickness seizure, but he rallied.

He merely sat and said, “Why do people always want to hurt me?”

“Because you have power. I don’t know what kind of power it is, but you have it in quantities like a mountain is high. You need to know you have more men who love you than hate you. This I can swear.”

He looked at me. Finally he found the will to stand.

I said to him, “Just don’t think about this anymore, the more you think about it, the more you’ll drive yourself mad. And I know about madness, remember? Now get out of here and go and do something useful, go and put your cock into something tight.”

He relaxed and said, “That’s just what the old man wants me to do, Bedwyr-brawd, breed with his daughter.”

I pushed him out of the room. “Good, only this time, make sure she lets you put it in the right hole!” I called after him.

He laughed back at me, and I went back to work.

The following days consisted mainly of organizing for the campaign, and as we were taking a large troop, we needed to pack many supplies, emptying the stores. Arthur and I spent most of our time down at the barracks with Master Caan, organising and packing war-gear. And as we were standing with our old drill-master in the back horse-stalls discussing how much gear to take, Valarius came in to tell us to go down to the main city gates.

“Wonder what’s going on?” I said to Arthur as we went together out of the stalls, following Val, where outside we saw an excited gathering by the main gates. We saw a group of riders just coming in. It was Medraut. And with him was Lord Darfod, our druid. And when Medraut saw Arthur, he jumped off his horse. He stood staring at his cousin like someone stunned.

He said, “Arthur…it’s been like knives in my guts, knives in my guts every moment I’m away from you.”

But Arthur only began leading Medraut’s horse away out of the crowd, heading back towards Ambrosius’ villa. In a group we went, with Lord Darfod following. We moved back to our cell, where outside the door, Darfod said something low to Arthur as he moved away towards Ambrosius’ private rooms, a group of guards following him. Me and Arthur took Medraut into our room and he dropped his gear down onto the bed under the window, dropped down himself and sighed. He looked filthy, his blond hair dirty, his face smeared with road-dirt. He sat there, spent, still looking at Arthur with mad passion.

He said, “I’m starving…”

Arthur told him, “I’ll take you over to the baths and you can wash before getting something to eat. I’ll talk the girls into giving you extra helpings.”

“We rode and rode,” Medraut said to him. “As soon as the letter came, we rode. You wouldn’t believe what it felt like, how did you do it?”

“You got him back from Uthyr?” I asked.

This was when the relief flooded out of Medraut’s body and he dropped his head into his hands and let out his emotion, a long moan.

And I wanted explanations, I turned on Arthur. “What’s going on? How did you do it? Uthyr let him go, is that what’s happened?”

“No,” Arthur answered me. “Uthyr hasn’t let him go, just freed him to Ambrosius for a while, and now that he’s here, I’m going to have to fight to keep him.”

“You’re going to fight just for one man? For him?”

“Not just for him, Fox, you know that.”

He lifted Medraut and said, “Come with me.”

And they went out together, leaving me standing where I was, confused. So it seemed I was going to have to share my room now with the Snake. And to lessen the tension, Arthur put Gareth and Val in with us. I appreciated this, because I found Medraut as eerie as they come, and I knew I wouldn’t be able to sleep at night if it was just him and me alone together.

For the Snake was capable of anything and everything, the son of some of the land’s most powerful and superstitious men. And even though I found him weird, I admired him for his unbounded courage, his fearlessness

in saying aloud exactly what he thought. His mouth was foul, and sweet. He spat poison, or he whispered poetic honey.

To Medraut nothing was sacred; everything that walked and crawled on the face of the land was his to attack. He never backed down before others, not even from the most powerful and aggressive of men, to them, Medraut fought back with equal ferocity. He was beautiful and blond and he was weird. Strong as a powerful sapling that clung to the highest crags of Rheged's mountains. Yet he was also so fragile he could crack like glass, especially where Arthur was concerned. Our dark Silurian had the fair Snake completely in his power. It was always there, whenever I saw them together.

So anyone would think Medraut fell at Arthur's feet like a subservient dog, how wrong they would be to think this way. No, they battered each other like the sea against rocks, both as strong as mountains, where neither one could override the other. But there was a weakness in Medraut's nature that always gave way in the end. He gave way not because he was finally beaten, but because he wanted to, he made a choice. And his choice was Arthur. There was no one or nothing else for him. And this was the very creature I had to share with, tempered by Gareth and Val. So Arthur and Medraut came home together later that same night, the Snake changed, fed and washed, his hair again shining blond and long.

We all gathered together in my cell, wanting from Arthur the very thing he had done to secure Medraut's release, but he was reluctant to talk about it. We tried to get it out of the Snake, but he wouldn't talk either. All I saw was Arthur staring down into those steel-green eyes of his cousin's, as if they were talking to each other mind to mind. A look crossed Arthur's face, a look of a man who was tempted to take hold of something deadly and eat it.

With myself, Val and Gareth watching him, Arthur turned to us and said, "I persuaded Ambrosius to have Medraut…have Medraut placed heir after myself for the Supreme Command. We offered this to my father too in exchange for Medraut's return to us, to fight with us as a representative of Gododdin's right to power in the land. I know Lot has been building to challenge Ambrosius' rule, so I had to stop it. My father released Medraut to Ambrosius."

None of us could believe what Arthur had just said. Medraut, next after him for the Supreme Command? I wanted to laugh, but this was serious. I knew also there was more to this deal of Arthur's; there was much more to it than he was saying now.

"So, how did you persuade the old man to do this?" I said.

"Good timing," Arthur answered. "Good timing, as right now, Ambrosius would do anything for me. And he did it because Rhonwen is pregnant. Now that I've given the old man a possible grandson, he finally sees me as a member of his family. His blood mixed with mine. I'm no longer a foreigner to him. Ambrosius did what I asked. It's official and recorded in Law."

And just when I was about to say what I thought, Arthur said more that stopped me. "Of course, by doing this I've split our forces and made myself a lifelong enemy. Cynan Aurelius won't stand for this. He will break and go out on his own, a rebel force, he might even join with Medraut's father. Even though Aurelius is still named as a possible heir if anything should happened to me or Medraut, he won't stand a chance of ever having the sword of command in his hand now. He will run scared, because I can command far more power than he can. So my brothers, you won't just be fighting Saxons, but our own kind."

"But now Uthyr expects us to back him against the Picts." This from Val. But Arthur was always too sharp for all of us.

He said, "I was going to do that anyway. I just didn't want to do it with Medraut on Uthyr's side. I told Ambrosius this, that if Medraut was to be killed fighting in any war against us, Uthyr and Lot would both see it as an excuse to come back at us for revenge. Ambrosius doesn't want any more internal fighting than necessary, so Medraut had to come back to me."

Medraut smiled a secret smile. Aye, I knew it, there was more to this. The two of them, scheming up a plan, a ruse, and what I saw now was only a part of it. Something more was bound to happen, only when? I could not know till it unfolded before me. And I felt jealous that these two had again left me out of their plans. When everything was nice and quiet, I said nice and loud, "Let's hope now the old man's first grandchild is boy. He might not be so willing to kiss your Silurian arse for everything you want if the baby is a girl."

Arthur countered me, “It makes no difference now, the document that makes me and Medraut heirs is signed and sealed.”

“Arthur, now you and him are rivals for the same thing. Uthyr will want to see that sword in Medraut’s hands, not yours!”

I jumped to my feet. I was getting angry. I thought it all too dangerous, too many plots that were all too deadly for our futures. I did not like any of it.

Again Arthur countered me, saying, “I’m going to destroy Uthyr and he won’t see anything other than me, his son, pulling him down. And not only that, Ambrosius too is near his end; he’s been ailing these past months. He won’t see anything. It won’t matter what he wants because he won’t be here to see the final outcomes. It’s just a game, because once I take Command, it won’t matter what deals I do here and now. It just won’t matter anymore.”

I was shocked. I cried at him, “So, you are planning on killing your own father? That’s a kin-slaying and evil!”

“I’m not going to kill him, Fox. I’m going to break his forces and take the Red Dragon. Once that’s done, he will retreat. He might come back one day because he’s still young enough to fight, but he knows he cannot challenge me. They are all fighting for things they cannot have. A new age is dawning, and it’s the final age. I am the best. And I am the last.”

“You’re a mad bastard,” I said to him. I dropped back down onto my cot and pointed at him, saying, “You better not get me killed.”

“And if I do, what will you do?”

“Come back and haunt you, what do you think?”

10: THE PLEDGE-MAKERS

Three days later the last war-host of Ambrosius Aurelianus was ready to leave the city on a cool dull morning, not good weather for the last flight of the Eagle. And it felt like every living soul in the country had turned out to farewell us. Rhonwen was there too, standing at the gates in a heavy cloak with a hood over her head, maybe trying to cloak her misery. Pregnant, and her young beloved husband riding out to war, surely she felt abandoned? She stood with all her women friends and maids around her, and just as I was about to mount my horse, she came out of the group and took my arm.

Pulled me to her and whispered, “Please, Prince Bedwyr, take care of him, he did that thing again in the night, the thing he does. Last night.”

“A falling-seizure? Is that what you mean?”

“Aye, I do not think he is well enough to ride today. I confess, I kept him awake for a long time, crying. Bedwyr, I am afraid for him, please look after him for me, with all your strength and all your heart.”

I looked into her desperate face; her small eyes were red and swollen from crying. She looked a mess. But her desperation for Arthur was real to me. I looked around for him, but could not see him anywhere.

I tried to console her; gripped her hand. “Don’t think of it, I’ll look out for him, my lady.”

The world moved around us, and the clouds overhead covered the morning sun; dark shadows fell over her face and she seemed to recede into the gloom of her heart, or the darkness of an overcast morning. War horns began to blow, the signal to move out. I gave her one last look before turning away and mounting my horse, and when I turned for her again, she was running away into the crowds. I heeled into line, finally seeing Arthur trotting towards me on his new chestnut war-stallion, Calibus.

He came up to me and said, “Have you seen Rhonwen? She was supposed to be here to see me go.”

“She was just here, she ran away into the crowds over there.”

He looked where I pointed, his dark eyes seeking her out and not finding her. As I looked at him, I saw the signs of lack of sleep on him. I noticed too his left eye was filled with blood. He said nothing as he turned his horse into line next to me. And when the horn sounded, we then made a slow ordered ride out of the city gates, banners waving overhead, crowds shouting and cheering. Ambrosius at the head of the train with his standard-bearer riding beside him. It was a long train too, the supply wains the last to leave.

When we had gone about half a Roman mile down-street, Arthur looked back behind him. When he looked forward again, there was a smile on his lips.

"What is it?" I said.

"I've managed to cut most of the younger warriors from the band. Less than forty now. Not only that…" he looked at me, smiling. "No Cynan Aurelius, see, he's not here. Ambrosius sent him north to patrol Pictish lands."

"And whose idea was this?"

"Not mine. I swear I had nothing to do with it." Another smile.

"That's good then," I agreed.

"But my unit is still the youngest, and this means I have to work hard to keep you all alive during this campaign. And without Aurelius…" he shrugged, it went without saying that life would be much easier without the problem Aurelius.

In the train south most of the men were lightly dressed; no need for full armour now. Everything for war was loaded onto our pack animals and wains. Ambrosius and his captains had their campaign tents.

Our horses carried shields and sleep-rolls and our water-bottles slung over saddle pommels. I wore my helmet, but Arthur wore only a headband, holding back his fringe from falling always into his eyes. I noticed the headband was very fine, embroidered heavily with a brilliant line of many-rayed suns, it suited him. He also wore the gold torc Rhonwen had given him on their engagement around his neck. His Silurian cloak was rolled up across his horse's rump and his sword was at his side—though not the one he wanted, the magic sword he had taken in war from the red-bearded Saxon.

Under the sun that was trying to break through the clouds, he wore a sleeveless leather jacket that was braced with metal plates, he wore breeches of leather and fine British made riding boots; those called buskins. I was in my usual skin-tight leather breeches, and hobnails on my feet, a leather vest and a cloak. I also wore a big silver ring on my right index finger, something I had taken from a Saxon on the field of our last battle, so as far as I was concerned, it was now mine, a find that had come to me by right of victory in war.

Behind us rode Medraut, dressed like us, though helmet-less, blond hair shining in the sunlight. Behind again came the body of our unit, Cai Long-man, Gareth ap Gan with his younger cousin, Brendon Ro. Then Valarius behind again; Llwch and Tegid, and all of them eighteen or over. Arthur did not like having to bring his own warriors, for he was not willing to risk their lives in this last madness of Ambrosius'. But those were his orders and he followed them.

After a while of quiet riding, I said to him, "You don't look too strong this morning, did you sleep last night?"

He said, "It was an awful night. Rhonwen was out of her mind with grief. She cried a lot and kept waking me up. It's bad for her, this thing. She's left all alone, and pregnant with it. And she's still only a new bride."

"And in love with you."

"And I have to ride away from her; she knows I have to leave. Nothing like this has ever happened to her before, never had someone to love her for so long all to herself. The break with me was bad."

"Bad for you too," I said. "I can see it in your eyes."

He sighed; "Aye, when I woke before dawn, it was on me. I know when it happens because it leaves its mark on me. Now there's something weird flickering in my left eye."

I said, "You know your eye is filled with blood. Let me see it."

He turned to look at me.

Riding side by side, I leant closer to him. "It makes you look wild and savage."

He said, "Last time I had a seizure I bit my tongue half off. If Ambrosius was to ask me now to lead a battle, I couldn't. I swear I couldn't."

"Of course you could."

Just then a rider came forward and stopped at Arthur's side, and said, "Lord Ambrosius wants you, sir."

"Oh, here we go again," he cursed and trotted away with the rider. We moved on steadily, and an army of our size on the move literally eats everything in its path, villages and towns we passed were obliged to give over what food they could to feed us. We gave them our lives in war; they must give us food to fight those wars.

Two days from home, we stopped north of Glevum. Here we made camp, our cooks ready to start the evening meals. The order was six camps of thirty-two men, all of us using the old eight-man tent routine of the Romans, with each unit headed by its own prefect. We waited now for our own captain to come back and join us for food and sleep. And when Arthur came back, he was again exhausted.

He told us, "Why does Ambrosius have to make me do all of his work for him? Now he wants you, Val. You have to go over to his camp and pamper his arse—the old man still claims he's a Roman citizen, so this means he needs his arse wiped for him."

"I hope you don't mean that," Val answered; he looked hurt to be leaving us. He was our camp-prefect, and praefectus ala, a well-used warrior was Val…but he rose anyway, and gathered his things before slogging off to Ambrosius' praetorium, muttering complaints to himself as he went.

This was when I noticed Arthur had a new boy with him. I had already laid out our bedding-rolls in the tent, Arthur's next to mine, and when he came over, he fell right down on it and said, "This is Alun ap Gawen and he's got a game-board if anyone wants to play."

I studied this new boy. Never seen him around before. He was older than us, around twenty and four, and he sat down by the fire just outside the tent door and was still, holding his game-board on his knees.

Cai came lumbering over and squatted down in front of Arthur and said to him, "Bear, what's happened to your eye?"

"I accidentally poked it with my prick."

"How can you poke yourself in your eye with your own prick?"

"Haven't you ever done that?"

"No…"

"Why not? When mine's up and waving around, it's deadly, look what it did to my eye."

Cai sat and looked at Arthur's eye. He snorted and said, "My horse doesn't have a prong that big."

"That's why we don't use your horse for breeding, they use me instead." Everyone laughed and Arthur asked him, "You want to play Black Raven?"

Cai looked over to where Alun had the board set up close to the fire. He said, “Only if you let me win.”

“All right,” Arthur agreed. “I’ll let you win.”

So we all gathered round to watch the moves. Shadowed by firelight, Arthur won three games in a row and Cai turned red with frustration. He complained loudly because Cai was loud, “You said you would let me win!”

Arthur said, “But you keep letting me win. How can I let you win when you keep letting me win? You defeat yourself every time.”

And every time Cai made a move, the rest of us made noises of encouragement. It just did not matter what move he made, he always got beaten. In the end though, Arthur gave the game away and let Cai win two in a row, which pleased him so much he jumped to his feet and cried out, “Cai, the champion! The champion! Cai Long-man of the Cornovi!”

His noise brought cries of protest from the other camps. This was when I saw a large group of warriors detach from our neighbouring camp and come over to us. Trouble, I thought, and came to my feet. Up with me came Medraut and Cai and we all turned to face them.

“We want to talk to Arthur,” their leader said.

Straight away Arthur pushed through us and stood before the warriors. “What do you want me for?”

“I’m Dair, and this is—”

“Ruis and Coll,” Arthur told them. “I know who you all are.”

Yet another came over to join the group.

A tall one and strong, very handsome. He had a head of frizzy dark blond hair. And his name was Uki Wolf-leg, as he told us he was a wolf-leg because of his long, loping walk.

But this was not all. After him came more, and then more. From the camp next to ours they came, and Arthur knew them all.

“You know all our names?” their leader seemed surprised.

Arthur said, “I know everyone’s names in this troop.”

The newcomers stopped and looked at each other. Uki Wolf-leg came forward and made Arthur a Roman salute.

He said, “We want to pledge allegiance to you, Arthur of the Silures. When the old Commander dies, we will be yours, if you are to be his heir. And no other will command us. When the time comes to form your new war-host, remember us, and call us to you, sir.”

They saluted Arthur again and bowed their heads.

And Arthur merely stood before them, quiet. Speechless, for this was the first time in his life that men had come to willingly pledge themselves to him. And all this happened even before he had taken command. It was the first time a pledging had ever happened to him at all, and he was not expecting it. So the warriors stood waiting for him to say something.

He said, “I accept your pledging. And I will remember you when the time comes.” He saluted them and bowed his head in turn. “Come and join us for a while, before the horn sounds to sleep.”

So there we were, for nearly the entire troop now came and sat by our fire, for they all wanted to be with Arthur. They came from all over the camp, deserting the old guard for the new.

We were the New Guard, and it was Arthur they all wanted to sit with and know and pledge to. It became a night of wonder, for youth after youth stepped before him and made a pledge to fight for him when the time came; they all wanted Arthur for their leader. And so it was to be, growing around me. I swelled inside with joy, and I watched my foster-brother’s face in the firelight, for he was overawed by it all, and humbled, and even afraid. To be their leader.

For Arthur, I watched him and the power inside him was mine to have, to hold the closest to my heart. For Arthur already had a reputation of being a warrior of unique powers. The legend and aura surrounding him had already begun.

11: TROUBLE on CAER CADWY

Though our commander called this great hill Cant Moel, the local people called it Caer Cadwy, after their king’s son, Cador.

And I had never been here before, and what I saw took my breath away. Though it was not as high as the great mountains of Gwynedd, the sheer size of the hill, the greatness of its heights above the flats made it so impressive it not only stood out on the surface of the land, but stood upward in a man’s mind with something that could be described as glory. Its ramparts and ditches would be impenetrable to any invading force; its height gave perfect views in every direction to the very horizon of the lands and marshes around it. Its area on the summit was so massive it could easily play host to a huge and growing war-band, such as our own.

Caer Cadwy was a good base to oversee the growing Saxon settlements that were a threat all along the southern and eastern lines. All of us believed these Saxons were in fact too close, even Aelle of the South Saxons, who commanded the Saxon Weald, too close even though he was almost on the other side of the country.

And then there was Octha, son of Hengist, the Jute from the north and always moving south with his war-bands, and many others on the march, and every one of them worth watching relentlessly. But now there were no Saxons, only Cadwy's fierce welcoming committee. All the petty kings and chieftains of every nation of the Dumnonians and the Durotriges to greet our Lord Ambrosius to their lands. We rode up through the south-west entrance of the caer, through the old gate, and on to the hilltop, bringing with us what seemed to me to be hundreds of people. The chieftains bringing out their wives and daughters, hoping maybe to marry some of them off to us unwed soldiers.

It was early afternoon, and we took over the entire summit, pitching our tents, picketing the horses and setting to work to water and feed them before ourselves. Food was brought up from the lowlands around the caer for our supper, for the great Dumnonian chieftains lavished us with their hospitality. Still in the chaos of our arrival, the Supreme Commander's tent was pitched, fires were lit, camp made in its usual order, women rushing everywhere as they ladled food into our bowls, and when all of this was done, Ambrosius called all of us young warriors into his tent to witness the Dumnonians paying homage to him, their Overlord in War.

Night came; torches lit the outside of the tent, its sides raised for air, while the people milled and laughed and even started to sing and dance to local musicians and bards. I was posted near the door, facing Ambrosius, who sat behind a small fold-down table he always liked to lug around with him on campaign. Beside him on his right, just behind him, stood Arthur, like a guard. With Medraut on his left, then Val, then the others of his handpicked favourites. Cai stood next to me. At the other end of the tent stood Gareth and Brendon.

Arthur and I stood opposite each other, eye to eye, with Ambrosius between us as the chieftains filed by him, one by one, offering him welcome and service. And like Ambrosius to be, he had the sword Arthur had won in battle unwrapped and lying on the table for all to see and be

impressed with. The chieftains came in, looked at the sword in the flickering light inside the tent, then at Arthur.

And what they saw was a true Silurian, standing stock-still and wearing his Silurian cloak, colours deep blue, bright gold and black. He held a spear, wore a shining silver headband around his head, black hair, a gold torc at his neck. His ebony eyes shone in the low light and the Dumnonians had never seen anything like him before.

After the parade of chieftains came the last man. King of the Dumnonians himself, Gerren Llyngesoc. With Gerren came his young son, Prince Cador. As the last and most important of all, Gerren was allowed to stay and sit and talk with Ambrosius. Here King Gerren pledged that he would oversee the rebuilding of Caer Cadwy. He offered all of his men as labourers, men who already had vast knowledge and experience of the hill-fort and its vast grounds. Ambrosius told Gerren that a great feasting-hall was to be built on the very ground where he had now pitched his campaign tent. Lord Gerren looked delighted with this idea.

He said, “And who is to hold this great hall, after it is built?”

Ambrosius moved in his chair and sighed. He turned his head to his right, indicating without words that it would be the Silurian standing at his back as his guard.

Gerren looked at Arthur, intense. He said, “Then it shall be done with swiftness, Commander.”

“No, no need for swiftness, we have much time before any such event takes place. More battles to fight and win before Arthur can come south. He has not yet taken my place.”

Gerren seemed embarrassed and said, “Aye, that is right.”

Behind Ambrosius’ back, Arthur pulled a face at him and I tried not to laugh. While on the other side, Medraut stood rock-still, taking everything seriously as he always did. Outside, I caught a movement. I looked; saw two young women by the tent door. They seemed excited. It was getting late, and everyone was tired, so Ambrosius rose and dismissed us guards. I stepped outside and into the fresh night air, Arthur followed me, he gave me a nudge when he noticed the women. He did not hesitate to go and introduce himself to them, all under the cloak of did they need escorting somewhere.

“We are waiting, young sir, for my brother. I am Lady Efa, Lord Gerren’s sister,” one of them answered him. “It’s been a long time since the Lords of the North deemed it suitable to visit us here in the summer country.”

“Not just to visit, my lady,” Arthur answered her, “but to reinforce your hill-fort. This land will not be neglected any longer; I swear to you, I personally give you my pledge to defend it with my life when the time comes.”

He bowed to her and the other woman with her swooned in delight. Gerren’s sister was small, slim, yet with large breasts, a fine figure. Her hair was braided long and red, framing a small and beautiful face, very similar to the other woman with her; both of them were dressed alike.

Efa then introduced the other one, the Lady Elin, her younger sister. Both of them Gerren Llyngesoc’s sisters.

Lady Efa returned Arthur’s pledge, saying, “You are more than welcome in our land, young sir. Soon, I hope, you and your escorts will come to visit my house. We live in the little village north-west; tis easy to find. We also have a villa in Lindinis, down the south road.”

“I would accept, lady, only Lord Ambrosius keeps me on a short lead,” Arthur told her.

“So it must be a clandestine meeting?” she winked at him.

“Maybe,” and Arthur looked at her deeply and she looked at him. Then with a curtsy to myself and Arthur together, the woman named Efa began pulling her sister away with her, as we headed back to our own tent.

“So you have forgotten Rhonwen already?” I said to him, as we got ready for sleep.

“That’s cruel,” he answered, lying out on his kit. He sat up again and looked at me. “I’ve got absolutely no objections to women using me for their sexual pleasures; that’s got nothing to do with forgetting Rhonwen, she must be going insane by herself.” He rolled up in his blankets and cloak and left me thinking that I wouldn’t mind being used for sexual pleasures either, if I could ever be so lucky…

The following days consisted mostly of planning for the reinforcements of the hill-fort. Ambrosius had brought with him all of his Roman-trained engineers and they spent the days planning the new constructions that would begin the following spring.

The plans they drew up were to re-build the battlements, build the feasting hall and construct a tall watchtower over the gate entrance that now stood undefended. The work was to be very extensive and massive in effort and materials. Even though the main construction would not begin till next May, we soldiers were set to work right away, clearing the site of rubbish—the place had been used like a midden-heap for decades. It was bloody hard work too, because of Cadwy's huge size and the amount of mess that had amassed over the many years of its neglect. The ditches and ramparts also had to be cleared and the post-holes were to be marked and dug for the hall's upright supports.

I was given work outside the fort on the lower ramparts and ditches, clearing for repair, while Arthur was kept inside with Medraut. The rest of our unit was spread out all over the hilltop, which made for lots of talk when we joined up again each evening. And King Gerren's inquisitive sister, Lady Efa, came up to see the work being done almost every day. The two sisters lived on an apple orchard, just outside the village at the base of the hill. Gerren himself lived further away with his wife, the Lady Enid; I heard they had a fine villa in the walled Roman town of Lindinis, four leagues from Cadwy. Other times he lived down the coast at Dunovaria, and I had no idea where that was.

So every day we worked, and one afternoon, I was outside the fort and down on the quiet south-east ditches, slaving to remove a huge pile of rubbish that had been layered there since Roman days. It was late and all my companions had already started up the track for supper. I was just about to stop work and join them, when I heard a noise behind me.

I turned to see four warriors from another unit standing at my back. All before I could even speak to them, they grabbed me between them and held back my arms. They then began pounding me so hard and fast, I was barely aware of it. I struggled, kicked, managed to pull free and land a punch at one of them in self-defence, right in his face…this only made them beat me even harder than before. I felt myself going down under their fists and feet…

When I next opened my eyes, I could see only sky above that was darkening. Slowly I became aware of pain striking through my body. I could not move. I couldn't breathe through my nose, which was clogged with blood. My lips were swollen and stinging, couldn't see out of my right

throbbing eye, my jaw hurt like nothing I had felt before, not even the worse toothache. My throat was tight and dry and I could not swallow, my left hand pounded with pain. I felt as if I had been kicked by a bucking horse in my face and chest.

After a moment of hard breathing, I tried to get up, but a pain in my side pulled me back down again. I knew now I would have to wait for rescue, and when it finally came, it was fully dark. Some older men found me and helped me back to my tent; here they lowered me onto a pallet. I only had one working eye, my left eye. I recognised gathering faces around me. In the shadows Arthur stood looking down at me, concerned yet strong.

With him was our troop doctor. I could feel the man working on my left hand, and then remembered…before going down, aye, I had managed to land a punch against one of my attackers, hard against his face. It seemed I had broken the last three fingers of my left hand. The doctor was splinting them already, and I complained about the pain he was giving me, worse than the breaks themselves. Everyone in our unit seemed to be taking a long look at me, making me feel exposed and foolish for allowing myself to get beaten so easily.

"Who did this to you, Fox?" Arthur asked me. "Did you see who it was? Can you talk, who was it?"

I answered, my throat tight and parched, "More than…one…four of them…big ones too…ugly…"

Arthur then ordered a man to go and fetch Lord Darfod. Better than any camp-doctor was Lord Darfod, as he was Greek-trained.

Arthur crouched at my side; came close to me and said, "Whisper it if it hurts too much to talk aloud. Who were they? They are going to die for this."

I managed a croaked whisper, "Don't know, didn't see, they jumped me…before…I could clearly see them, don't know…why…"

I tried to swallow.

He said, "Darfod will give you something for the pain, a drink, it will clear the pain and cure your thirst. Hold up, Fox."

The doctor started feeling and pushing on my stomach, all over my stomach and I yowled when he touched my right side. "This is a massive bruise to his side," he said to Arthur. "He makes no sign of internal injuries."

“What else?”

“Nothing broken other than these three fingers, though I suspect a few cracked ribs here, but not broken. The rest is as you see it. He should be up and moving about in two days. Two days bed rest,” the man ordered me and got up and moved out of my sight.

Arthur got up and went out with the doctor, leaving me lying with a pounding headache. But all my pain stopped when Lord Darfod came. He gave me a drink in wine, bitter, and as I lay there, the wash of the drink’s power flooded me from head to toe.

The dark inside the tent became a soft blanket, and the voices of those around me hovered in the air I breathed. The potion gave me the rest I needed. Sometime in a dream, I felt a deep sense of being watched come over me. It filled my mind, and I painfully opened my one working eye. Sunrise, and Arthur was there in front of me. He stood over me, watching me sleep. I knew just by looking at him that he had worked all night to find my attackers. He knelt to my side.

“What’s wrong?” I said, still only able to talk out of one side of my mouth.

“Nothing,” he said. “Though I didn’t find them.”

“Don’t want you to find them,” I stopped him. “…even if you did find them, I’m not going to confirm it was them to you, and you know why. So leave it be. I’m not dead. Just bruised and broken…I’ll live.”

He studied me, searching my face with the deep darkness of his eyes, and because he worked so hard, I put out my good hand and gripped his wrist. “Arthur…this is what happens to deserters…I know now that’s why they had me, so let me be seen to take what’s owed me. There are some here who would see this as fair justice for what I did to you. Don’t throw your weight around over this.”

He told me, “Aye, the talk is going through the troop that you were bashed for deserting me. I could make it all so much worse than it is now, couldn’t I? But I won’t take it any further without your permission.”

“That I won’t give. But why the look on your face?”

“I’ve just had four more pledge-makers, right outside here and you know who those four are. It’s them; I did not have to find them. They gave themselves away to me. And one of them has a swollen black eye, your

punch, right? What a fast move on their part, now they think I'm unable to touch them. How wrong they are."

I said, "What will you do?"

"I'm taking them to war and putting them in the most dangerous positions on the field. I'll make them fight for me, and they will wish they had never laid eyes on me."

He looked around, checking to see how alone we were. What he told me next chilled me to the bone. "Ambrosius, he wants me to ride out from here and hunt down a war-host of Saxons that are making trouble on the coast. There are reports of many keels coming to beach down on the south coast, bringing new Saxon invaders. But it's leagues and leagues from here, so you cannot come. You have to stay behind and mend."

"Don't leave me behind! Do you think I can lie here while you are out fighting and dying? Oh goddess, I don't want that, not that."

"Fox, you cannot even stand up, let alone ride a horse and fight; your fighting hand is broken, you bone-head. I'll be all right. I'm taking Medraut, and Cai will be there. Trust me. When I get back, I'll bring you more Saxon rings to wear. I'm not going to die."

"You have to stop talking about dying! You are killing me. Even now I'm dying. When are you leaving?"

"Tomorrow morning."

My heart thrashed and I began to sweat. My injuries began to throb, as if someone had deliberately hit me where I hurt the most. A miserable moan escaped me and a blinding pain stabbed through my chest from my right side where I had a few cracked ribs.

I cried out and Arthur stood up, said, "I'll get Darfod, he's better than the troop doctor." He put a hand on my chest. "You are in a fever. I won't be long."

He left and I did not want him to go, but I lay where I was, throbbing and breathing and sweating, filled with anger. It was that old bastard, Ambrosius, always sending Arthur out to do his dirty work for him. If I had the strength, I would have crawled out of that stinking tent and put my dagger in the old man's heart, just to hurry up his death.

For an age it seemed I lay frozen with pain and being tormented by thoughts of Arthur riding to battle and me staying helplessly behind. I felt feverish. I hated the four who had put me in this weakened state, and I saw

them in my mind's eye, riding into battle with the Silurian and wished myself with them. My spirit was dark. But I drank the potion Darfod came to give me, the same as the night before. After it all went down my gullet, Arthur came in and ordered everyone out of the tent, and he stood alone, shadowed and dark, waiting for my pain to ease.

He said to me, "One day, it won't be like this anymore. I won't have to take orders from others and you will be free. We will fight and we will die, but I want you to be free. If I could, I would open the gates and let you go free right now."

I answered, "With you, I am free." At last, I began to feel the workings of the drink on my body as I spoke, where I saw him through the light and the shadows of my half-closed eyes. "With you, nothingness and fear are gone, you free me." Saying this, I disappeared from the world…

And woke again at midday.

It was freezing cold, the weather had changed and a bitter northern wind came flapping the tent sides and I was bursting to piss, so I struggled up and out of bed, my head spinning, finding I could stand up only if I did it slowly, walk slowly without jarring movements. I pissed in the pot by the pallet, filled it up, and noticed how quiet it was. Not a sound as I shuffled to the tent door like an old man and looked outside. All the horses and warriors were gone.

Arthur had already gone. Lord Darfod had gone too, though he had left his potion with an old drab who came to dose me up at nights. And the days were terribly cold and lonely, windswept on the hilltop of Caer Cadwy. The only others with me were Lord Ambrosius himself, though he did not sleep in his campaign tent, but went down to the town of Lindinis to stay with King Gerren and his wife in their villa…all right for him.

Once the Commander had gone, there was only some old engineers left, needed to stay on at the fort for their work. The old drab soon deserted me, but Tegid our cook stayed with me. The only one I knew. I think Arthur had left him behind to make sure I was fed, otherwise I would have starved. And everything seemed cold and dank and miserable.

After a while, when I found I could walk without grinding pain, I went down to the main gate and wished the tower was finished being built so I could climb to the top and watch for sign of Arthur returning. Tegid came with me on my rounds, but he was never much of a talker. Tegid, for

all his silence was a great help and did everything I asked without complaint. He kept the fire going and fetched my food and emptied the piss-bucket, and just sat and watched me fall ever deeper into darkness, for my spirit was being eaten up each day Arthur was away, and each day I heard no news.

12: ANOTHER BATTLE WON

The troop had been away three weeks, and even though I could walk easily now, my ribs healing well, my hand was still useless.

I no longer needed the potion-drink at night, and my eye was healed, my jaw free of pain. I was at work again, as the engineer said I could do simple jobs around the camp. And it was that very morning when I heard what I thought was a distant call. I lifted my head and listened, there, again, a distant horn blow. I knew.

I dropped my hammer and ran down to the main gate, Tegid and the others with me. I heard the horn blow again and my blood ran hot, they were coming home! We all ran out onto the top ramparts and looked away into the south, where I saw the glint of spearheads and the next, the troop riding two abreast, came into view.

Their banners were flying, their spears up, sure signs of victory.

The men around me began a roaring cheer.

We could see the full troop coming in from the south and urging into a canter, making their way for the south-west gate, turning up the slope and coming at me like an irresistible force as they rode up the long winding turn of the hill. I looked for Arthur at the lead, but he was not there. Something hard kicked into my guts and my heart began to thrash. He should be riding at the head of the column, with the standard-bearer next to him. Instead, I saw only Cai and Gareth, the other captains and the entire troop charging up and through the gates, going past me one by one and I looked…no Arthur. I turned and began running after the horses. On the hilltop they milled around in a huge wheeling group. I forced my way through them, they were all laughing and crying, “Victory, victory for the Clan Bear!”

“Where’s Arthur!” I shouted over the top of them.

None of them took any notice of me, too high they were on their victory-song and the power of it still coursing through their veins. I moved

through a mass of dismounting men, searching for Cai, found him over by our tent with the rest of our unit.

He saw me, called out, “Victory! You should have been there, brother. It was the meanest, hardest, fiercest battle our Silurian ever led us into. We won! Hoi, Fox!”

“And where is he now?”

“Don’t panic.” His huge dirty hand came down on my shoulder. His eyes were wild with battle-lust and he breathed like a charging bull. He was just about to tell me more when Valarius turned me.

Filthy as Cai was himself, he said, “Don’t fret, but he is wounded. He was ordered by messenger to go directly into Lindinis and report to Ambrosius, who’s staying in King Gerren’s villa. Lord Darfod is with him now, to doctor him. The Supreme Commander said no visitors.”

I swallowed, answered, “Arthur is wounded?”

“You won’t believe this story!” Val said, laughing, walking away as they all milled around me, stinking of horse and sweat and blood. I looked at them, beginning to stoke up like a fire on their excitement.

Here I wondered how many had died, how many wounded.

There would also be a feast of a kind that night. They had brought back booty with them too, even some game, and the camp-cooks and the women from the village were coming up to help prepare the meals. Warriors were always starving, especially after a long hard battle.

I found myself being dragged into our tent. Surrounding me, they were all eager to tell their story. Down the far end of the tent stood Medraut, one of us, yet always apart. When I went to his side, welcoming him home, he gave me a half smile.

He said, “He got kicked by a horse in his thigh, only it’s not as bad as this lot will let you believe. Go and ask Cai what happened.” He laughed before saying, “You know something, Fox? Arthur is a perfect killer. I watched him. A perfect killer, just to watch him, makes my mouth water. There were many of them, over a hundred or more and Arthur would kill them all if he could.”

“That’s right,” Cai agreed. “Perfect. The Saxons from the settlements down there had come up to welcome their kinsmen to Britain, though they walked into Arthur instead. Such a shame.”

“Just tell me what happened,” I urged him.

“Later,” he answered. “I’m starving, let’s go find some supper.”

The whole mass of them turned out of the tent and went hunting for supper. I followed, gathering with them around the cooking-fires. Here, as Cai had a bowl of stew dished out to him, he told me, “Arthur lost his horse. There was a Saxon who was head and shoulders taller than all the others, even taller than me. We thought he was a giant from the mountains of their lands. He was so huge he brought a hammer down on the head of Arthur’s horse, the horse was felled and Arthur went down, then up again. I saw him rush into the mass on foot.”

Everyone stood quiet to hear him.

“The giant turned to face him, just about to land his hammer on Arthur’s head, but he jumped aside. I had to take down the giant myself. Though our archers filled him full of arrows, I sliced through his massive skull with my sword. Arthur put his blade through the giant’s neck and jumped back as the creature fell dead at our feet. By then, the massacre was over, but with the giant at our feet, we backed into a circle around him, staring, all of us in wonder and horror. He was huge I tell you, Fox! Hands that made mine look like a child’s.”

And he showed me his hands, like platters in size. “But killing their giant enraged those who were left and they charged us over the bodies of their dead. I saw one coming right for Arthur’s back, so I…so I…”

Here the story stopped; everyone looked at Cai.

“So I what?” I asked him, knowing that it was not going to be good.

“I…accidentally I tell you…trampled over him…on my horse, my horse bucked him.”

Cai turned red-faced and moved away and went to stand by himself, spooning stew into his mouth.

I followed him, stood in front of him. He gave way to my stare and finished his tale, “I saw a Saxon was going to kill him, so I forced my horse between them both, but instead, I smacked right into Arthur and, well, I killed the Saxon with my spear as he came at me; but as I did, not looking where I was going, I saw my horse had kicked Arthur down; almost broke his leg.”

“You’re a big blundering idiot, Cai, just like your horse,” I said.

“I saved his life!” he bellowed at me. “And he will tell you that too!”

“His horse’s kick took a chunk out of Arthur’s leg,” Val told, coming over and looking at me. “But Cai did save his life.”

“He did not even notice,” Cai added, hot and bothered.

“Your horse?” I said.

“No, you bone-brain! Arthur! He just got up off the ground and stood there, looking at the dead bodies around him, breathing like a panting dog. Then I noticed all this blood pooling at his feet. I don’t think he feels pain, goddess love him. The battle was over and the enemy all dead, save the few prisoners we took. I saw all this blood at his feet, so I hauled him up onto my horse, in front of me so I could hold onto him, which was a good thing, because as we were riding away, him bleeding all over me, he fell; not off the horse, you know? He did that thing he does, went into a falling-seizure and I had to both ride and control my horse and hold onto him at the same time, so I think you all should bloody-well thank me for what I did!”

I put a hand on his shoulder. “Thank you,” I said. “Thank you for saving him. You know what this means to me. Better a wound than dead.”

Cai looked at me deeply, strangely, like he regretted something.

I thanked him again and turned away back to the tent, where I gathered up my gear and went for my horse, and ignoring the Commander’s orders of no visitors, I rode down from the caer grounds, and kept on going without stop, trotting the four leagues to Lindinis, all rugged up in my winter cloak.

Once arrived, I asked my way to King Gerren’s villa. It was well after sundown by the time I got there, and I could not wait a moment longer to find him. What I found was a big comfortable house on the outskirts of the town, and roping my horse outside, I banged on the door. Only it was not a servant who opened the door.

It was the Lady Elin.

She told me, “Prince Bedwyr! Oh, you are so luck-bound today; the Commander is in his room, ill, and if he was to see you here—”

“Elin, is Arthur here? And Lord Darfod ap Luca, our druid?”

She answered me, “Lord Darfod has gone to see to your other wounded. My brother Gerren has gone to visit the town magistrate, Master Price. Lady Enid is gone too, and they will be away all night. Lord Ambrosius is in his room, ill, as is Arthur in his. He’s asleep. You can sleep by the fire tonight. I can give you some supper.”

Elin then let me into the large main room, where by the wall was a huge open fire burning hotly, scented with ferns. The hanging-lamps were low. I accepted her invitation for sleep and supper. And if Arthur was asleep too, I would not bother him for a while. I thanked her, and she gave me a mousy nod, as if she was shy of me. She went away and left me standing alone in the huge main room; here I waited for some supper. There was a small padded chair by the fire, I sat on it and the room fell quiet.

When Elin came back again, I ate the supper she brought with her, and asked, "Is he all right? Arthur, I mean. Is he badly wounded?"

"A heavy kick on his upper right thigh. Lord Darfod stitched it, the skin gouged open by a horse's hoof, I was told. It looks bad. I helped my sister nurse him." She hung her head, then looked away from me; she mumbled something like, "He is very brave…very…"

"Very what?" I asked.

Elin did not answer, though she did tell me, "My sister is with him now. She has all the warriors she wants. The best, she keeps the best for herself."

"She does?"

Elin sat closer to the fire, prodding it with a poker and trying to hide her face away, till she went on, as if duty-bound to explain her sister's behaviour. "She loves to practice the freedom of the thighs. She loves to give herself to powerful warriors; it brings her great joy and fulfilment."

"You mean she is sleeping with Arthur. That's what you are trying to say. He's pricking her and not you."

"Do not say such things! He is wounded and she took advantage of his weakness."

"But not so weak; not so weak he can't get his cock into her."

Elin glared at me daggers and knives. "You speak so rudely about your friend, you have no respect."

"He's ploughing her, and to me, that's a good sign. It means he's not so badly wounded and I don't have to fret about him."

I gave her a smile and she turned away from me again, stabbed the fire one last time and got up and left the room in a wild female fit of some kind. Alone now, I sat in my chair thinking. I slept in front of the fire. I never went back up to the hill-fort. I stayed at King Gerren's house with Lady Elin and her randy sister, Efa.

The next morning though, I finally got to see Arthur, and he looked fine to me, though his right thigh was bandaged from hip to knee, a blood-stained bandage. With Ambrosius unwell too, there was not much Arthur could do, so I made sure no one came making demands on him, especially not Efa. If I heard anything that I thought sounded like rutting, I would have dragged her off him by her hair. But that did not happen. He just lay in bed all day, sleeping, and being woken up for food and drink.

The only other person I allowed in, later in the day, was Lord Darfod, who was in with Arthur for a long time, and when he came out again, he said to me, "I think that potion of mine will lessen some of his seizures, if he has a small dose each morning, it could help him."

I agreed.

Later that evening, I went to join the other members of the household around the table for supper. Ambrosius was up, brought in to lie on a Roman couch before the fire. King Gerren and his lady-wife were still away. Arthur came limping out of his room to join us. He sat down next to me, and we watched Efa serving up another delicious meal. Over supper we discussed the last battle, and here Lord Darfod revealed something important.

"We have had some Saxon prisoners interrogated."

"And?" Arthur prompted him, eager to hear, to know it all.

"That Saxon king you killed a while ago, well, he was no Saxon, or even a mere petty king. He was the High King of Jute-land. The man you killed, Arthur, was King Goodricke of Jute-land."

Hushed silence; and Efa's eyes shone at Arthur with lust and awe.

"King Goodricke?" Arthur said. "Goodricke, he was a relation of Hengist's, his cousin."

"Aye, he was," Darfod replied and swallowed a mug of ale.

"The very reason why Hengist left Jute-land to come here to Britain in the first place. Goodricke drove him out. That man was a monster." This from Ambrosius, speaking from his place before the fire. "He was Hengist's cousin, had been a bane to our people for long and tireless years before I came to power. Their family murdered my family, and aye, Arthur, he was one of their most powerful kings. What he was doing running around like a common skirmisher for you to kill is a mystery. But he was up to something, mark my words, he was. What great fortune it was for you to

find him that day. You are Fortune's child, Arthur, you are, as God's Truth be on it."

"And now Goodricke's death," Darfod continued, "has left a huge hole in all Germani nations, they are fighting amongst themselves to fill the void right now. With him gone, it will be Aelle of the South Saxons to take power and become bretwalda."

Arthur answered, "So I must finish Aelle next. And don't forget Octha Hengist-son; he will want to ally with Aelle, so one of them has to be finished soon. Any news of the sword I won?"

Darfod explained to us all, "What we could find out, not much, only it might have come from Armorica, taken from an Armorican king in battle before Goodricke came to Britain. By taking it, Arthur, you have restored something of worth to the Armoricans. I have sent news of your actions to their kings. I also told them you killed Goodricke. Word is, no one has heard from him since the time of that particular battle. Some say the Saxons are trying to hide his death from us. Dim-witted of them, when we were the ones who killed him."

Arthur said, "That sword is mine. It was meant for me by Fate, brought into battle for me." He lowered his voice so Ambrosius, still lying in bed by the fire, could not hear. "I want it back off him."

"The Armoricans will let you keep the sword," Darfod assured him. "Especially if you carry on winning battles like you do. I even think they might come over to meet you one day. Do not think for a moment they know nothing of you. Everyone in Britain, Hibernia and Armorica knows about you, even the Dal Riada know about you. I make sure they know in my songs and poetry of your battles."

And Arthur told him, "And I bet you make me sound a thousand times better than I am. I don't like you doing this, Darfod. And stop giving me that pig-shit potion to drink every morning."

Everyone laughed and we roused the old man, who had nodded off to sleep again.

At once Arthur got up and went over to him, sat down on a chair at his side. "My lord," he said, "are you feeling better?"

"Much, my son, much. I think I should be up and ready to ride home, day after tomorrow, aye? Did you go to war? Have you done that yet?" Still the old man was confused.

“I have,” Arthur reminded him. “We won a great victory with the Dumnonians. King Gerren fought at my side. Now we have secure Dumnonian alliances. Next spring, we have to secure the North against the Picts. Ambrosius, my lord, do you understand me?”

But the old man had fallen off to sleep again.

13: AND ANOTHER

In the end it turned out to be five more days before we pulled out of Caer Cadwy. We tore down our tents and packed the horses, checked our gear, sealed alliances with the Dumnonian king, Gerren Llyngesoc, as he came to farewell us. He swore loyalty to us, swore the work on the hill-fort would continue in the coming spring, and just like it had been when we first arrived, the whole of Dumnonia seemed to have turned out to watch us leave. Overseeing it all, Arthur stayed back till last, keeping me with him.

We were the last two warriors to ride out of the south-west gate and down the hill amid the cheering crowds. Arthur had made friends too with Prince Cador, Gerren’s young son, a boy who might turn out to be a powerful warrior one day.

Arthur had also made firm friends with Lady Efa of course. She was there outside the fort, waiting for us on the road; we stopped before her. It was a cold day, overcast with high white cloud, no sun, and she stood wrapped in her woollen cloak. There were no tears for Efa, for she was not the weeping kind. She smiled at us, delighted. We were now her boys. This was what she called us.

“Come back soon, my boys,” she said as we pulled our horses to stop before her.

“Another year, my lady,” Arthur told her, leaning down and holding her hands. “Any trouble, send for me.”

“My love.”

She then looked at me with a look of concern. I wondered what was in her mind, why look at me like that? But we could not linger with her and said goodbye. We heeled our horses forward and trotted down the road that would turn us north for Aquae Sulis.

“What a woman,” Arthur said as we went. “Beautiful. I love women.”

“You sure know how to make alliances all right. You use your weapon to great effect, Wonder-boy.”

He laughed.

We were going home and we rode together, alone at the rear all that first day. And I was nervous. I had a feeling something would happened to us on the way home.

I found myself saying this to him, “I don’t think we’re going to make it home without trouble. We’re down twelve men and six horses.”

Arthur himself was riding a different horse, having lost his own on the field; his first precious warhorse downed by Saxons. His new horse was called Long-Neck and had belonged to a lost member of the troop, killed during the Battle of the Keels as it was now called.

He said, “Ambrosius gave me orders to take the cross-country way, east, then turn north and patrol through the mid-country before turning for home.”

I frowned. “Then it’s going to be a long ride home if we go up through the mid-country.”

He answered, “That’s true. And it’s possible some of them could come out and hunt for us as we go, looking for revenge, either that or they will send to their kinsmen north to cut off our road home. We killed over a hundred of them at the Keels and their new arrivals were wiped out as well, so they might try to strike our forward path. Why do you think I’ve got our strongest units riding in these positions?”

“You’re going to enjoy this, aren’t you? If they come for us.”

“If they want revenge, they will come for us. I think they might.”

So then the sun came breaking through the high icy clouds, touching the rayed suns embroidered on his headband as I looked at him. Golden suns around his head. He grinned at me, and I laughed, feeling better.

Yet being so unwell, Lord Ambrosius went straight home, escorted by his own attendants and the oldest of his warriors, he went home inland, too far west for any Saxon attack, while the rest of us, a mere hundred mounted men, turned into the east and cut across country to carry on our patrol. And with Ambrosius gone, it meant Arthur was now fully in charge of the remaining troop.

We rode for days and saw nothing, nothing in the way of enemy that is. We headed north, straight into the mid-country, and by the time we had gone so far, Arthur said we were safe now from any South Saxon attacks on

our rear. But there was still a threat. Arthur wouldn't allow us to let down our guard. Saxons were everywhere in these parts, in raiding parties.

Though what was spooking me more than anything else now was the presence of my four attackers in our unit. Arthur had transferred them to us, so he could watch their every move. The four spent all their time watching me, yet I knew they wouldn't dare ever touch me again. Still they were pleased with themselves, for Arthur had promoted them to shield-men. It was their job now to protect him in battle, two on each side of him, left and right on the battlefield, to act as shields, thus the name shield-men to us. If they got killed doing this post, so be it. It was a dangerous post. But they accepted it, because in their twisted beliefs they had hammered me blue for Arthur, to punish me for what I had done to him—my desertion.

So Arthur gave me their names, Druce ap Cynlos, the one I had broken my fingers on. Howell ap Berth, Glenn ap Gwilyn and Owain ap Mofran. They were all older than us, and mean. I had to tolerate them.

And after being out one week from Caer Cadwy, we made camp about six leagues north of Calleva Atrebatum. We stayed here to rest and graze the horses for a few days. It was our second night in camp, and so far, there had been no sign of any enemy following us.

Our scouts kept constant watch. I remained on guard. Here I found time to try and practice swinging a sword with my right hand, but it was hopeless. There was no way in the world I could wield a sword right-handed and I dropped the thing over and over again, feeling out of balance. The whole action confused my mind. I was a pure left-hander and I threw the sword down in disgust. All around me it was foggy and cold, the land hereabouts very quiet and eerie. Any moment I thought Saxons would fall on us and kill us all to a man.

Every noise I heard was a Saxon footfall. I stood alone under a tree in a small hollow, away from camp, and when I heard footsteps, I froze, saw a figure coming towards me…

It was Arthur. He came and picked up my fallen sword. Here I noticed he was wearing a new leather jacket the Lady Efa had given him as a farewell present. He said she had bartered it out of a trader who had come over from Hibernia. The jacket was embossed, with silver clasps and small metal plates riveted down either side of the breast, engraved with entwined

animals. Lined with quilted linen too, it was both beautiful and rare; everyone in the troop was envious of it. He wore it over the top of his tunic.

He came and pushed my fallen sword into my right hand and said, “When it comes to the heart of battle, you will know how to hold it, to use it. You won’t even have to think about it. Take it. It’s high ground here; we won’t be attacked here, not unless the Saxons want to struggle uphill all night long in the dark.”

I just stood staring at him, the way he could still my mind.

He urged me, “You want to play?”

His own sword came out, held out against me. I took up my sword right-handed and flung it at him, point first. He jumped aside, and in an instant, whipped my sword out of my hand and sent it flying to the ground. Quickly I bent to snatch it up, and snap! It was out of my hand again before I could even stand up. For the third time I jumped for my sword and for the third time he whipped it out of my hand, snapping it so hard and fast from my grip that it grazed the skin of my palm. I let the sword lie where it was.

He said, “There’s nothing wrong with the way you hold the sword, you’re just too slow.”

“Too slow for you!”

“Don’t drop it too far to your right; defend your body, not your hip.” He gave me time to pick the sword up again, and as I lifted it to defend my body, his own sword came up and he swung at me, stopped with his blade at my neck. I dropped my sword down and attacked his wounded right thigh, but held back from striking him. He turned and hit my right arm with his left hand, but this time I kept my sword even though he had unbalanced me. Up again, I swung back at him and managed to strike his sword back; the first time I had hit as an attack.

“You got it!” he called.

I still felt un-balanced, trying to correct my natural instinct to attack, left-leading. He stepped back so I could grip the handle. Facing each other, I attacked, but Arthur jumped to the left and hit me on my shoulder with the pommel of his sword. I winced and countered. Turning left I struck his sword as it came at me from the left. I connected again.

“Feel better now?” he laughed. “You got me!”

We could barely see each other, it was so dark, yet a spark of light from the moon fell on the gold torc at his neck and I aimed for it. This time

I did not swing too far to the right and I kept it tight and straight. I came at him point first, as if to up-cut into his throat. He dropped back and smacked into the tree beside him. I swung at him and my blade struck the tree trunk at his back but Arthur remained still. He dropped and moved forward and I heard him give a sharp cry of pain. I thought I had cut him and I jumped to his aid.

"My leg," he cried. "I hit my wound against the tree…"

"Enough of this," I said, taking his arm. "We shouldn't really do this in the dark."

"I think it's bleeding again."

"No, come on, back to camp."

We housed our swords and I helped him climb up the rise back to our camping ground. He was limping. I knew his wound was going to give us trouble. Under my breath I swore at Cai for his clumsy horse riding. Lord Darfod came running over to us, cursing us for playing swords in the dark.

He cracked me over my head and said, "You know he is wounded, idiot!" And he went off again to brew up his magic potion.

When he came back again, he said it was almost the last drops to be had and he made Arthur drink it whether he wanted it or not. Then he made us all settle down to sleep. Strangely I slept well all night, and woke to voices at dawn. Arthur and I had slept close together under a tree and when I opened my eyes, I saw him with his breeches down around his ankles and a man crouched between his open and naked thighs. Arthur was moaning.

The man was Darfod; he ordered, "I just want to look at it, see how it is progressing. Arthur!"

"All right, all right…"

I got up and went to piss in a clump of grass.

It was another foggy morning.

As I happily watched the steam rising from my long morning stream, I listened to the argument behind me.

"This wound does not look good," Darfod snarled. "It is not healing as it should."

"Kiss it better then."

"Be quiet, you foolish Silurian! I do not like this. We are going straight home today. Ambrosius gave me the power to override you if things do not go to my liking, and this is not to my liking. You might be troop-

captain, but you are not the Supreme Commander yet. Now get up off the ground and tell the men we are pulling out for home. No battles! This could make you very sick, Arthur, if you do not do as I say."

When I turned around and looked at Arthur now, there was a look of scowling misery on his face, but his wound was raw. Darfod put a clean square of linen over the stitches, wrapped it in the old bandages before getting up and going off into the troop and yelling at them, telling them we were going straight home as soon as breakfast was done and we could pack up and move on.

"He's right, you know," I said to Arthur. "Let's go home; get your wound drained and properly cleaned."

"I don't want to die," he sighed. He laid on the ground, back against the tree, hair in his eyes and said, "I don't want to die."

Cai then came running over, all bothered and concerned; he looked at Arthur. "Are you dying? This is my fault! If you die, I will commit suicide."

And he pulled Arthur to his feet, helped him get dressed and escorted him to breakfast. After this we rode for home, and as we were east of the main British roads, we carried on our course till we found the gap west. But instead of the gap west, we found a long open plain on high ground, and far ahead of us east and slightly north, we spied a large band of Saxons marching right fast in our direction.

To our west was a forest, while ahead was open land and Saxons, wild and fierce. They had seen us, and even from the distance between us, we could hear their battle roars. Arthur halted the ride and we pulled in tight together. He looked at the Saxons a moment as he rode up and down our lines.

He said, "Looks like they have done us a favour by taking to open ground. That's better than a rear attack. Don't have to watch our backs any more, right?"

He rode up and down again.

Our entire troop waited on him, shifting on horseback, restless. Do we retreat west or advance to meet them?

Darfod protested, "We go. We go now."

Still Arthur rode up and down our lines.

All the warriors were looking at him. Waiting. In the distance the Saxons were still advancing, battle-chanting, their voices echoing deep and

powerful across the space between us. They were still far enough away for us to sit and wait.

As Arthur rode up and down, he called to the men, “Retreat back closer to the trees!”

We turned our horses’ heads and rode fast, back towards the trees, and as we went, we heard the Saxons roaring at our backs. They thought we were running away; it happened every time, and thinking we were fleeing, they broke their band and came scattering after us at a fast run.

Just before the trees, Arthur ordered us to stop and turn back to face them. Still they ran at us, having committed themselves to battle. Naturally we formed into our units and Arthur continued riding up and down our lines. He called, “First two units take the initial charge! Me and Medraut. Uki and Val, take their right and left flanks! Cai, take their rear! Bedwyr!”

I turned to face him.

“Move into Uki’s unit,” he said, riding up before me. “Do not get into hand to hand fighting. All of you! We’re going to cut down their outer flanks, surround, charge in, kill and retreat out of their range. Do not get into any fixed battles one on one, just keep moving in to kill on their flanks and then out to regroup. Uki, I want you to reinforce Cai when he takes their rear, keep the Saxon rear from escaping.”

As I joined with Uki Wolf-leg, I rode by Lord Darfod and saw the look on his face; he looked like a pitched cat. Going into battle was not to his liking, but there was no stopping Arthur now. Already he was riding back to his own unit and bringing Medraut in beside him, then Druce, Howell, Owain and Glenn, his shield-men. Dafin and Iran, the twins, shield-men to Medraut.

So we waited.

I sat, forcing my fingers to hold my shield left-handed. Took up my spear in my right, gripping tight, my heart pounding. Still we waited, watching, laughing, as the Saxons ran themselves spent to reach us, and when Arthur thought they had come close enough, he charged with Medraut beside him, slicing down their left and right flanks. Wedge formation, forty thundering horses that split into two, twenty riders each unit, all bellowing our own battle cries.

I sat controlling my horse with my legs, heart pounding even harder, my throat drying so I could barely swallow. Watched as our units sliced

down the Saxon outer flanks before wheeling behind them, surrounding their band, close enough to count fifty enemy, a raiding party for sure.

At once the Saxons scattered wildly as our horses surrounded them. Val and Uki, taking me with him, charged inward against them, attacking and killing. Terrible screaming filled the air as Cai's men chopped down the enemy from their rear.

We knew we could not get in too close or else the Saxons would hack at our legs, the most vulnerable part of any mounted warrior. Arthur and Medraut, their shield-men, fighting side by side, fast, hard, fierce, fearless before me. Here I saw them kill and retreat before turning to run down fleeing men. And when the enemy realised they were being chopped from every direction, their leaders began screaming to clump together in tight formations.

As they did, Arthur retreated back to us.

"Three horses down and their riders," he said, breathless, with a spray of blood across his chest and neck, not his own it seemed. "Thirty of them left. Ride in and finish it before they form a shield-wall. Uki, follow Cai!"

Then we went into a tight ring, surrounding the clumping enemy. In relays we rode into them, killing, before moving out again. We fired arrows into them, cleaved them as they fell pierced through their necks, shoulders and chests.

Myself, Uki and Cai speared them as they broke their ranks.

Right-handed, I speared a Saxon under his arm as he lifted his shield to try and ward off my attack. My spear lodged in his chest; I pulled it out hard and advanced. In too close for a moment, I had to drop my spear and use my sword against necks, shoulders, and heads, pulling out again before the enemy could gather their numbers; better to scatter them as they were easier then to run down and pick off one by one. And I was surviving. I lost awareness that I was using my right hand, I lost fear. Men fell all around me. All over the field they were hemmed in by our ring of horses. Still their numbers fell, and we kept to our ring that charged constantly in and out. As I came in, another horse would take my place after my retreat.

Cai then going insane with battle-lust. Right in front of me, he leapt off his horse and threw his fist square in a Saxon's face and grounded him, chopped him. Here I tried to grab Cai's horse as it ran by me, but missed, so I turned and flung my sword across a man's face, cracking his nose and he

screamed, staggered back with blood running down his chin. I turned my horse, kicked into his rear right leg and he bucked. If lucky, the kick would connect with an enemy chest.

It did! The Saxon went under my horse's legs and I heeled out of the fray, regrouped with Uki.

Around in circles we rode. Their numbers were dropping, dropping, four more of us went down, but two riders were up and fighting on foot, one was Alun of the game-board. I charged to his aid, the enemy failed to see me coming at his back, he was breaking Alun's chest open with his spear. I galloped, reared and chopped into the Saxon's neck, blood sprayed and the man went down and so did Alun, speared to death.

I looked up. Arthur was there, watching me.

He pulled in beside me, fierce, hot. "We're done," he said. "No more!" He turned to gallop around our circle. "No more!"

In the centre of our ring stood six lone Saxons standing back-to-back, terrified and defiant.

"No!" Arthur called. "Do not kill them! Stop your attack!"

As always happens at the end of a battle, the sudden silence roared in my head. Sometimes, I just could not stop fighting. We continued to gallop around and around, slowly gathering together to realise it was over. We pulled the horses into a cante and stopped, men breathing hard, breathing in the smell of horse-sweat and blood.

I joined with Arthur. We rode in close around the lone survivors, two older men and four youths no older than ourselves. There was a look of pain on Arthur's face when I turned to him. I looked back at the Saxons, saw hate and sorrow all over them. We had wiped out their entire war-host. They hated us with passions so violent they would tear out our hearts with their bare hands if they could.

Arthur called for Valarius, who could speak Saxon. Val pulled in at his side, wounded, but holding himself straight, a true prefect. "Tell them who I am," Arthur ordered him. "Make the point that my warriors and I are the same who destroyed them on the south coast."

Val spoke, and the Saxons moved closer together, they snarled at us in reply.

"Now tell them I will destroy them wherever they come to face me." And Arthur pulled his helmet off to show them his face.

The Saxons stared at him. The older ones spat at our feet. The younger men stared at us without turning away. They stared at Arthur the most, maybe seeing something in him they could not name; eighteen, nineteen year-olds like us, they saw themselves in us, only on the opposite side, on the side of Britain. These Saxon youths thought they could take our land from us, but they could not have it while this dark-eyed Silurian stood in their way.

They knew it only now.

Arthur looked back at the Saxons, then said to Val, "Tell them I'm the one who killed their red-beard high king, Goodricke."

When this fact was revealed to them, their entire stance dropped from defiance to wonder, one even stepped forward to take a closer look at him.

The Saxon spoke to Arthur directly.

Val interpreted, "He said…he said thank you! Said the red-beard was a tyrant and murderer, even of his own people. Seems you did them a favour and now they are seeking for a new and better overlord."

"Tell them they can have me if they want," Arthur said. But the Saxon response to this was without humour and cold. "All right, Val, tell them they are free to go home now."

Val again spoke their language and one Saxon spoke back. "They want to say goodbye to their dead brothers," Val told us.

"Aye, they must," Arthur answered. "And tell them they fought bravely."

Again the Saxons studied him, and with pale and desperate faces they moved away, looking for their dead kinsmen as we turned to look for ours. So began the long sorrow, searching for our own dead. We found them, and would take them home with us.

So we stripped the dead horses of their trappings and saddles, took war-booty. The six Saxons crouched over bodies in the distance, we watched them. They stood up and looked back at us, turning then to run off the way they had first come. I moved away and saw Arthur sitting on his horse, his head down.

Still on horseback myself, I trotted over to join him, saw he was looking down at a body on the ground at his feet. Alun, the spear still sticking out of his split chest, the Saxon I had killed lying face-down next to him. Arthur jumped off his horse and pulled the spear out of Alun's chest

and threw it aside. He looked pale, looked as if he was going to spew, he turned and spat on the ground. He felt sick. He walked away, and I could tell by the way he walked that he was fighting with himself, for he was the one who had led our men into this battle. Here to die. It made him sick. I brought his horse over to him, but he just kept walking away. I followed him, allowed him time to think and grieve. He stopped and waited for me, and when I caught him up again, he walked at my side. I saw the paleness of his face.

We made a full search of the field and the day fell late, sky dimming, growing cold and fresh, and we could not stay here any longer. At last Arthur stopped walking and turned and looked up at me, there were streaks through the dirt on his face. He had been crying; but then he leapt up onto his horse and we joined the rest of the troop and turned into the west.

14: THE FOX in TROUBLE, AGAIN

Three more days and we were home.

And I swear nothing feels as good as riding home a hero.

They were calling us ‘Arthur’s Heroes’. Even as a youth, Arthur was a killer of Germani kings and he was making history, making history of our battles. And we brought home the rewards of yet another victory with us, consolidated victory over the Keels. So monumental a victory all of Britain already knew about it and the Dumnonians gave formal alliances to Ambrosius and to Arthur as his heir apparent. Who else would they have?

Crowds welcomed us, but during our return, Arthur’s wound had turned bad. We had to take him down off his horse and hold him up, but he still managed to smile when Rhonwen threw herself into his arms and nearly knocked him flat.

To me, she looked insane with joy to have him back again, or else she was just a madwoman and nothing more. Fortunately Ambrosius had managed to stay alert enough to remember his son-in-law’s wounded thigh and had prepared a range of high-class troop doctors to take care of him. Medraut and I, with Arthur’s arms around our shoulders for support, led him back to his rooms. I was pleased to find the place prepared for someone wounded. The bed he shared with Rhonwen was made soft and warm, a fire burned in its place.

Standing in the centre of the room was a strange woman that Ambrosius had found and brought to us. A woman healer. Standing over six-feet in height, taller than me as I was still growing, she was built strong and firm, young and very handsome. And she had very strange coloured hair, long white-grey hair in a braid down her back. She called herself Arial, told us she came from Armorica. She commanded everyone around her. The room was crowded.

There was Rhonwen and three maids who were her friends, a group of doctors, Lord Darfod, myself, Cai and Medraut, and Arthur of course, who we dumped on the bed. We then turned to go and get washed up, but as we went, Arthur grabbed my wrist and shook his head, no.

"Don't leave me alone with this mad crowd. I'm scared…"

I laughed and sat down on a stool by his bed, saying, "I'll protect you, especially from that Arial woman, bloody hell-fire, she's big!"

He nodded and turned to the crowd, and cried at them, "Give me some food! Can't you see I'm starving? Feed me, you bastards!"

"Do as he says!" Arial roared at Rhonwen. "He needs food if he is to survive this healing I am going to give him."

She spoke with an Armorican accent, and Rhonwen died of shock at the woman's insolence. For Rhonwen was not one for ordering, she was the wife of the heir apparent and a lady! She snorted at Arial and went off to spoon a large bowl of hot mochyn broth for myself and Arthur from the pot over the fire. As always we ate like starved dogs. I think we had three huge bowls each. And when we were done, Arial cleared the room, pushing people out the door like a sergeant-at-arms.

Cai, who did not want to go and was the only one taller than her, he got shoved out. Medraut; he gave Arial a dark look. Even Lord Darfod and the doctors got shoved out, leaving only me, Rhonwen and her friends. What happened next left me holding my breath.

First the girls came over and helped strip Arthur of his clothes; off with the armour, the mail-jacket, the lamella riding breeches and boots and right down to his bare skin, and he just lay there, looking at them with his dark eyes burning. The three girls looked at him naked, looking and giggling at his manhood that he made no attempt to hide, but made it worse by opening his legs even wider and grinning at them, as if to say, take a better look, girls…

But his grin soon dropped when Arial, the terrifying female giant, came and sat at his side; he looked at her with a kind of child-like wonder, no cocky grin now. With tender and gentle movements, she un-wrapped the deeply stained bandage from around his thigh, and not once did he take his eyes off her face. I sat and watched, amazed by her skill and gentleness. I was sure she would be rough and crude in her nursing, but no, she had the touch of a delicate lover. With the wound exposed, the girls gasped, and Arial looked at it.

I looked, Arthur looked; he gripped my hand and I gripped back, saw his lean muscles tensing.

Arial made no comment; she turned aside, and came back with a tiny obsidian lance in her hand. Arthur gripped my wrist even harder, the strength of him breaking my bones as Arial quickly slashed open the stitches, fast and sure, and all the poison in the wound instantly drained out, and Arthur fell back on the bed and held his breath; he did not cry out. He made no sound. He just turned pale as a corpse.

I looked at him…sweat on his brow…he was squirming with pain, but still he made no sound. He seemed to control pain deep inside himself somewhere.

Only in the way he breathed did I know how much it hurt. Rhonwen moaned about it. Arial's powerful fingers drained the wound with massages and squeezing before she began cleaning it, washing it with some special liquid, binding it with strips of bandage smeared with salve mixed with honey.

She told him, "No movements, no cocking with women. Just sleep and food, but you will not get away with misbehaving. I will be here all the time, young sir, all the time to watch you."

"I want Bedwyr with me too if you are all going to stay and watch me suffer." His grip on my wrist lessened and his voice was low and dry. "Can I have something to drink, please Arial?"

She answered, "You can have anything from me if you are so polite. What a polite young man you are."

She turned aside and went to the fireplace, where the pot hung over the fire; she spooned only broth, gave it to him with a smile. He drank it with a shaking hand, and I thought, brilliant, I don't have to go back to the cell and share with Medraut. Rhonwen's friends went home, delighted to

have seen her young husband's naked cock, giving them something to giggle about.

That evening a camp-bed was brought in for me, and I slept by the fireside; I was in heaven, despite the fact I slept badly all night. Arial slept under the far window and got up every watch to check his wound. All through the night she worked, draining where the poison gathered, dabbing and cleaning and soothing him, as she had to wake him. Sometimes he slept right on through it all, though I always woke, watching her in the shadows from the low firelight, hearing her deep whispering voice, her attention to her work, her selflessness, her dedication, but above all, her gentleness.

All night long she nursed him and I thanked Ambrosius for finally doing something caring for Arthur. And it must have driven Rhonwen mad not to have him all to herself. And just when I thought it was all over for the night, I felt someone touching my left hand. Arial had of course noticed my splintered fingers, and I woke to the feel of her taking off the broken splints and testing the movement of my hand.

Working silently, she gently bent each finger.

She said, "You must try to use them now; leave them un-splintered. They have been on too long, and your fingers will set rigid. Use them, though keep a watch for sudden jarring movements, everything must be slow and careful."

I nodded, and finally went to sleep…

Two more nights her nursing went on, and each time Arial woke him, Arthur looked at her with silent admiration. He loved women like bees love honey, for it was not just nourishment they gave him, but he gave them a kind of worship and respect that was true and solid and real. When Arial deemed his wound safe, she allowed him to sleep without having to wake him to have the thing drained. So she moved out on the fourth morning, kissing him and me farewell, saying to come and see her any time for anything, not just for healing.

Arthur was in love with her by the time she left. His wound was no longer weeping, no longer poisonous, though it was still red and puffy, sore as hell-fire, but safe. He was not going to die after all. With Arial gone, I supposed I had to move out as well—but it was so comfortable and warm in Arthur's room, even with Rhonwen there. Her eagerness for him seemed

uncontrolled and I thought one of these days she was going to smoother him alive, mad bitch.

So I went, and Arthur limped with me back to the cold and lifeless cell where I had to share with the Snake. I hated it even before we got there. It was a cold day; October was on us and winter looming. I hated winter. Not just for the cold, but it was the darkness that bothered me so deeply, for there were days of winter when I thought the sun would never come back and the world would end. I walked into the cell, threw my gear on my pallet and looked surprised when I found the brazier already alight and burning to warm the room.

"Thanks for that," I said to Arthur. "It's freezing in here."

"Wish you had a better place to live than this. I know you don't like it with Medraut."

I dropped onto my pallet and put out my hands to the fire. Arthur sat down next to me and we both tried to warm ourselves. A bucket of coal stood at the foot of my pallet.

He said, "You are in charge of the fire, don't let Val take over. He will burn the lot in one night, he likes it red-hot."

Everything he said sounded down, his voice low. I knew there was something bothering him; he had been like this ever since our last battle. I laid down, put my feet up. It was intensely quiet around the barracks, the quiet time of year, where all things seemed to slow down and even halt. Many men had gone home to their families for the autumn and winter seasons. The place was near deserted. A frosted light came in through the window, a cold light. Arthur sat looking into the tiny flames of the coal-burning brazier. I watched his face; he was still pale in colour, as if ailing for something deep.

I said, "Come on, tell me, what is it? You have been hurting in your heart since our last battle. Do you think you were too cruel to wipe those Saxons out like that?"

He looked at me hot and sharp.

"I'm not the only one who kills. But, where I go men follow and they die. I lead men to their deaths. Alun. It's Alun."

"I saw you looking at his body. What about him?"

"He used to come and talk to me when no one else was about. He would come and tell me things. He wanted me to get him out of the army,

said he wanted to go and learn to be a healer, not a fighter. I said I would get him out as soon as we got home…but he never got home."

"No. No, he didn't. That's bad, but you cannot blame yourself. You are a leader. It's only going to get worse, you know."

"Thanks for your hopefulness."

He stood up and went and looked out of the window.

Cold by the window, he was not even wearing a jacket, but was bare-armed. He looked outside for a long time, silent, then turned to me, came and sat back down. I nudged him with my foot. He looked at me straight.

So I told him what I wanted from him.

"I want to go home," I said.

He looked strained and I said, sitting up, "No, not like that. I don't mean leave the army. I mean I want to go home for the winter season; most of the others have gone home. I want to go too. I cannot stay here in this barren place all winter. Sign me out so I can go home, and come with me. Come home with me and we can talk, I mean really talk. It's much warmer at home. We can hunt, talk at night—"

"How can I? How can I leave Rhonwen? You forget she's pregnant. But I would like to. I would really love to go back to the mountains, but it is not possible."

I said, "At home, we can sort out all our problems close and real. And if you come, come…" I stopped.

Arthur stayed silent. I made another attempt. "If you come home, my father will give us space, I know him. He would go and stay with my uncle and his wife and we can have the house to ourselves."

"You can go home," he agreed. "I think it's right for you not to stay here all winter. I'll sign you out. But I cannot go with you. How can I leave her?"

There was no way in the world I would say bring her too, no way in the world. And he wouldn't bring her, not pregnant and out on those high roads in winter. My heart was breaking; go away all winter and leave him behind?

No, I could not bear it.

"Then I'll stay. I'm not leaving you."

"I'll find a way," he offered. "I don't know how, but I'll find a way for us to go together, even if it's only for a while." He got up. "I have to go

now. We cannot do anything till after Ambrosius has given us another bloody victory-feast. I'm going to see Arial now. My wound is hurting. See you later, right?"

I nodded and he went out into the cold without a jacket. I watched him go, and decided to stay where I was…in the warm.

But when night came, we were all summoned to attend Lord Ambrosius' promised bloody victory-feast. And after hours of feasting we spilled out into the square outside the Commander's villa, carousing, drinking, singing, making praise-poetry and flirting with the maids, here to serve us more and more ale and wine. The old man really knew how to reward his chosen warriors with his fine feasts.

And women were everywhere; of course, they all wanted to take a closer look at the top-dog, and Rhonwen did not seem to see she had no need to hang onto Arthur's arm all night long. I had no idea where he found the patience to tolerate her, but for me, she was causing me trouble. She just would not leave him alone and she glared at any other woman who even came near enough to serve him; or even worse, daring to smile at him.

But Arthur tolerated Rhonwen's obsessive clinging to him in a way I never could, if it was me. Now we filled the square, all out in the fresh air, laughing, singing, and drinking. And as I always did, I drank as much as I could swallow in the time allowed, and drinking so much, I just could not shake the flaming anger I felt about Rhonwen, as she was annoying me so deeply it was like a spike in my side. And to make it worse, there were my four attackers from Cadwy, those four who had pummelled me black and blue and broke my hand and my ribs; Druce, Howell, Glenn and Owain. They all stood watching me, and I watched them back. Everything inside me began to burn in a rage of swirling anger. I felt trapped, cornered, bullied too far to stand it anymore. None of them respected me as a Gododdin prince.

None of them respected my rank in this army.

In the square the music was not so loud and I wanted to join with Arthur and talk, but when I came close, I heard Rhonwen say to him, again pulling on his arm, "Let's go home now. I want to go home with you."

He shook his head at her; said, "I cannot go home now. This is official, this feast, I cannot just walk out. It would insult your father. Be

quiet and enjoy yourself. Go and find your maids if you need female company."

Still she wouldn't do as he told her.

So I stepped forward and grabbed her wrist and pulled her back, away from him. "Do as your husband tells you," I warned her. Her hand was off his arm at last, and Arthur took the chance and walked away, free to go and join our group. I stood staring at Rhonwen.

"You need to learn some manners and respect, girl," I told her. "You might be the Supreme Commander's daughter, but you are not important here tonight. Keep your hands to yourself."

She bit back at me, "You are not married to him; I am. I will touch him as I please."

"Not with me around you won't. I'll snap you like a twig if you don't start showing respect."

And just as I said this, I felt someone tap me on the shoulder.

I turned; saw one of my attackers standing behind me. Glenn ap Gwilyn; he never got a chance to speak to me, as I smashed my mug of ale across his head, then hammered him in the face right-handed. Anger erupted. I was blind with it, vicious. I kept on hammering him till I felt blood spray into my face.

Nothing mattered to me anymore, all I wanted to do was beat the bastard senseless for revenge and still carry on for more. Glenn fought back and we crashed through the crowd. I felt nothing. Felt only mindless rage; was conscious of nothing other than the need to kick his head to a bleeding pulp.

Shouting, I heard shouting, and I kept on going at him, even as I heard a voice cry, "Stop!"

But I could not stop. Everything moved in a blur and I tasted blood in my mouth. I head-butted Glenn's nose, and he went down as lights flashed before my eyes.

Someone struggled with me, saying, "Fox! It's over, over! Hold back, you are done. Stop!"

Still I went on, and Arthur threw his fist in my face and I went down like a stone and rolled on the ground, spitting blood. Everything blacked in my head and I could hardly breathe for the pain. My head spun as he picked me up and led me through the crowd; here he dropped me onto a bench

outside the villa doors. I sat still, sick, blinking through the blood in my eyes.

He lowered close to my ear and said, “You mad bastard, all you ever do is cause me trouble! When will you ever stop? You will pay for this, and I don’t know now if I can even be bothered to defend you this time.”

I swallowed blood and looked at him, breathing so hard I could hear my own breath rasping in my throat. But even as Arthur said these words, he had his hand on my neck, stroking me with his thumb.

He said, “Stay still, don’t go mad on me, Fox, don’t go mad.”

Then he went ordering some warriors to pick me up and take me away to get cleaned up. They took me to the baths, dunked me under the water before leading me back to my cell. Medraut and Llwch. Medraut thought it was a huge jest, as he would. He threw me on my pallet and stripped off my gear and said to my face, all fired up, “I love it when you do things like this, more of it, more…”

Then he left me lying in my own mess. They walked away, both of them howling with laughter.

When I finally woke the next morning, it was not morning at all but the afternoon. Arthur and Medraut were sitting at my bedside, talking. Arthur saw me awake, me looking at him through yet another swollen and blackened eye.

He said to me, “You put Glenn in the infirmary. Arial is looking after him. He will live. That means you only have three more to go.”

He and Medraut laughed.

Arthur added, “I’m not going to apologise for breaking your head last night. Rhonwen did naught but moan about you all night long. You offended her and I had to listen to her whining about it for hours, thanks to you. So I might send you home anyway, just to keep you out of trouble.”

All the time I could see Medraut smirking and laughing at me. I was getting ready to hammer him as well, but I could not move.

He said to me, “They are going to give you a leathering; they will strip the skin off your back. You are a beautiful cock, Prince Bedwyr, but mad.” He laughed.

And I mumbled, “I know…something went black inside my head and all I wanted to do was take revenge; kick the living-lights out of those who do it to me. Is that so bad?”

“Fox, listen to me,” Arthur said. “The old guard want Ambrosius to punish you for hammering Glenn like that; they saw it as an unprovoked attack, and shameful of you. A victory-feast is no place to carry out personal vendettas, and now you are in danger of starting up a blood-feud. Ambrosius wants punishment now and I cannot keep on shielding you. You have gone a step too far now with him.”

I felt sick again, and I knew Arthur was right. He took so much weight to protect me and all I did was let myself get out of control.

I said, “I’m sorry, I’m truly sorry.”

“I know,” he said. “You hammered him good; he deserved what he got, and I let you go on as long as I could before stepping in.”

“Hell-fire, did you have to punch me like you did? I’ve never felt anything like it before.”

“It’s a secret punch, but I’m not going to teach it to you; you are too bloody dangerous.”

We were friends again. He understood why I went mad, and I understood why he had to lay me out on my back.

Now he turned serious again; he said, “Ambrosius is going to discipline you. When it happens, you have to take it.”

I swallowed, “I know. I’ll take it. I’ll take it.” Goddess help me, the way he looked at me, I knew he would save me if he could. Arthur would risk his own life for mine, I knew it in every thread of my being.

“It won’t always be like this,” he said, both to Medraut and me. “Soon things will change. And it’s the three of us who will make those changes. Hold up, Fox, the uprising is almost here.” He laughed again, and he and Medraut got up and left me to sleep…

I woke again in the early evening. Arthur was at my side again, and instantly I saw by the look on his face that things were not good. He said, “We’re going over to the hall for the best meal you can eat.”

Hearing this, I died; the best meal. The last meal was it?

“Why?” I said, afraid. “The old man’s not going to execute me, is he? Is he? He cannot do that, I’m a prince of Gwynedd, the son of his ally!”

“No, not that. Ambrosius wouldn’t dare try that, not with me around. He said he would have only army law in his camp, so it’s fifty lashes tomorrow at noon. I said you had a right to take revenge for what Glenn did to you, but he wouldn’t suffer a word I said. Fifty lashes.”

“Fifty?”

He nodded, serious. “I cut it down from a hundred.”

I said, “What about Glenn? Is that bastard going to get off without the same?”

“He didn’t do anything.”

“What are you saying?”

“He was going to offer you the hand of friendship when you smashed your mug across his head.”

“Oh, hell-fire and buggery, what have I done now?”

“I didn’t want to tell you before. You have to take this, Fox, once it’s over, it will be over. This isn’t just punishment for attacking Glenn, but for your desertion. That’s still a sore point with a lot of men. You have to take it. It will put you right in their eyes.”

Of course he was right again. If I ran, it would be the end of me for all time. I would never be able to show my face anywhere in Britain again.

I said, “I will take it.”

15: BEDWYR TAKES WHAT’S COMING to HIM

I had never felt so cold before in my life, and my dislike of the army grew now to a black hatred. I wouldn’t bend to the will of the army and they would punish me for it. As they marched me out into the barrack square the next afternoon to take what was coming to me, I thought of the days of my childhood, when my father first brought into our house a compelling, black-haired child.

I had grown up watching the bullying and injustice Arthur had experienced amongst us. He was a southern foreigner, as Ambrosius once called him; he had been rejected by his father, and kicked out of the heart of his own people for being different. The boys of our village hounded him; attacked him in the street. Nothing but bullying. All of these thoughts flashed fast through my head as the guards strapped my wrists to the flogging pole. I was shirtless to take the whip.

And cruel, so cruel—for the Supreme Commander made Arthur watch what they did to me. That was the moment when I believed he split from Ambrosius forever. I think he even split then from Rhonwen too, for she was there to witness my humiliation. She gave me a smug smile as I passed her to go to my punishment.

Arthur saw her smugness and…and what?

I took the first twenty lashes with as much strength as I could gather. But after this the pain went into realms of the unexplainable. I slumped in the restraints and tasted salt tears in my mouth. Deep, racking pain. They intended to break me. My back was afire, searing my flesh from my bones. They kept on and on, and I felt myself passing out…and yet, when I thought I was dying in the heat and the flames, everything suddenly stopped.

I heard myself moaning, and over it, Arthur's voice coming from somewhere behind me, "If you strike him one more time, I will kill you."

"The Commander said fifty," the man with the whip replied.

"I said stop. No more."

It stopped.

I was taken down from the pole, laid face down on a stretcher and taken not to the infirmary, but to Arial's house in the main street, and everything that was done was illegal. For I should have taken fifty lashes, not forty. I should have gone to the barrack infirmary, not to a private healer. And some of the lashes were so deep Arial had to stitch them; men had died from such whippings. I was dying. I did not know if men could die of pain. I was sick in a bowl she put on the floor beside my bed. She cleaned me of my blood, gently, but I screamed and cried and had no mind beyond my own body, a body I could have disowned and thrown away to rid myself of the pain.

I moaned for hours in pain, feeling Arial trying to soothe the immense heat of the wounds with her salves and dressings. She forced potions into me, for hours and for days, a never-ending battle over my body. Never had I experienced pain like it before. I was eighteen years old, and I was feeling pain beyond anything I could have even spoken about before. And without Arial here to help me, I would have surely died. And through it all, I knew somewhere in my suffering that Arthur had gone into battle again for me.

I lay face down on Arial's bed and thought I was dying.

For days my pain went on and there was nothing in what I felt but agony, as if I was being slashed by knives across my back. Over the days I fell into a black hole of sorrow and pain, stayed there without light, unable to speak, and I barely ate. Arial was forced to spoon-feed me. Arthur did not come to see me. But when he did finally come, he was changed; he was both triumphant and in a controlled rage. He rarely lost his temper, for he

was always slow to anger. He had perfect control. Yet when he came into Arial's room over a fortnight later, she got up and curtsied to him. He filled the room with his presence.

And he was fully battled-dressed and I did not know why.

He said to me as I lay on my stomach, "It's almost here."

"What is?"

"The day I take the Supreme Command. It's coming soon. And if you are not dying now, you are coming with me."

He was flaming hot, burning like a fire.

I stared at him. "Are we going to war?"

He answered, standing over me, "What they did to you sealed it with me. I'm not taking orders from anyone any longer. Not Ambrosius, not anyone. And Ambrosius knows it. I stopped your flogging at forty, more than I could bear. If he dares make trouble with me over this, I'm going to overthrow him by force. I've warned him that if I thought it, if I dared think it, I will take him down by force and have what I want here and now. If I raise my warriors against him, there's nothing he can do to stop me. But I don't want to do it this way. Still, we're going home. Come on, Fox, get up. We're going home before the real cold sets in."

The way he moved, he had changed. I knew my flogging had been the means that had moved him into being who he really was, the person he had long held in check. The real Arthur was now standing before me, and I was speechless. He said as I continued to lay where I was and not move, "Ambrosius takes orders from me now. Though I have agreed to save face for him by having it ostensibly known he's still in charge." He laughed. "I told him I'm taking you home. He didn't argue with me like he would have done before."

"But…but what about Rhonwen?" Still I did not move, the lash-wounds on my back still needed healing. I was still in pain.

Though when I mentioned Rhonwen, Arthur turned to Arial and began taking off his battle-jacket and shirt. He sat down on one of the little stools by the fireside. Under the jacket he was hiding something raw. Arial groaned as she took hold of his bare left arm. Down from his shoulder to his elbow were long raking scratches, very deep, not the usual marks made by women with their nails during love-making. I stared at them, horrified.

At once Arial turned to her work, saying as she took up her salve to clean and soothe his wounds, “These are not the marks of love. Not made by a woman in love; these are the marks of possession and jealousy.” She dabbed at them with a clean cloth, smeared with one of her healing ointments.

Arthur winced and said, “What’s wrong with her, Arial? She did it last night when I told her I was taking Bedwyr home, and staying away for a while. She cries a lot too, not sorrowful, but like a madness. Sometimes she even rakes at her own face, especially if I don’t give her what she wants. She wants me sexually all the time, and at night she clings to me so tight I cannot breathe; what can I do?”

Arial looked at him with sorrow; she said, “I do not think you can do anything to help her, it might be her pregnancy affecting her mind. Or it might be her, herself. She has been given all she wants without responsibility for what she has, then ridiculed for her ugly face. This is why she rakes at it. I do not think she loves you in a healthy way, though she might learn this one day.”

I listened and watched with a growing dread in my guts. I had never liked Rhonwen from the beginning. So was she going to kill him with her furious love? And Arthur only seventeen, how could he possibly know how to deal with a woman like her? If Rhonwen was going to go so far as to harm him like this, I swore I would kill her myself. But Arthur made no comment about Arial’s words; what could he say?

He only said, “Will you look after her for me while I’m gone? Arial, please?”

“I will do anything for you, young sir. But you must take medicines with you for Bedwyr’s wounds, and your own; these scratches are wicked.”

“I’ll do that. Just pack everything we will need. Rhonwen knows I’m going today and she needs help. Arial, will you go to her tonight?”

He received a smile and a nod and Arial continued on cleaning and dressing the scratches. Rhonwen must have taken his skin off under her nails to dig so deep into him. When he was all patched, he helped me stand up. Arial then dressed my back in a long winding harness of bandages; then packed a bag of medicines and supplies, including our Lord Darfod’s brilliant morphia drink that we used on the wounded after battle; the druid had given Arial a month’s supply.

In payment for her goods, Arthur gave her a small bag containing melted-down gold nuggets that she could use to buy provisions for herself. She accepted with another curtsy. Arthur helped me dress; he even laced my bloody boots for me, as I was unable to bend over.

Doing this, he said, “Oh, and there is something else.” Of course. “Medraut is coming with us.”

16: THE WARNING

The ride home to Dogfeiling was hard and cold.

Arthur rode a wild white mare with a black nose and mouth; she was his new horse and he had named her Epona, the goddess of horses. I had the brown I had ridden south to Cadwy, a good horse, quiet and safe. On the ride, we took an escort with us, a mounted troop of twenty other riders, warriors who Arthur had handpicked for their courage during our last battle. Uki Wolf-leg was here with a group of his own men, some of the pledge-makers; Ruis and Coll, also Llwch and Tegid, and a new warrior, Gwydre ap Rhobert, another recent pledge-maker. And there was one other; Howell ap Berth, one of my attackers.

These men rode with us as far as the off-road east to Deva, where Arthur would have them stationed for winter. Sometime later he would ride down with Medraut and join them, but now our escort parted from us as we three turned up from the plains and high into the mountains for home. We wrapped up in our fur-lined cloaks and wore tight woollen leggings under our deerskin riding breeches, a trick to help keep warm, as knees and thighs froze first, then feet and hands. We wore scarves up and over our faces and fur hats to keep our heads warm, and seal-skin gloves for our hands.

As we went higher, lowering clouds came down and a drizzling rain drenched us all before we could reach the front door of my father’s villa. We stabled the horses out in the rear horse yard; three horses in one stable, which was good as they could keep each other warm, and we went bursting through the back door of the house, shivering and dripping rainwater on the floor.

We found a deadened fireplace in the main living-room, and it was bitterly cold inside. My father was not home. I needed to know where he was, so while Arthur and Medraut set about building a fire, I trotted my horse down to my uncle’s, who lived in his feasting-hall near the lake.

There I found out from Tannan, my uncle, that my father had gone north to Luguvalos to join with Lord Uthyr for the winter, and he wouldn't be back till the campaigning season was over, almost another year away.

My uncle's wife, Lady Una, gave me some food. Even though we had brought supplies with us, she insisted, especially when she found out Arthur was with us. All of my people had heard that he was to be the heir of Ambrosius Aurelianus; this gave him high status. And as my uncle's wife was a new wife, she had never met Arthur before.

So Una gave me a bag of food and a large amphora of wine and told me to come and bring the heir of Britain down to see her one day soon, one day when it was not so wet and dark.

I rode home loaded, only to find Arthur and Medraut arguing over which one of them was best at lighting fires.

After a moment of wrestling each other around on the floor, Arthur got up and said to me, "I'll let him do it, this way when he makes a pig's mess of it, it'll give me something to pick on him about for the rest of the night. So, where's your father?"

My arms were full of supplies, and I answered, trying to set it all down on the table in the corner, "He's gone to Luguvalos, to spend the winter with your father. Damn his bones, I wanted to spend the winter with him. Now when am I going to see him again?"

Arthur just stared at me, raised a black eyebrow at me, repeated what I said, "Your father's gone to my father's camp."

"All winter, he's staying for the campaigning season with Uthyr."

He was silent a moment, till he said, "I don't want to upset you, Fox, but this looks like your father has pitched his tent in my father's camp, that is, going over to his side and fighting against me when the time comes…" He moved in closer to me. "And when that time comes, when Uthyr comes against me, and he will, should I chop your father down along with my own?"

"What are you saying to me, you fool? My father isn't going to fight against you."

"Then why is he staying for the season with Uthyr?"

I could not answer, and I felt my heart jump a beat.

Medraut said to me, "Your father is steaming mad because Ambrosius took you into his army, and treated you like a common soldier and not a

highborn prince of Gwynedd, an insult to the Men of Gwynedd. Ever since, you have been fighting for Ambrosius, and not for your own clan. Fox, you know Uthyr will come for him," pointing at Arthur. "And if your father is with Uthyr, then he is likely to come against us too. Uthyr knows Arthur is coming for him, so he needs Gododdin supporters, as it is this one here," he pointed at Arthur again, "who is the odd one out; a Silurian. Your father has aligned with Uthyr to fight against their sons. Deliciously mad, isn't it?"

I could have split Medraut's skull for saying all that, and I chilled cold with dread. I looked at Arthur.

I said, "And if my father does fight for yours, will you fight against mine too, kill him? You would kill my father in battle?"

Terrible fear took hold of me, and I saw for the first time the awful truth of Arthur's power, his difference.

He may have been raised in my family, a Gododdin family, but he was not Gododdin himself.

He answered me, "I have to take Uthyr down and become Pendragon myself if I am to have any power in Britain. And of course, my father won't let me just walk in and take the Red Dragon without a fight. And if your father is going to back Uthyr in any attempt to destroy me on the battlefield, as his ally, what do you think I should do, Fox? Reward him for his loyalty?"

I railed at him, "Then let me remind you that my father is your foster-father; he won't come against you. Neither should you go against him. And if he does come against you, it means he will come against me as well, his own son. He won't do that, Arthur, trust me, he won't."

He stood firm and said, "Why not? Fathers betray their sons all the time. Uthyr betrayed me and he's my father; he turned against me, rejected me, and abused me. What makes you think your father is any better than mine?"

I answered, growing more angry, "If you kill my father in civil strife, what will that do to you and me? It will make us enemies. Then who here in Gwynedd will take a Silurian as Pendragon?"

Arthur turned cold when I said this to him. I thought he was going to strike me down, but he stopped himself, turned again to his endless pacing.

I grabbed his upper arm to have him stand still. He winced from where Rhonwen had scratched him.

He stopped and breathed in deep, saying, “I am half Gododdin, remember? Uthyr has no other sons to pass his title to, there’s only me, a Silurian, and he will not let me take my rightful place without a fight. I am not going to kill your father.”

“No, but I will,” Medraut told me, loud, firm, and laughing.

“You be quiet!” Arthur ordered him. “Fox, if I have to go against Uthyr, I will make sure your father stays safe…for you.”

We had been home only moments and it had already turned hostile, both inside and out, where the drizzle now turned to a pounding downpour of rain. At last Medraut had the fire going and I thought about what Arthur said as he turned aside and slumped down on his back on the Roman couch under the window; he stared up at the ceiling.

I watched him, thinking that if my father had chosen Uthyr over us, what could I do about it? I was a part of Arthur’s coming Supreme Command. I was his lieutenant, not my father’s. And if my father was going to raise arms against Arthur, then he would also be raising arms against me, his own son. He knew whose side I was on, whose side I would always be on.

I felt betrayed, cast out of the heart of my own family in the way Arthur had been cast out of his. It was not a good way to start the winter. And by the time evening came, the rain came with it, ever harder, pouring like a tempest. Before the fire, we ate as much as we could.

We sat in front of the flames, drinking wine.

As the room was large, it heated slowly, but when the great front door was stopped and the lattice-work windows shuttered with heavy bull-hide coverings, it warmed enough to strip off our winter gear and sit only in our woven shirts and breeches. We had lamps too, the small red ones from the Continent. And if I kept on the way I was, I would soon be stoned drunk. I was trying all by myself to drink all the wine Una had given us. We were quiet, not talking; the conflict earlier had crushed our spirits. But I swear Arthur could read my mind.

After an age of staring into the fire, he turned to look at me, saying, “I swear I won’t kill your father, I’m not that barbaric. I just have so much to deal with, Fox, it piles up in my head till I…till I feel—”

“Betrayed,” I said. “And you want to destroy those who hurt you; that’s how I felt that time when I fought with Glenn, that’s how I feel about

the army. And now, my father, if he fights against you, he fights against me. I cannot believe he would do it. Not for Uthyr; he doesn't love Uthyr so much as to come against me."

"Why don't you two stop your bleating?" Medraut told us. "The pair of you make me sick with your pledges of brotherhood and undying love."

We ignored him.

And I was in pain; the wound on my back, the lash wound that hurt the most was giving me grief.

"Do you want some salve on your wounds?" Arthur asked me, knowing what was wrong. "Do it," and I pulled off my shirt.

Arthur took off the bandages from around my chest; he made me lie on my stomach in front of the fire. He got out Arial's bag of medicines, and with Medraut watching, he layered on the salve, gently smoothing it over the wounds, and as he did, I closed my eyes against the prick of tears I now felt, for the memory of the beating was not healing. Medraut watched me; he said, "That wound above your hip, it will scar deep and long. A beautiful scar."

"A scar of shame," I told him. "How can I show my face in Gwynedd ever again? A prince who deserts his brothers? I should renounce my status and give my place to Lucan, my first cousin."

As I said all this, a roll of thunder boomed overhead like an omen of coming death and bad tidings; a brilliant flash of light showed through the gaps on either side of the coverings at the windows. Medraut and I flinched, but Arthur did not move.

He said to me, "Don't talk this way about shame. One day, you will redeem yourself. Don't say these things, Fox."

I knew he was right and I said nothing more.

Though he said, "Maybe you should leave the bandage off now, Arial's healed it well enough. But what about me," and he took off his own shirt.

And when those long raking scratches were revealed, Medraut said, surprised, "What happened to your arm?"

"Rhonwen," I answered for him. "Dug her nails into him like a wildcat; tore his flesh open." I turned, helping Arthur with his wounds. I smeared the same salve over the scratches on his arm.

He sat quietly as I dabbed at them. An intense feeling touched me as I did this, the quiet way he sat and allowed me to stroke in the salve. I looked into his eyes; saw the smouldering black fire in his eyes. Something pricked up my back and the wound that hurt the most began to throb.

The Snake was at my back and I disliked the way he breathed down my neck, so I elbowed him hard into his stomach. He grunted and dropped back again. Arthur laughed at us, and poured more wine; he opened Arial's supplies and poured a drop of Lord Darfod's morphia potion into each of our goblets.

"Help you sleep without pain," he said to me.

My heart was thrashing for some reason, and I drank my wine in one swallow, poured myself another, topped up theirs, and the three of us stretched out fireside, listening to the rain and the distant roar of thunder. Me and Arthur, now leaving our wounds open to the air.

And in the long slow silences, I breathed in to dull my pain, sipping more drugged wine, trying to lose my thoughts. I wanted to sleep. I told them I was going to bed, and I got up, wandered out to the latrine. After this, I went to my room, threw off my gear and rolled over under the covers and closed my eyes, feeling a floating bliss come over me. But the door opened and Arthur came in; he came and sat on the end of my bed.

He said to me, "How long will it be before someone comes bashing on the front door, wanting me for something? Wanting to take me away? Peace, so peaceful here, even with Medraut watching every move I make."

"Then you shouldn't have brought him with us," I answered. "And no one's going to come. They are all closed down for the season."

"I cannot stay so long, maybe only a few days, then I have to go back to Viroconium…to Rhonwen."

"Then I'm going back with you. Someone has to protect you from her. She's mad, you know. I don't like her, Arthur. I'm saying it outright, I don't like her."

"I know you don't, and she doesn't like you."

"Do I care? Go to sleep, the bed is made in the guest-room. Medraut will sleep well on the couch, and don't talk any more about Rhonwen. Just let me go back with you."

"No, you are not coming with me. You are staying here safe all through the winter, then in early spring you are going to Deva and stay there

with Uki and Medraut till I come up for you, probably in March if the weather is good. If I can find Cai, I'll send him to you before then. But there's no way in the world are you going back to Viroconium with me."

"Arthur," I said, "go and shaft a goat," and turned my back on him. I heard him laugh; he took hold of my shoulder and shook me.

I turned back. "What?"

"Last time I was here, I had a beautiful dream, but it was in our old bed, in our outhouse, I'll sleep out there. That bed is enchanted, and I have to dream of her again. You cannot make me sleep in the guest-room, Prince."

"It's not me then you dream of?" I pretended hurt and he answered, "The Lady of the Lake, my goddess first. Then you."

I gave him a kick to get him to move. I heard him go out of the back-door to our old room, where we grew up together as boys, sharing an enchanted bed…

The following morn it was cold, wet, but sunny.

The three of us awake early, we heated water to wash and Arthur showed me how Arial had showed him the best way to brush teeth; a tiny bone and horsehair brush he used. He shaved, saying that Alexander the Great refused a scruffy beard so he would too. Medraut and I did the same. Later in the morning we rode our horses down to visit my uncle. Mist hung over the waters of the lake and all was eerie and still as this place often was. We took the path along the shore and came to the quiet corner that was my uncle's hall, and I swear that his wife, Lady Una, wet herself when I introduced her to Arthur.

"The heir to Ambrosius himself in my house!" she squeaked like a mouse. "Oh help me, Tannan, what do I do with him?"

"It is best not to do anything with him, my love," my uncle told her, pushing her aside and greeting us into his hall.

He put a hand on Arthur's shoulder, saying, "I remember what you were like as a lad, scrapping in the street. Now look at you. I cannot believe it…heir to the Supreme Command of Lord Ambrosius himself. This will make you a dangerous man to reckon with; the power you will wield with this position, Arthur, do you realise you will make many enemies as well as supporters? You will have to win the whole of Britain and all her kings to

be what you want to be. Beware, I say, of King Cadwallon Llawhir, the Longhand. He will not take your coming power lightly."

Arthur bowed to him, answering, "I know it," and said nothing more. Una then brought us something to eat and drink, which was good as we hardly ate a mouthful for breakfast that morning, only some warmed milk with honey and a bite of mochyn-pie. The talk for a while turned to war, and Arthur remained silent. He would not dream for a moment to discuss battle plans with anyone. But Tannan wanted to know all the details, and Arthur only told him about things that had already happened, not what might happen in coming months.

Though my uncle did tell him that my cousins, his sons Lucan and Manos, were still away fighting the invading Gaels down on the peninsula, that my first cousin, Lucan, was the head of my clan. Tannan glanced at me when he said this, a slight accusing look. I knew what his look meant, for why was I not fighting the Gaels with his sons? Why, when I was their prince? Where was I, when I should be fighting with the Stags and not with the Bear?

Again I felt the sharp bite of my position. That I had chosen some wild Silurian over my own kinsmen. How long, I wondered, before all of this would come back to level me?

Then my uncle suggested he take us out fishing on the lake.

So this was what we did. All day. We fished.

It was a beautiful fresh cold day, all day. And we failed to catch anything till the early evening; we went home, and there Una baked up our catch as fast as she could because we were starving. Over supper, my uncle again turned the talk back to Arthur's coming struggle for power; he warned us again of Lord Cadwallon Llawhir, the King of Gwynedd.

"Longhand will not support you, Arthur. He is the most powerful man in Gwynedd, and with his brother, Owen, they are probably your most dangerous opponents. So beware of them in the coming years. For you to Longhand will be a threat."

"I know who they are, sir. As all the Men of Gwynedd are the grandsons and descendants of Lord Cunedda…just as your own fathers are the descendants of his many sons, I know who you all are."

They said nothing more about it, and when it fell late and we were just about to go home, Tannan came out with something unexpected.

“Arthur,” he said, coming forward and looking at him deeply. “Can I ask you something? I do not mean to be in any way rude, only I have heard, I have heard you have the falling-sickness.”

Arthur glanced at me.

He looked uncomfortable, but said, “It’s true.”

It was difficult not to warm to Tannan even when he was being personal, and strangely he looked impressed when Arthur gave him the truth. “You know,” my uncle said, “when I was younger I met many doctors from the Continent. One spoke about the falling-sickness as the Sacred Disease. He said those who are touched by it are blessed by the goddess, Selene.”

I think he felt Arthur should be reassured by this, but Arthur remained unmoved.

So Tannan rattled on, “Aye, people with falling-sickness are highly intelligent and blessed. Did you know that Alexander the Great was rumoured to have it too? No, or was it Julius Caesar? Many great commanders were subject to its hold. It is a sign, Arthur, of your greatness.”

Arthur said, “Are you saying I’m great because I have falling-sickness? And not because of my own powers of leadership?”

“Does it matter, lad?”

“Of course it does, my lord. If someone finds a way to cure me, I won’t be great anymore, will I? And Britain will fall in a heap. Best I stay having falling-seizures then.” He stood up. It was time to go.

But we did not leave on strained terms.

Arthur turned to my uncle at the door and shook his hand, saying, “I know what you are trying to tell me, sir. And thank you for the warning about Lord Cadwallon Llawhir.”

We three went outside in the dark; here we mounted our horses and rode up the dark track towards our own villa. The rain came back again next morning, falling hard, and the main room was cold when I went in. I lit the fire, knowing it would be a long cold day shut inside. I made breakfast and pulled over my father’s old chair, sat down, waiting for my companions to wake.

Medraut slept in the guest-room and he came in not long after me. Then Arthur, claiming he could smell breakfast cooking. Outside, it was still lashing down with rain, and when he pulled open the bull-hide cover at

the window and looked out, he said, “I have to go, but I cannot go in this weather.”

I said, “Do you have to go right now?”

“I have a feeling things are not going well at home; something’s wrong. I cannot stay away. I have to know what’s going on so everyone doesn’t go and make more trouble for me while I’m gone. That’s what they do when I’m not around.”

“It’s just the weather making you feel this way.”

I wanted to lighten the mood, but it was heavy and strained and the rain pounded down. Medraut went and fell down on the couch, covered himself in skins and blankets and stared up at the ceiling, saying nothing.

No joy from him.

Arthur said, “I’m starving,” and there came a hard bang at the door as he spoke. He went and opened the door, pulling back the hide to see who it was. My Uncle Tannan; he came in dripping and shaking water out of his long white hair. He came with a big bag, which he dropped on the table.

“Una,” he explained. “She made a mound of food for you boys; she is worried you are not getting enough to eat.”

“She’s right,” Arthur said. “You have perfect timing, sir.”

He went and opened the bag, and with Medraut jumping up to help, they stoked up the fire and heated the thick roe stew Lady Una had made in an earthenware pot, which would go on the hot-plate, and Arthur would get a better breakfast than the one I had tried to make.

There was bread too; eggs, and strip-bacon, enough to last me a week, but Arthur and Medraut would eat it all in one day. We were destined to starve.

My uncle stood watching us, looking at me, looking at Medraut; he wanted to say something. He cleared his throat and said, “Arthur, about last night, my warnings about Cadwallon.”

Arthur turned from the heating pot and stood up, facing Tannan. “What’s wrong?”

“Only this. If, and when you come to power, swear to me you will not bring your forces into Gwynedd. Swear to me you will not bring Bedwyr here into Gwynedd against his own kinsmen. He is a prince here; you know this…he can never come into Gwynedd with your forces if you fight against

Cadwallon Llawhir, our king. This is my warning to you for the coming years."

He stepped closer to Arthur, looking into his eyes with a serious frown and saying in a low voice, "And one day, if Bedwyr allows it, my first son, Lucan, will be high chieftain of Dogfeiling; so you can never bring our Bedwyr to fight on our own soil. For if you do, you will tear us all apart. Gwynedd will oppose you. Swear to me these things, and I will always stand by you as a fair Commander."

"These are hard truths, sir," Arthur answered him. "Hard truths. And I understand the roles of the Men of Gwynedd. But sir, if Cadwallon Llawhir tries to stop me from my own role as Supreme Commander, I will oppose him. And I cannot or will not swear to stay out of Gwynedd if I take power. What I plan to do, I will do for Britain, not for Gwynedd, or even my own Siluria. Not for Dumnonia, or Rheged, or Elmet, or Powys, I will do it for Britain."

Hearing this, my uncle nodded his head.

He turned and looked at me long and hard.

I told him, "I too will do what I do for Britain."

Arthur stood still, staring at my uncle with his indomitable gaze; he showed nothing on his face. Only I knew his mind was working at a pace far beyond poor Tannan's.

Politely Arthur said, "I respect all of Gwynedd's men. You raised me when my father was abusing me. I owe you, sir; please don't think I will one day be a threat to you. I am not. I understand what you are telling me."

"Thank you, young sir," and Uncle bowed his head to Arthur, and Arthur turned back to the fireplace, watching Medraut stir the pot with an iron spoon. I could see Medraut was desperately holding his tongue, trying not to break into a smirk. He loved nothing more than conflict that could tear into the hearts of all men; he loved to think of Arthur, his cousin, as a power so vast he could tear out the hearts of the Men of Gwynedd.

17: THE NAKED RIDE

But Arthur, he would not like my uncle saying these things to him, as if he was a coming danger to Britain, rather than her rescue. So he crouched back down by the hotplate and waited for the stew to heat through, saying nothing more.

The moment was over, and Tannan said, “Well, aye, I best be off before I get washed down the hill with the rainwater; how it rushes off the roof here! It is a wonder you have no leaks.” He looked up at the ceiling. “But you have good solid tile-stone up there…you will be all right,” and he went dashing outside. He grabbed his soaking pony, mounted and was gone into the blowing sheets of rain as fast as the poor creature could trot.

As soon as the door was closed again, Arthur turned to Medraut and said to him, “Don’t you dare say a word.”

But he did.

“I would love nothing more than to see you crush every chieftain in Britain, and Gwynedd be damned! Carve them up, Arthur, and let me watch you do it. Oh, you can never know what it feels like to have a cousin like you, that I am related to you! You are going to be the most powerful man in Britain, and I am your cousin. If you won’t bring the Fox here into his homeland for war, then bring me. I will stand by you.”

“Making battles for me, Snake, even before they happen? Even before they exist?”

Arthur looked at me, and I felt as if a cold wind was blowing through me. My foster-brother, sitting right in front of me, he could be the very one to tear my homeland apart, and myself with it. No, this would not happen. It was all gone into the future, just as Arthur said, battles fought before they could even happen.

Only then did we dig into the stew and the bread, sitting on the floor by the fire, with the rain still pounding and thunder rolling in the mountains, a sound I had loved all my life.

But Arthur brought us back to where we were by saying, “I still have to go. Tomorrow morning, whether it’s raining or not. I cannot be away so long. Anything could be happening, and Ambrosius just doesn’t have it in him any longer to cope. His attendants are not willing to help him; they think they are being discourteous if they try to direct him. It’s me they come to for answers and I’m not there. I have to go back, Fox, I have to.”

“I know,” I said. “Now there’s no reason either for me to stay on here; there’s nothing to do. You can forget your idea of me spending the winter in this place.”

“I’ll camp you in Deva, then. But you are not coming back to Viroconium with me. And don’t bloody argue with me, I am heir to the

Supreme Command, you know." He grinned at me.

"And what are you going to do with me, Supreme Commander?" Medraut asked him.

"You! You can go and live with Cadwallon Llawhir."

We looked at each other and burst out laughing.

What should we do with a day shut inside and nothing to do?

Arthur got up and went and looked out of the window.

"Over there," he said, "the rain is breaking up towards the south; there's sunlight over the hills."

He went out of the room, down the corridor. I heard him open the back door and go out. Medraut and I jumped up and followed him, found him brushing down his horse in the stable, getting her ready to ride. But where we stood, it was still hammering with cold, icy rain.

"You will get all your gear wet," I warned him. "It won't dry in time for your ride home tomorrow, and you must not ride in wet gear. You cannot think of going riding in the rain."

Medraut of course had the answer. "I want to ride too. We've been locked inside for two days. The solution is simple. We ride naked."

Arthur looked at him from over the back of his horse; he smiled.

Medraut swore, "I dare you. I dare you now. If you want to ride and keep your gear dry, ride naked. I'll go with you. Fox, are you with us?"

Ride naked in pounding freezing rain in November?

I said, "There's no way in the world I'm riding naked through my own cantref. I have relatives under every hillock…you two are madmen, you will freeze your balls to ice, freeze to death."

But they were already taking their clothes off and piling them up into my arms, my mouth hanging open, trying to find words to stop them.

"Into the south," Arthur said, "where the sun is breaking through; if we ride hard enough, we can be there before the weather closes over again."

He said all this as he stripped, and the cold wind swept into the stable and he was already shivering. But they carried on stripping down to bare skin, neither of them going to give out on the dare. They led out their horses, no saddles, only blankets and bridles, laughing at each other. I stood with their clothes in my arms, watching them mount their horses; and heeling into their sides, they turned into the rain and galloped over the hills behind my house, taking the ridge-top above the lake. I watched them go.

They were wild together and I heard them yelling, urging on their horses to run faster. There was no way in the world would I ride naked around my own home-town, but I knew I had to follow them. So I went back into the house and packed all their gear into their saddlebags; I went through and saddled up my horse and loaded him with the bags. I threw an old waxed seal-skin coat belonging to my father over my shoulders. I even put my helmet on to keep my head dry, then I led out my horse into the rain, mounted and turned after them.

Quickly I brought my horse to a gallop. I knew my land well, and I took a short-cut up higher than their lower course, where I skirted the ground and saw them galloping fast downhill. They were racing each other. I turned right and took the downward path, still seeing them ahead of me, though small in the distance. They had gone down lakeside and were racing into the south where I could see the sun breaking through the rushing clouds, long shafts of sunlight spearing to the ground.

With rain pounding in my face, I rode to catch them up. Riding naked would be agony, but neither of them would think of giving way before the other. When I crested a rise, I stopped. There they were below me at the head of the lake, riding around and around each other in a shaft of brilliant sunlight. They split apart, turned, then charged in a gallop towards each other. They passed within less than an arm's length to spare, trying to unhorse each other.

Not for one moment did they relent in the hardness of their ride, moving as fast as their horses could bear. As I came closer, I could hear them calling to one another. They both veered hard to my left and began chasing up into the higher hills over us. They had not seen me, and I was drenched and shivering, watching, trying to see from a distance which rocky path they were taking, but they had disappeared into the heights where it was impossible to ride at speed. The sun began breaking through, sending down beams into the hills; I could not pick which way they had gone as the sun was in my eyes.

But knowing the land well, I knew they could either carry on riding south or head back homeward. If they were going home, they would eventually join me, but I had a feeling they would not do this. They would carry on goading each other into more and more foolish acts of wildness.

So I turned to follow them again, wondering what they were doing up there in the heights…alone and naked under the shafts of light. My mouth dried, as sometimes it was hard to say which one of them was the most provocative. The blood in their veins was the same, and their desire for one another was sometimes so barefaced it could spread to me and burn in my guts. What were they doing up there?

And with the rain clearing out fast to the north, I looked up; saw over me jutting rock-heads, the winding path that hunters took, shafts of sunlight spearing down, sheets of misty rain over the hills with sunlight playing on the surface of the lake, golden.

What were they doing?

My heart began beating fast as I climbed up higher, moving up the Hunter's Pass. I guessed they would turn south, though I saw no sign of them or their horses. They had just disappeared and I ached to find them, yet at the same time afraid of what I would find. Just then I heard a voice coming from my right and slightly higher up. I rode on, moving closer. Medraut's voice, speaking with passion, coming from behind the high jutting rocks on my right.

"Arthur," he said, "if we die in battle, what does it matter? It's only love. And love between men is stronger than the rocks beneath us. It's not the weak love that women give you. Men are stronger; our sex is stronger, better. I'll show you this and prove it to you."

I stopped to listen, my blood running cold. The Snake.

He said, close and deep, "I want to tell you something about me. You think you know all about me, about our family, but you don't. Uthyr threw you out of our family and you were raised in another less dangerous one."

"And what about you?" Arthur answered. "What don't I know?"

Medraut saying, "Something dark, sinister, forbidden, but what does it matter? Nothing really matters, you know that. Let me show you the power of love between men, and it is power, strength, stronger than anything you can have with a woman. Let me show you."

"Just tell me what you want to say."

"I will. I am the son of incest. My father on his sister, they got me."

"How do you know this?" I heard Arthur ask, asked with a tight breathlessness.

“Lord Darfod ap Luca, the druid,” Medraut answered. “He knows it all; said it was the Will of the Old Gods, like he always says. It was him who arranged for you to go to Bedwyr’s family. While myself, Medraut ap Lot, am the son of incest…my father loved his sister, and now I love you, my cousin.”

Here followed a long silence. I heard a moan of passion. I could not tell which one it was and I was dying inside as I heard these things.

So I turned my horse around the corner and found them; impervious to outside intrusion they were, both lying naked on their backs in the sunlight that came beaming down through a break in the clouds; Arthur with his arms around his cousin’s neck in a headlock, holding him still. Medraut was erect, and when I saw this, I jumped down from my horse and stood over them, right in their sunlight and covered them with my shadow. Medraut looked up at me, a vicious glare in his eyes. Savage and wild that I had intruded on his seduction.

“Bastard!” he cried at me. “You had to come and find us didn’t you? You are such a waste, Prince Bedwyr the Fox. Get out of here and leave us alone!”

Something inside me broke and I said, “Snake! True to your name. It’s true, that’s what you are. Get up, I’ve got your clothes, the rain is coming in again.” I looked at Arthur, said to him, “I never believed you would do something like this with him. Do you let him seduce you? Why?”

“I haven’t done anything,” he answered me, and tightened his hold around Medraut’s throat. “I control him, that’s all. He’s mine to control and this is no seduction.”

I turned away.

I did not want to see them naked like this, together. And so I unsaddled the bag with their clothes and threw it down at their feet, saying nothing more, because I could not speak or else my voice would break with anger. I mounted and rode home alone, as for that moment, the pair of them disgusted me, hurt me.

Neither of them followed me home and evening came. I spent all day tearing myself apart. They were shutting me out, and I would rather they brought me in with them; no matter what it was that they were doing together for so long, I would rather be with them than closed out and alone.

Not till night came did I hear a horse coming into the stables; a moment later Arthur came in through the back door.

Medraut was not with him.

“Where is he?” I said, jumping to my feet.

“I sent him away.”

“But, his things are here, his war-gear.”

“I’ll take his gear when I go in the morning. I sent him on to Deva.”

“What happened between you two? Don’t shut me out; it kills me when you do that. Do you do it with him? I don’t believe it, it’s insane! Don’t let him drag you down into his evil; I’ll kill him if he does…”

Arthur stopped and glared at me. “Is that what you think? Fox, you know that’s not my way. And don’t think of him as evil. The true wrong is thinking Medraut is evil. He’s not, he’s just…different. He’s a sodomite. And I have to control him. I’m the only one who can.”

He shook his head at me; went and crouched down by the fire, putting his hands out to warm, steam rising from his wet clothes.

Here he said, “He’s a sodomite, a lover of other men. That’s what he told me; he makes no lie about it. It’s not evil to tell the truth, and that’s what Medraut does. He tells the truth and everyone hates him for it. He tells the truth to your face. He shocked me though, telling me what he did, that he’s the child of incest, and not just him, but his sister Essylt as well. Both of them. My cousins. And I know it’s true because he would never lie about something like that. Medraut is no liar.”

He fell silent, staring hard like he did into the fire, and I knew it was true. Medraut could hurt people; hurt people with the truth, from which the Snake himself never baulked.

There was nothing more I could say.

So he stood up and took off his wet jacket and dumped it beside my own drying clothes in front of the fire where it continued to steam. He looked at me and said, “Medraut turns to me because no one understands him like I do. He loves me, but I know how to handle him. He needs controlling, not destroying. He’s my cousin, and where else will he ever find love, if not through me?”

He moved towards me, pulled me to him and said, “Come on, let’s get something for supper. We have a long ride back to Deva tomorrow.”

18: LUNG-FEVER

We rode on together after saying farewell to my uncle and his wife the next morn. It was foggy in the hills, fresh with lowering clouds, and we were already riding down towards the plain when the sun came out through the mists. As we rode, we spoke about Medraut.

"Doesn't it hurt you," I said, "that he's a child of incest?"

"No. No child can be blamed for the actions of his parents. He cannot help his birth any more than you can help being the son of loving parents."

I nodded. The morning was turning out fine and beautiful and we rode through a wooded vale where the sunlight played through the treetops, sparkling in our eyes. We were quiet for a long time, just thinking and riding. Yet I noticed the way Arthur looked up into the tree branches, at the dappling light. He seemed absorbed by the sight of it, consumed by light.

We rode on quietly, horses' hooves clopping slowly, silence in the woods, a soundless late autumn forest. Here we found our way to the river, riding through the day, and having Arthur all to myself was worth any hardship, any long slow ride far from home where wolves hunted. And any coming misery or anything else he could give me was worth a thousand years of pain to be his. I wanted it all, even the things I could not reach in his mind, the things he held back from me, either through deliberate choice or had no control over, his falling-sickness and his visions of colours and sound. Even his future battles, I would never leave him, not even in the face of these future battles.

Later in the day we quickened our pace, hoping to make Deva before sundown. And just before reaching the city, we stopped.

Arthur began seeking around inside his saddlebags, looking for his torc, which he found and put on; the gold torc was the only insignia he wore to display his high ranking status, a necessity within the confines of the military base we were now about to enter.

We rode over the bridge across the river and into the city via the Westgate, and of course, the stationed troops saw us coming and barred our way. Medraut of course was already there, expecting our arrival and the barring of our way was purely official.

The correct response was, "Advance and be recognised!" and when the gatekeeper saw that it was Arthur, he gave the cue and we passed into the walled city where we picked up an escort of warriors from our own

troop. Uki with Howell, one of my attackers, who seemed interested in changing things between us.

These two with Medraut escorted us to the officers' quarters by the Eastgate, which was good too, because the Eastgate had its own taberna, a first-rate place for drinking. And if there was one city in Britain that motivated us to feel strongly for the defence of our land, it was Deva, home of the long-gone Legio XX. The spirits of those men were all around us still, those warriors of Valeria Victrix, the builders both of the Great Wall and the city's amphitheatre, built hundreds of years before us. Deva was well provided with amenities and we all liked it better than the bleak Viroconium.

Here, there were barrack blocks, officers' houses, granaries, armouries, tanneries, smithies, bathhouses, tabernas, a small infirmary, and of course, the amphitheatre. It was the perfect place to spend the winter and I did not think Arthur should leave. Uki and Medraut took us to stable our horses, and here Arthur said farewell to Epona his mare with hugs and kisses.

And lugging our gear, we followed where they took us to our lodgings, officers' quarters, a small house with three bedrooms, a tiny hall with a central fireplace, table and chairs and a big upright chest for storing our gear. Outside was a latrine and tiny courtyard with the remains of a herb garden, dormant for winter.

We saw that Medraut was camped in with us, as was right, as he was Arthur's cousin. A room each we had, rooms with no doors, as the doors had been pulled off and probably sent to the armouries for fuel. Instead we had hide coverings. I took the room at the end of the short corridor, and Arthur took the one next to me.

We dropped our gear on our beds, delighted to find them made with woollen and quilted blankets and fleece-stuffed bolsters. Medraut's room was at the other end of the hall, also with no door. He told us the chest was stocked with provisions, and with that, we followed him to the baths; a hot bath each after a cold day's riding to relax…

A few days later, Arthur left us as planned, and over the weeks that followed, we stood where we were, watching the south road, and the time for winter came and everything closed down like a huge frozen lid. Even

the river seemed to have died. I switched from working in the carpenter's shop to the armoury, where it was warmer.

Then after another long miserable month, an errand-rider came in with an official letter. It was early evening and I had just come in from work; here I found Medraut standing by the fireplace, reading the letter in his hand. He looked at me, his face white.

My sense of doom struck into me at once as he handed me the letter without speaking. I looked at it, saw it was written in Latin. Sealed with Ambrosius' Eagle insignia, it was addressed, Medraut ap Lot of the Clan Lothian, Nephew of Lord Uthyr Pendragon stationed in Deva.

I handed it back to him, saying, "Read it for me."

"It's from Ambrosius, it says his only daughter, Lady Rhonwen, is dead."

"What? How? Read it!"

"Murdered by Cynan Aurelius, and—"

My guts sank. "And what?"

"Arthur is gravely ill. And I have been ordered to lead a unit to hunt down Aurelius. Ambrosius says that if Aurelius is not found and brought to justice, Arthur is in danger of losing his right to Supreme Command."

I stood deathly still, unable to respond.

Strength left me, and I slumped down on a chair by the fire and said, "I have to go to him. I'll leave in the morning."

Medraut faced me; he said, "You should ride with me to hunt for Aurelius."

"You know I cannot do that." I looked up at him. "I have to be with Arthur. If he's ill. Don't make me go with you. You cannot order me to do this, and it says nothing about me in that letter. I'll go in the morning."

And I got up and went into my room and began packing my gear into my saddlebags, my hands trembling.

Medraut came and stood in the doorway, watching me.

He said, "Don't ride alone. Aurelius could be out ambushing our men on the roads, take warriors with you. I'll go now and raise the troop to leave with you in the morning."

He went out, and I went down to gather my gear, packed and arrayed at the foot of my bed. I sat down and hung my head, head in my hands, knowing I would get no sleep this night. Besides, it was madness to try and

hunt down a fugitive in mid-winter, for the passes would be blocked by snow, the roads cut in some places, and wherever Aurelius was now, he would be holed up tight like a wolf in a lair, impossible to find. But none of this concerned me now, for I dared not even think of what gravely ill could mean. Or why Ambrosius could think for a moment of denying Arthur the right he had long fought for, the right of Supreme Command. The old man must be mad with grief and blaming Arthur for the death of his daughter… madness…

In the end I waited out the night by the fireside. Medraut did not come back. When the sky lightened with sunrise, I was up and out of the house and running down to the stables for my horse.

The city was moving. A large troop of men was waiting in the freezing air to leave on the hunt. All units were ready, and when they saw me, ten men detached from the main body and joined me. Medraut and Uki Wolf-leg were to lead the main troop in the hunt for Aurelius, riding north, while the other ten were to ride with me south to Viroconium.

I rode to Medraut's side and clasped hands with him.

He said, "If you find him very ill, send for me. I'll not waste my time hunting for that madman in this weather. I'll ride with my troop to Viroconium if things are bad with Arthur."

I nodded to him and turned out of the Westgate and ran with my escort over the bridge, then wheeled south at a fast ride. We would be there sometime after midday, if the ride went well. With me were Llwch and Tegid, Howell ap Berth, Gwydre ap Rhobert, Dair, Ruis, Coll and Owain, and two other men whose names I did not know.

We made a short break a few hours later for something to eat and drink. All of the time, Gwydre kept close at my side, for he had attached himself to me for some reason, and I knew that he liked me. I had my very own shield-man, and I was grateful to find such loyalty around me.

The road was quiet, yet as I rode, I studied the way ahead; the flat plains around Viroconium could not hide much in the way of ambush, and when the sun touched after midday, we reached the city gates, only to find the whole town shut and barred. It was eerie and unnerving and I was afraid of what I would find inside…if we could only get in! I bashed on the gates and called out my name; the gatekeeper cried back that no one was allowed in.

I called, “Send for Master Caan! He knows who I am and will vouch for me. We have ridden all day from Deva. I am Arthur’s lieutenant. Let me in, you moon-struck bastard!”

There was silence on the other side. I called again a moment later, and the gate was finally unlocked and Caan’s face peered out. When he saw it was me, he allowed us to ride in. Here we turned and thundered down the main street towards Ambrosius’ private villa and square. And when we got there, the whole place too was locked down.

I jumped off my horse and went to the room Arthur shared with Rhonwen, found the door shut and bolted. Ambrosius’ door too was shut and locked and the whole area seemed deserted. As I was about to ride back for the main gate and find out what in all hell-fire was going on, Caan came trotting in on an old pony.

He called to me, “He’s down with Arial! The rest of you men, come with me!”

Back we went, my troop following Caan to the barrack blocks and the stables, while I rode for Arial’s house in the main street, where I left my horse roped outside and banged on her door.

She called out, startled, “Who is there?”

“It’s me, Bedwyr. Arial, let me in!”

At once I heard the door being unbolted, her face looking out at me; she pulled me bodily into the main room, warm from her blazing fire and I dumped my gear on the floor and went to find Arthur; found him on a large pallet-bed opposite the fire, lying there like he was dead or dying. I looked down at him, hearing him breathe heavily, a rasp in his lungs. He was pale, with dark circles under his eyes, his hair brushed back from his forehead and dampened to keep his brow cool. His lips were parted and dry and I dropped to his side and took up his burning hand, squeezed, saying, “It’s me.”

He squeezed my hand and opened his eyes. He looked at me for a long time, as if trying to make me out; was I a dream? But I saw a terrible sorrow in his eyes. He was a boy again. A hurt child.

He said, his voice very heavy and raspy, “I’m not going to die, but I dream of it…why did it take you so long to come?”

I looked up at Arial, standing there watching us.

I said to her, “What’s wrong with him? I want to know everything that’s happened, everything.”

Pulling over a chair, Arial sat down beside me. She too was pale. And I knew without having to ask that she had been nursing him without relief for who knows how long.

She put a hand on his brow, stroked back his hair, saying, “He came back to find her murdered; he stood at her side for two days and nights in the chapel where Ambrosius had lain out her body. Two days and nights he stood at her side, before she was buried and then he collapsed, he just fell like a stone. A brain-seizure it was.

I looked after him till he recovered, then he took off out into the north after her murderer. He was gone for almost a fortnight, and when he returned, he was ill like this. Now it is the cold that is the danger and we must keep him warm.”

“How was she murdered?” I ordered her.

“By Cynan Aurelius,” Ariel told me at once, her spirit growing dark. “He came here and was welcomed by Ambrosius. He began courting Rhonwen and she encouraged him, she was so dim-witted! I told her to beware, but that only made her worse. She even allowed him into her room at nights. I think Aurelius was trying to persuade her to have the lawyers annul her marriage with Arthur and take him instead. When Rhonwen refused, I suppose he must have given in to his rage. He didn’t just murder her; he also killed the child she was carrying. Ambrosius is destroyed, for not only has he lost his only daughter, but also his unborn grandchild. I do not think he will ever recover now, and he’s near mad. The old man threatened him, saying he could no longer be his heir. That was the first time I saw Arthur rebel, but he reined himself in. He went out and stood at Rhonwen’s side till he fell, exhausted.”

Arial looked down at Arthur now as he lay there breathing hard.

He was partly awake, listening to our voices, his hand in mine, hot and burning.

I said, “What did he do to rebel?”

“He said he would overthrow Ambrosius’ rule, said if Ambrosius dared to disown him, he would have no choice but to raze the city and destroy the old man’s few remaining supporters. He said he could overthrow the old man with greater force of arms. The troops support him,

and the warriors would back his takeover. But he said he would not do it, that is not the way for an old commander to end his life, not as a broken warrior, overthrown by a younger, stronger one."

Arial looked at me, a serious look.

"It's the way of the fighting world," I told her. "It's the way we take new from the old. All he has to do is call in his warriors and we will follow him in an overthrow by arms. I would follow him into this without a second thought."

She shook her head against my words, for maybe she did not understand the way of the warrior.

I added, "All I want now is for him to get well and rise up and break down those who opposed him." Then I said again, "What's wrong with him?"

"Lung-fever. He coughs and wheezes. I am worried that should the weather get any colder, it will make it worse. I sleep with him at nights, my body to keep him warm."

I thought about this, her holding him against her body all through the night. I said, "I'm going to stay here with you now. I just need to stable my horse, then I'll be straight back. Where's the old man now, is he still here?"

"Gone to Dinas Emrys. I think he's afraid that when Arthur gets well again, he will do what he said he would. Overthrow the city here, then head north, taking the cities as he goes. Deva would go over to him without a fight. Is this true?"

"Without doubt. Not a man there, save for a few remaining men of Ambrosius', would resist him. By the time he reached Luguvalos, we would have an irresistible force to take Uthyr's war-host, and half of them already support Arthur in secret even now. And the men of Dumnonia would back us without question."

I left her with these thoughts and went out into the cold dark to stable my horse. I was gone one watch. I had to make sure my troop was safely housed and fed, then I met them all in the barrack dining hall and told them what had happened, the murder, and how Ambrosius had threatened to remove Arthur's claim to the Supreme Command; this outraged the warriors and they called for an overthrow right here and now. So hot they were for war, I had to explain how ill Arthur was with lung-fever and nothing could be done till he recovered.

Medraut too was away with his own troop, so we were down on numbers and would have to wait and bide our time.

But the idea of a possible force-of-arms rebellion kept their spirits up and I was overwhelmed by their concern for Arthur, as they wanted him back. They wanted him as if he was their reason for living, and by the time I left them, I knew that he was. So I went back to Arial's, carrying a packet of food from the dining hall, plus a large flask of wine. But Arial would give him nothing other than a rich beef cawl she made herself, full of healing herbs, colts-foot and others like it.

So I cleared a space in front of the fire to sleep, lifting aside all her boxes of medicines.

Arthur then began to cough, and he coughed so hard he cried aloud, "It hurts, it hurts!"

I moved to help, helping Arial control him. And then the very thing we feared the most descended; a blizzard rolled in, a howling wind and driving snow, and I ran to stop the door, pulled across the hide and did the same to the window that overlooked a wide courtyard. Darkness fell. Above the bed on a corner shelf stood a lamp. I lit it

The main room where Arial housed her patients was so small it was all the night-light she needed, and I watched as she tried to get Arthur to drink her cawl. But he coughed too much to drink and when he stopped, he doubled over in pain and she went to the fire to begin mixing up something new. She stoked up the fire with coal and I looked at him, at the way he struggled to breathe. The room was cold and I knew I had to get into bed with him. There were no other beds and it was far too cold to sleep on the floor.

When it was really dark and late and the wind was battering against the door, I climbed into bed on one side, against the wall, Arial saying that naked bodies were warmer than clothed ones and she stripped, got into bed and pulled the covers up high and pulled Arthur against her breasts, safe in her arms. It was the only way to keep warm, to keep him warm between us.

All the following day we were snowed in, and Arial went out on the hunt for supplies, chasing down her contacts in the town market. Still Arthur continued to cough and wake and roll about in pain and I held onto him; this went on all day.

By evening he was near delirious, and as I was trying to get him to sit up and eat, he began talking in a wild rush, telling me of the horror of finding Rhonwen murdered, how Ambrosius had blamed him, and it all came out in broken words before he fell into a seizure. His suffering near broke me, but I stayed firm to hold him through the darkest, longest, meanest winter of our young lives.

Another fortnight went by like this, bleak and desolate. Every day people came to the door with food or drink or medicines. Our men came often, asking how Arthur was faring. Llwch and Tegid bringing food, Gwydre stopped to talk, then Howell, whose aim was to right the wrong he had done me back at Cadwy. I accepted his apology, too tired to continue to make war. Arial and I worked to the bone and I began to fall into despair.

At night in bed beside Arthur, I felt him dreaming, monsters chasing him in his mind. He had night-time fevers, hard breathing and sometimes falling-seizures, till I begged him to stop it or die.

One time he answered, "You want me to die?"

"How else am I ever going to get any sleep? Just hurry it up will you?"

"Love me…that's what I want," and he fell quiet again.

"Get better," I whispered to him. "Get better right now."

I stroked his shoulder, his arm. I put my arms around him and held him close against me.

"Where's Medraut?" he whispered.

"Hunting Aurelius."

Silence. He was asleep again.

19: BEDWYR MAKES BREAKFAST

Winter still had a hard grip over the land and the square outside was covered in a thin layer of snow, the main street awash with slush. The wind had dropped and icy clouds covered the sky. One morning I came back from the barracks where I had been to visit the men, telling them that Arthur was finally beginning to recover. I brought food and drink back with me from the stores, and when I came in, I found Arthur up and out of bed, though sitting in a chair by the fire. Arial had rugged him up like an old woman and I laughed at him.

"Who gave you permission to laugh?" he said, and coughed.

His cough was still on him, though sounding as if it was beginning to break its hold.

"I've got some salt-mochyn for breakfast," I told him.

I then set about doing the cooking, while Arial went out again to hunt down her medicine supplier. Her medicine-man, she called him.

Arthur sat watching me, he said, "Help me get out from under all these rugs. I'm suffocating. She tries to save my life by smothering me."

I turned and pulled off the layered blankets and threw them on the bed. He breathed in deep, freed. But I felt uneasy. As we were alone, and he was well enough to talk, I knew he wanted to tell me what he was feeling about Rhonwen's murder.

He stared into the fire, watched me fry the bacon and warm the beef broth, and he said it out straight, though low and deep, "I want to kill him. For the first time I want to kill a man outside of battle. I keep having visions of what I'm going to do to him, but it's vile. And I won't tell even you."

I stopped what I was doing and turned to face him. Pale he was, ill and deadly beautiful, like a man stripped of everything save his power to live. He said, "He didn't just kill her…he killed my unborn child." He stopped, swallowed hard. "Aurelius sliced her stomach open with a knife, and pulled the baby from her womb and left it to die at her side." As he spoke, tears came and fell and he wiped them away without comment. I turned away when I heard this, feeling sick, horrified.

What kind of beast would do such a thing to a young woman and her unborn babe?

"Now Ambrosius blames me," Arthur went on, "said I should have been here to protect her, and I've thought about it, long and hard. But this time…I cannot accept blame. There was no reason to protect her from Aurelius then. He was Ambrosius' own man, and Cynan was let into the city without hindrance and trust. The old man and his lieutenants should have done the protecting…if they believed she needed it. It's only through hindsight they blame me; but they didn't know any more than I did what that evil cur was about to do. I suspected he would challenge my marriage to her, and I also suspected he would try to kill any child of mine, but not this. If Ambrosius turns against me, I'll burn him, I'll burn down his city." He started coughing again, but soon stopped.

I handed him a drink.

He took it, and I said, “Whatever you do, you know we back you. You want to do things by the law, legally and with the blessing of those gone before you. You are not a usurper, but the old guard are killing you. If you plan an overthrow, then you know the men will back you. Even now they are waiting on you to join them.”

“I cannot move from this chair. I haven’t the strength to hold onto this drink. Here,” he gave it back to me and he slumped down in the chair, saying, “I cannot take any more blame. Why doesn’t he blame the one who killed her?”

“I know.”

“And I want Medraut back. Will you go down to the barrack and find a rider, tell him I want Medraut back in Deva.”

“Medraut has written orders from Ambrosius, orders to hunt Aurelius. The order said that if Aurelius isn’t brought in, you will lose your right to command…that’s what Ambrosius had ordered.”

Arthur looked at me long and hard, the look was not for me.

He sat up, answering, “Bring me parchment and quill and I will write orders, and my order is that no man of mine will ever again take orders from him while he threatens me. Medraut will come home.”

I laughed at his seriousness, so ill, so serious. “I’ll do that for you, but only for you. After I’ve had breakfast.”

“Give me some too.”

I flipped the rashers over and as I did, I noticed a shape lodged amongst the piled crates of whatever Arial had in the far corner. I had not noticed it before and it looked interesting.

“Hoi, what’s that thing over there?” I said, looking into the corner.

“Go and see.” He smiled, his seriousness gone, almost.

I pulled the pan off the fire so the rashers wouldn’t burn, got up and went to find what was hiding there. Covered by a sheepskin rug, I lifted the object up, knowing at once that it was a shield. I took off its cover, revealing something astonishing under the low light in the room. I carried it over to the fireside, my jaw hanging around my feet.

I had never seen anything so beautiful before. I brought it over to Arthur, and we both drooled over it, for it was a Roman legionary shield of wondrous make. Purely ceremonial by the look of it. Big, round and heavy, it was decorated with a legionary emblem of a black bear standing up on

hind legs, jaws open to savage, front paws out to strike. The outer rim was steel. It would turn any sword with ease.

"Where on earth did this come from?" I crooned.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" he agreed. "Caan found it when he was clearing out some old stockrooms in the barrack, found it wrapped in oiled leather. It must have been left behind when Rome pulled her troops out. It must have been here for decades. It's real. Caan thought of me and just gave it to me. Just like that. He could have kept it and sold it for a personal fortune, but he gave it to me."

I stared at him. "But the emblem. It's a bear. That's what your name means. The Bear. How coincidental is this? This is a Fate-omen. I can see you now, riding into battle with this on your arm and your Armorican sword at your side, a shield with a bear emblem…it sat here all these decades, waiting for you. Can't you see the significance of this?"

I saw the way he looked at it, at the emblem. He seemed to be delving deep into the heart of it.

He said, "It is weird, I suppose. Of all the legionary emblems, a bear. It's ceremonial, but who would waste such a thing on ceremony these days? Not me." He shrugged. "Now how about some breakfast?"

20: THE BEAR GETS BETTER

Three more days in bed, Arial told him, only then would he be allowed up and outside to breathe some fresh air.

Freezing air, I said.

And for those three more mornings, Arthur did nothing but fight hard to get between Arial's legs.

He was getting better, so I told him, "You shouldn't try to prick your doctor," and Arial agreed with me. Even though she gave away some of her reserve and allowed him to kiss her, to try every move he knew, and she sighed and panted, but would she let him in?

She frustrated him to madness, and in the end, he got out of bed and said, "We're finished, Arial, it's over between us. Say goodbye to this…" And he turned and displayed his erect cock in her face. "How can you resist it? Look at it! I swear to you, it's eight inches of pure Silurian rod. It's a beauty, what's wrong with it?"

Arial grabbed his rod in her hand, pulled on him a few times and said, “It seems perfectly healthy to me,” and he groaned with pleasure, but she only laughed at him, slapped his arse and told him to go and take the air. It was time to step out into the cold.

I sat laughing at him, then helped him find his clothes and get dressed, and together we stepped outside into the bitter air, icicles hanging from the eaves, snow on the ground.

I said, “Has your eight inch Silurian rod gone down yet?”

He complained, “No, it hasn’t. You cannot make something that big go down so fast.”

“Go and sit naked in the snow. That’ll make it shrink, but I swear, Arthur, it didn’t look eight inches to me.”

I laughed at his face. He looked fierce, and we began walking down the street.

He said, “How would you know? Do you have eight inches?”

“It swells to eight easily; but I don’t need to brag about the size of my prick.”

He nodded; “You should feel proud of that.”

“I do, I just don’t need to go about waving it in women’s faces.”

“Why not? They love it.”

We walked slowly.

I said, “My last girlfriend screamed when she saw mine standing up in her face; maybe that’s put me off.”

“Put you off women? Just because she screamed? When women see mine, they faint.”

“I would rather they fainted, screaming hurts my ears. Fainting is quieter.”

“But you’re just going to have to get used to it. Lead them into it slowly and gently; let them play with it for a while, and when it gets bigger in their hands, then warn them. Just don’t ever pull it out fully erect, that really scares them. Let them play with it while it’s still soft, see? That way they think it’s all their doing when it grows up like a great horse-cock in their faces.”

“Thanks for your sex-advice, brother. Anything else you would like to enlighten me about, about women?”

We kicked through the slush in the street.

He gave me a long cool look. “Fox, when was the last time you had a girl?”

I did not like his line of questioning. How long? Not since Caryn in Aquae Sulis…I felt uneasy.

He said, “Sometimes I think you don’t like women at all.”

“Will you shut up? You are supposed to be ill. Why don’t you act it?”

We stopped and looked at each other. And standing out in the street, we began to attract a crowd. Our entire troop came out to meet us and it was like a sudden party. They dragged Arthur off down to the barracks and here we fell into discussions of a possible overthrow; the men were eager for it, but Arthur stopped them.

“Only one thing would cause me to do that,” he told them, “and that’s Ambrosius officially rejecting me. And I don’t intend to allow him the chance. The old man is hurt and grieving and he knows what will happen to him if he rejects me. But I will tell you one thing, brothers. I will take power before the summer comes. And each one of you will be there at my side when I do.”

They listened to him stilled and quiet, trapped by what he offered them. I saw it in their eyes; adulation and awe. They cheered his words. Arthur was their world. He offered them a reason to live.

By late afternoon, I saw too he was beginning to tire, and he began coughing again, so I pulled him away, leading him home back to Arial’s. But it being so dark so early, the lamps were lit in the street, and just as we were passing, the watchman called to us from the tower over the gates, “Riders approaching, Arthur!”

We stopped and turned back. “Can you see who it is?” he called.

“A troop, twenty men at least!”

We could hear them thundering down the road, a hail from over the wall, a distant voice calling out, “Hail! Open for Medraut ap Lot!”

“Medraut!” Arthur answered. “Open the gates if you are sure it’s him!”

The gatekeeper called back, “Snarling White Wolf-head on his shield?”

“That’s him!”

The gatekeepers ran to unlock the gates and pull them open and in rode the Snake, frozen in his saddle, bringing a troop of warriors with him,

all frozen from their long ride.

At once Medraut was off his horse, and finding Arthur standing there, grabbed him into his arms, saying, “People said you were dying. But here you are, standing. I’ve been all over the country, even went to visit my sister, she blubbered like a fool when she knew you were ill…didn’t find Aurelius of course, but ran into a few wandering Saxons and chopped them up!” He laughed; his lips blue with cold and I pulled on his arm to try and get him to shut-up. His men were cold and needed housing, horses stabling.

He understood me, saying to Arthur as he turned to his men, “Cousin, you don’t look so good. A rare look for you.”

Arthur ordered him, “Take your men down to the barracks. Come and see me tomorrow. I’m staying with Arial.”

Arthur and I then went home to sleep.

Medraut came the next morn after breakfast, and wherever he went, he had Uki Wolf-leg with him. They gave us reports of Saxons running around in the north near the Wall, and Arthur knew that it would soon come time to go into massed battle against them. But for a while longer though, we stayed locked down in Viroconium, in fact, for the rest of the winter.

And when the weather finally began making its blessed turn to spring, near the end of February, we started going out for exercise, mostly down to the square to hurl javelins at targets. Here Arthur coughed with the effort, but got stronger each day.

Then one certain day, we kept on playing this game over and over because he was trying to beat me and he couldn’t. I thrashed him every time. I threw left-handed and still thrashed him. I hit the target square-on eight out of ten times and he could only hit it four out of ten. Every time I made a strike he called me an arse.

Thwump! My javelin hit the mark.

“You arse!”

His fell on the ground before his target.

I did it again, then again, then again.

“You arse!”

“What’s wrong with you?” I complained at him. “Can’t you see the target? Isn’t it big enough for you?”

I threw another javelin and thwump! Again I hit the mark. “See, it’s easy! Arthur, look, the target is at least as big as your head. You cannot miss

a thing that big, can you?"

I loved to rile him. He was starting to get wild at me. He turned and hurled his javelin and it went right past the target and hit the wall behind; there it stuck fast a moment before falling to the ground. The targets were shaped like a man's body with a head. I turned and threw mine; it hit the dummy's heart.

"Like that," I said.

He looked at me, was just about to call me an arse, when I told him, "Try and think of the javelin hitting the target before you throw it. Let it all go through your mind first, see it, feel it, then throw it."

"Good advice, you arse," he said and tried again.

I sighed, and groaned. His throwing action was never going to work, for he threw it too hard and too far and it went wayward again. He swore when it hit the wall for the thousandth time. He told me he was only letting me win because this day was my birth-day.

"Aye, that's right, I'm nineteen today," I said. "And you are only seventeen, you little snot. I am your elder and you have to respect me. So stop calling me an arse."

"Yes sir," he said.

And I threw my javelin one more time and it went right over the target and hit the wall behind. This was when he really laughed. He cracked and laughed like I had not heard him laugh in a long time. He said when he finished laughing at me that I was worth my weight in gold. We picked up our javelins from all over the ground and went home. After supper Arthur gave me something.

I did not know how much it had cost him to give me what he did. He gave me two silver rings, birth-day gifts, two Saxon rings he had got for me during the Battle of the Keels. He had put them away somewhere and forgotten where. But when he remembered, and had to go and get them, it cost him dearly. I fitted the rings on, one was light and had a red-stone embedded; the other was heavy and carved with what looked like a tiny ship, one of their keels that he had burned in the harbour at the Battle of the Keels.

They looked well next to my fox-head ring and I said, "Thank you, brother. Where did you hide them, where were they?"

He fell silent, he looked pained. He said, “I gave them to Rhonwen to look after. She had put them in her jewellery—” he stopped, struggling to control his feelings.

As I watched, he suddenly gave way, broke down and cried.

He put his head into his hands and said, “A helpless girl…a helpless girl, raped and murdered, and pregnant. Because of me, to get at me, he murdered her. I married her to save her from him, and this only made it worse. I didn’t see by marrying her it would put her in even greater danger than not.” He stopped to think, then said, “I fought so hard to save her from Aurelius, and this…this because of me.”

He was blaming himself, just what he said he wouldn’t do.

He stood up, his tears stopped.

In a rage, he said, “I’ll kill him! When I find him I’m going to kill him. I’ll show no mercy, none at all. And I know just how I’m going to do it, the way he’s going to beg me to kill him just to stop the pain.”

I watched him, watched his rage, he began to frighten even me. I stood up and grabbed hold of him, made him sit back down.

“Stop it!” I ordered. “We have to leave this place, it’s too full of pain here for you. You had to go into her room to get the rings, didn’t you? You went in there where she was killed. Just to get these rings.”

“I did,” he answered, looking at me.

I saw anguish in his eyes. “Listen,” I said, “take us out of here. Spring will be here soon, and you are well enough now to ride out. We have to leave before you let this thing destroy you. Take us out of here!”

He looked stronger and said, “I am, I will. I’m taking my war-host, and riding to Dinas Emrys. I’m taking them all, and show the old man just who it is that the warriors follow. The warriors are mine, not his. And when he sees them following me, he will give me the command, and he will give me back my sword.”

I stopped, stared at him.

The time had come.

At last, the time had come…

21: THE RED DRAGON LEARNS to FLY

Two days later we were all assembled before the main gates, ready to ride. All of us fully armed and armoured and waiting for Arthur to join us. My heart was beating fast like a running horse, my hand holding the reins trembling with anticipation, exhilaration, controlling my horse with my thighs as I held my spear hard. Around me waited a hundred mounted warriors, all of them flying as high as I was. The sun came out, the sky a clear pale blue, a cool swift breeze, a perfect early spring morning.

All of us knew it.

That when we rode out of the gates before us now, we would no longer be men of Ambrosius Aurelianus. We were Arthur's for all time, and no others. And this changed everything. Even the very structure of the army itself would soon change. Because we were no longer men of Ambrosius, there was no Eagle standard flying above us.

There was no standard at all. All we had were our own clan banners and painted shields, myself with the Stag, horned and charging, my father's clan emblem, though soon I would paint one of my own, a fox head with eyes as strange as my own. Medraut at my side with his white wolf's head snarling, the men around us with colours and totem emblems of their own.

We waited for Arthur and my patience was running out, for we wanted to ride! Ride! The horses were gathering and hoofing the ground, and when I turned, there he was, riding towards us on his shying white mare, trying to control her wildness, as if she was being led to a stallion, as if she was fighting the rider on her back. As Arthur rode up to join us…the look on his face, nothing could say it.

We looked at each other…

"Are you ready for this?" he said to me. Turned the mare's tossing head to face the troop and said aloud to them all, "Are you ready for this!"

A deafening roar as one, "Yes!"

One voice, spears up and swords out, Arial standing nearby, looking white-faced and anguished. Even she had tears in her eyes when the gates opened and we thundered out like a tide, a wave, wheeling and turning up the road, gone out of one world and into another. We rode for the first time in our lives as men of the Clan Bear, Arthur's Heroes, his own. It felt as if

everything in my life was blessed by hands unseen to take me to Avalon. We rode in a thundering roar, then a hard canter.

I looked at Arthur, riding on my right, and wearing the Roman bear-shield on his back. All signs of the long illness he had suffered were gone from him now as he cantered his horse with perfect control.

On his right-hand, rode the Snake. Medraut, fair as a golden child from a northern land, his shield up, himself as savage as the ravenous wolf he carried as his emblem. Taking to the Roman road north-west we saw both sides lined with townspeople and villagers, all out to wave and cheer us on. And as we thundered by them, my skin rose in bumps, where I felt the lash of excitement building inside me, burning like a roaring fire, heart hammering, hand on my spear gripping hard, my mind touching on nothing normal or day to day. For we were exceptional, and it felt this way in all those invisible roads of my body and mind. I could kill and kill again and still ride on at his side.

And I wondered what Arthur was feeling, because he was the One. What must it have been like for him? All faces turned to him and they watched him pass them by, too high to touch, too high to reach, like a thunder-head passing above with lightning streaks in his eyes, this was Arthur. I began to laugh, and when I looked behind, what I saw was an army of warriors mounted, each and every one of them ours.

We would last an interminable age and I laughed. Arthur caught me laughing, looked over at me and began laughing too. What can a man do other than laugh when he had all of this, and it was his and no others? Nothing mattered where we were going. Who we loved and who we fought, it was all One. Somehow the Silurian had made it all One. We were as bound to our enemies as we were to our lovers, and nothing mattered other than Arthur and how he rode us…

Rode us west into the wilds to Dinas Emrys, where camped the old man, his time over, ours just beginning. To the place elemental, the old man's eagle-perch, overlooked by dark hills like ominous waves. We crested those hills, lined along the ridge-top and looked down. Above the fort, the Eagle standard was up and flying.

While above them again, ourselves, horsemen on the hilltop, staring down, waiting. What was Arthur going to do? He had not ridden us hard to reach this place, for the road had been long from Viroconium and we took

the pace carefully. Yet in his mind there was no great rush to see Ambrosius fall, and after leaving the area of Viroconium, we were able to pull back and release our energy in a free and easy ride. We camped out overnight, gathered together around a central fire, where each and every man pledged full allegiance to Arthur.

"Will you follow me on north after Dinas Emrys and fight against the Picts?"

He had walked around the fire, the warriors ringed around him.

One voice, "We will!"

"And if I come against my father, Uthyr Pendragon, will you fight alongside me or flee!"

"Fight!"

One voice, our swords raised to the sky, firelight on our blades.

"And the Saxons? Do they live or do they die?"

"Die!" One roaring voice.

"And who do you belong to?"

"Arthur!" and the points of our swords stabbed the sky.

And the men chorused, "God's Truth be on it!"

So it was set and it was done.

And so now here we were, overlooking the last stand of Ambrosius in his home fortress, where down inside was Arthur's sword, the Armorican blade he had brought back to Britain after killing the Saxon thief who had stolen it from us.

Before anything else could be done, Arthur had to get his sword back into his hand. The wind on the ridge-top was strong and buffeting and it was cold, and as we crested the hill, our trumpeteer gave a long and deep blast on our war-horn to warn the occupants below that we had arrived.

When the echoes of the war-horn faded away, Arthur called Uki to him. "Have the men camp on sheltered ground, not too far out of sight of the fort. I'm taking Bedwyr and Medraut down inside with me."

"Just the three of you alone?" Uki asked, concerned.

"Just the three of us. Ambrosius won't hurt us. Not now. But I'm going in unarmed," and he began stripping off his weapons and handing them over to Uki; the Roman shield, his old spatha, his helmet, his long dagger, his spear, till Uki was struggling to hold it all before passing it to another.

Arthur was now unarmed between Medraut and I.

He said to Uki, “If we’re not out by sundown, you can come in and see what’s going on.”

Uki put a hand on Medraut’s shoulder in farewell, and Arthur heeled into his horse’s flank and began making his way down the steep and torturous hillside, taking Medraut and I with him. The fort perched on top of its hill seemed deserted, though servants were moving around outside and we gave our horses over to a youth who came out to meet us. He looked at us with his mouth hanging open.

“Are you…Ar—?” He stammered as he looked up at the ridge above and saw the warriors over him, moving in to camp.

“I am,” Arthur answered, relieving the youth of his embarrassment and giving him the reins of his horse. “Take care of our horses, right? I’m relying on you.”

The youth nodded; we made our way to the south-west entrance with him leading. Of course Ambrosius knew we were coming, and the gates were open and we took the long walk up through the three levels of security, three gates at different heights and levels for a man who had long feared assassination. We took the steps to the main entrance, myself and the Snake still armed, Arthur between us, naked as a warrior could be without his weapons.

Reaching the head of the stairs, we were met by an old friend; we were not expecting to see a familiar face already here before us. Lord Darfod, though he looked tense.

“Your arrival, Arthur, is timely,” he said. “Come with me.” He leant towards us, saying, “Ambrosius is dying. The Will of the Old Gods has spoken…tonight, he dies.”

“No!” Arthur said out loud.

I glanced at Medraut and he stood as impervious to emotion as ever; he gave nothing away.

Darfod then led us through the main hall and into a private room where sunlight fell in through a small high window. On a couch under the window lay Ambrosius. At once Arthur ran to him and dropped down on his knees at his bedside, taking up his hand.

“My lord, can you hear me?” he said, low.

Medraut and I moved in closer. I could see that the old man was finished, and Arthur was already grieving, for no matter what had gone on before, Ambrosius was the closest thing to a father he had ever known.

The old man opened his eyes, studying Arthur's face and saying, "You have come…did you bring your army?"

"My lord…"

"Hush, do not fuss…I knew you were coming…to take by force what I should have given you freely…only now, lying on my deathbed, on my death-day do I see the pointlessness of trying to hold on to what I once was. Tell me the truth now, son, tell me, and it will be over, were you coming to overthrow me?"

Arthur hung his head and answered, "I was. I was coming to take you…by force."

The old man sighed, "No need now…I should have handed over to you with power and dignity, instead of standing in your way and forcing you…forcing you…" he stopped, closed his eyes. Sunlight fell over his face, a wasted old face. All of the time Arthur held Ambrosius' hand and tears were falling; he made no sound.

Soon the old man woke again.

He said, "Now, now Rhonwen is gone, my grandchild with her, you are my only son…my only son…I trained you for war…then stood in your way. There are only two more things to say to you…do these things for me…" He swallowed hard and again closed his eyes, breathing in long slow breaths.

"Anything, my lord," Arthur answered him. "I only want to carry on your work. I know your work and have studied your long years of fighting the invaders—"

He stopped, unsure if Ambrosius was still listening, still alive.

Watching this scene before me, I could feel Arthur's pain. The way he cried, shedding tears like a boy and I felt the prick of tears in my own. Beside me, Medraut stood statue still, unmoved.

Ambrosius again spoke, his voice sounding very low and dry.

He said, "Stop the Germani…my lifelong enemies. Do it, Arthur, do it for me." Another shuddering breath, "One more thing…capture Aurelius and take him to Viroconium…execute him in the square outside my villa…outside the door where he murdered my daughter…in the square, execute

him there, and spill his blood on the ground…throw his broken body on the rubbish heap…leave it for the city dogs…no burial for him…the city dogs, eaten by dogs…do this, Arthur, swear it…it is my final wish."

"I swear it. I swear. I will do as you ask, sir…"

"Oh…I was wrong to blame you, Arthur, for her death…how wrong I was…and you still care for me."

All around us attendants began gathering; Ambrosius' old captains, a small group of men who were tribal chieftains, his many lawyers, his priest, Calros. Our druid and counsellor, Lord Darfod; women of the household, all those who knew him in the power of his youth and fame, now an old man dying, holding Arthur's hand.

And at last, saying so all could hear him:

"I pass the Supreme Command to Arthur, son of King Uthyr of Rheged. The Supreme Command of Armies in Britain is Arthur's and none shall gainsay him. It is passed into Law. I give you back your sword. And none shall wield it other than you, Arthur, son now to Ambrosius Aurelianus, once Supreme Commander of Britain. This job is now yours, my son."

He said all of this with a strong breath and a clutching hand and never once took his gaze from Arthur's face.

He gasped, "At the foot of the bed…look under the covers."

There was a shape at the foot of his bed, a large black bearskin, and when Arthur took the skin away, there was a long finely carved box with solid gold handles.

"Open it…"

He did.

Inside was the Armorican sword, lying on finely embroidered red material. All of us moved forward for a closer look; saw that the sword was now housed in a shining new scabbard, tipped in gold and shaped like a horse's head, highly polished leather, embossed and inlaid with gold-worked emblems that told the story of how Arthur had taken this very sword from the thieving Saxon king. It was breathtaking.

Arthur lifted it out into his hand, drew the blade from the scabbard, all of it repaired and polished till we could see it catching the sunlight and flashing like lightning. He turned to us with it up and burning in his hand, everyone moved back, all save Medraut, who stood rooted to the ground

like fixed iron. The two red jewels on either ends of the hand-guard sparked like drops of freshly spilled blood. With the scabbard came a new sword-belt, the belt itself a thing of beauty, for this now was Ambrosius' final gift. His way of saying sorry; sorry for taking it, sorry for keeping it, and sorry for all the blame.

Also inside the box was the legal document that named Arthur as heir of Britain, sealed with the Eagle, Aquila. This was the moment Arthur had been waiting for, had planned for, all of it legal, with no need to usurp or to take by force of arms. And when he put the sword back into its box, he dropped down again at Ambrosius' side, unable to speak. Everyone was silent, tense, for Ambrosius was now drawing in his last breaths, and Arthur held the old man's hand to his forehead, as if he was bent in prayers.

Tears ran down my face as I watched them, as the crowded people in the room murmured around them, a dying man with his young successor at his side. Ambrosius was gone. He ended with one slow exhale of breath. And all in the room fell on their knees and bowed their heads. The priest began his benedictions of death, and Arthur continued to hold the old man's hand, staring at his face.

The priest pushed him aside, saying, "Stand back, pagan, and let his soul go to God!"

On went the prayers and Arthur turned to me, stunned by the death before him. Mourners everywhere, women crying, the priests lighting candles around the deathbed, praying on their knees, and I pulled Arthur into my arms as hushed voices whispered around us. Next would come a night-long vigil at Ambrosius' bedside, night-long prayers for his soul before burial, when women would work to wash and dress his body. We moved away out into the main hall, subdued and not daring to yell our victory cries.

I whispered to Arthur, "It's yours! You have the Supreme Command! It's yours. Now, right now. And you never had to fight; you never had to use force. Let this console you, Supreme Commander."

Oh, how I loved saying that! It came out of my mouth with a taste of honey. But it was all too much for Arthur, him having just survived Rhonwen's murder, and now, her father waiting for him to come so he could die in his presence.

I watched his face, and he was quiet, his inner fire dampened. I looked around for Medraut; found that he was nowhere to be seen. I frowned and took Arthur to sit before the central fire, for it was late afternoon and the sun would soon set. All around us people worked, our druid gone to give orders for an evening supper and to prepare for the night-long vigil.

Returning a moment later, Darfod put the long-box with the sword on Arthur's lap, saying, "I think you forgot something."

Just as Darfod said this, there came a tremendous roar from the warriors on the ridge-top above us and Arthur lifted his head to the sound. Medraut. He must have gone back to the troop to report what had happened inside the fort below them. The sound of our warriors came echoing down the valleys, and Arthur was on his feet and he opened the box and took out the sword with its belt and buckled it around his hips, pulling the long tail of the belt tight, the tail itself tipped in gold.

He turned to Darfod and said, "What is the correct form to do now, counsellor? Do I stay for the vigil, or return to my men?"

I took Darfod's arm and said, "No vigil. It's an all-night affair and he cannot function without sleep, it makes his falling-sickness worse. Trust me, I know. Without sleep, he falls. I won't allow him to sit up all night. No vigil."

Arthur stared at me and Darfod looked impressed.

He said to me, "Well, well, it looks like Prince Bedwyr the Fox is starting to mature. That was the action of a true lieutenant. But—"

I told him, "We will stay till after supper, and then we're going back to our troop. It is the living who need him the most, not the dead."

Through all this Arthur looked at me, taken-aback.

I turned to him and said, "You are doing what I tell you. You are not staying up all night here."

He considered me seriously. He said to me, "We will do as my lieutenant says, but only one hour longer after supper. I want to say goodbye to Ambrosius, just an hour's vigil, is this all right, Prince?"

I nodded to him; "An hour and no more."

So this was what we did; while the noise of the victory celebration on the hilltop carried on, but it was offensive to those in the fort to hear the joy

of those outside at the death of someone they loved, and Arthur had to send orders to shut them up.

When it fell quiet, after supper, he went into the room where Ambrosius lay and sat with the priests under candlelight to pray. I stood guard at the door, watching him. He did not cry any more, but for the first time in his life, I think he prayed something in his own words, in his own way, and before he left to go back to his troop, he bent and kissed the old man's brow, put a hand on his chest and turned away.

We moved out with torches in hand to go and find the stammering youth who was looking after our horses. With the torches held high to light our way, we began riding up the hillside, only to realise we were being followed.

It was the youth. He was following us, huffing and puffing behind, running upwards and calling, "Come this way, masters! It is easier for the horses this way, my lords!"

"You better not be leading us into the swamp!" I called to him before following.

"No, master, this is the best way. I will lead you."

"Why not?" Arthur said, and he turned first and began following the boy. I frowned at him, for he was always so trusting. Still the youth led us true, and what we met when we rode into camp, all lit with fires, was us being surrounded by exhilarated warriors. They pulled Arthur off his horse and crushed him between the lot of them. I joined in, and the joy of the men around me swept away all that had gone before us.

"Supreme Commander!" they called. "And the sword! He has the sword!" And it went on like this for most of the night, and in the end all of my efforts to get Arthur to sleep failed…

As son-in-law to Ambrosius, it was Arthur's duty to stay for his funeral-rites, and the following morn was a fine sweet spring day in the mountains. And taking a long look at the hills around me before the ceremony, I found someone hiding amongst the rocks, watching everything with wide-eyed wonder. The youth who had led us through the swamp last night. In the full light of morning he looked skinny and dirty, a greasy face and unwashed hair. He stared at me as if I was about to pierce his heart with my sword.

He jumped to his feet and backed away when I approached him.

“You have been here all night, haven’t you?” I asked him.

“Aye, my Lord Prince Bedwyr.”

He knew who I was and he nodded at me.

“So, who are you and what do you want?”

“I am nobody, I was only looking.”

He looked so bloody skinny I said, “Come with me and get some breakfast.”

So I brought him before Arthur and said, “Look, I found a spy!”

“Kill him now!” Arthur ordered.

The youth fell on his knees and begged, “No, lord, I was only watching!”

“And I was only jesting,” Arthur told him. “Come on, get up, I was jesting with you. Do you want some of Tegid’s camp biscuits? He mixes them with horse shit; here, try one.”

He offered the youth a biscuit and he grabbed it and stuffed it into his mouth. We watched him, amazed. He was starving.

Seeing him like this, Arthur called to Tegid to bring some mochyn-bread, then saying to the youth, “What is your name?”

“Drustan ap Dagoneth,” and bits of biscuit fell out of his mouth as he spoke.

“Doesn’t know how to eat,” Arthur said to me. “How old are you?” to the boy.

“I do not know, lord, I think about nineteen summers, maybe more, I do not know.”

“What do you say, Fox? Do we keep him, educate him? He eats like a dog.”

Medraut came walking over, saying, “He needs a bath, that’s what he needs, bathed just like a dog.”

“We all needing bathing,” Arthur told him and got up. “We can go back down to the fort and get cleaned up for the funeral-rites after breakfast. Bring Drustan with us.”

Medraut moved away, saying to Arthur as he went, “What a way to start your Supreme Command, giving baths to lice-bitten fools.”

22: ARTORIUS S.C. in BRITANNIA

It was a long ride from Ambrosius' stronghold back to Deva after all the death-ceremonies were over, but worth the effort as the land hereabouts was awesome in its height and beauty. All the ride homeward, Arthur was quiet within himself, staring as he did at the beautiful towering hillsides around us, at the mist and the sunlight.

I began to wonder if it had even entered his thick skull that he was now the Supreme Commander of Armies in Britain. Yet when I joined him on the ride, he gave me his enigmatic smile.

A moment later I dropped back to check on Tegid, who doubled with the youth, Drustan, riding up behind him. For none of us had the heart to leave the boy behind in the deserted wilds, so we had enlisted Tegid to carry him for a while; Drustan smelling better since he had been bathed and scrubbed and combed.

Just behind Arthur rode Medraut and Uki, always together. In the rear came the old guard, escorting the chieftains back to their home cities. The sun broke through lowering clouds; clouds that were breaking up now and drifting east over mountain heads. And as the sun burned down I saw the flash of silver off the sword at Arthur's side, off the Roman bear-shield on his back. He looked round at me. He was riding by himself. There was a horse-and-half gap all the way around him. Was he being avoided now that he had become Commander, too high to approach? He looked back at me again and I trotted to his side, joining him. Here I saluted him.

I asked him, "Are they avoiding you now? Do they think you must not be approached without formal permission?"

"You were doing it yourself."

"I was not!"

"You were, even Medraut looks at me strangely. I don't want this to happen. I don't want the men to think they cannot approach me now. I'm still me, am I not?"

"More than ever. But you will have to speak to them, tell them they need only come to you with a salute. Reassure them. That's all you need to do. That boy, Drustan, he is in awe of you."

He frowned at me; "I do not want my men to be afraid of me."

I laughed a little and said, "They say it's lonely at the top. And you have lost as much as you have gained. You lost a wife, a child, a father, then

gained the highest place in the land, all at one blow. All of this makes them stand back from you."

Arthur fell quiet again. We came down from a long sloping hillside towards a wooded valley with a long shining lake, where there was a place of flat ground, full of trees budding into new leaf and freshly risen spring flowers. Still at Arthur's side, I saw him staring ahead before he pulled his horse off the road and into the glade; here he dismounted, taking off his shield and helmet.

He ordered, "We will camp here tonight."

We followed, the troop grateful for the break, our mounts rested and let out to water and graze. Night fell in the glade and the fires were lit. The men gathered to eat and talk. Arthur stood alone for a while, listening to the voices around him, then he moved, stepped before them. All faces around the fire looked at him.

He told them, "Do not fear me. Don't think you cannot approach me now I'm Supreme Commander. Nearly all of you are my seniors in years and experience, I'm only seventeen. So you don't need to make spaces around me. I'm yours if you want me."

"Do not think we all want you!" someone called out, one of the old guard. He stood up, saying, "Do not think, boy, that everyone in this land wants you."

"I don't think that," Arthur answered him. "I just had a wife and unborn child murdered by one who doesn't want me. Do you think I haven't noticed? And the one who murdered—he will bring others against me until he's found and destroyed. Don't you know what Ambrosius wants for this traitor? Are you a part of the traitor's code or that which Ambrosius left in my charge?"

"Aye! Shut-up, you old bastard, and sit down," Medraut said. "Or go and bury yourself with your old commander."

"Snake," Arthur turned to him. "Let the man speak." And he began finding his way through the gathered crowd to the old man's side. He sat down next to him, still speaking so we could all hear, "What do you know of those who do not support me?"

The old warrior looked indignant.

He glared at Arthur and answered, "I am not declaring that I myself do not support you, though it is hard to accept a boy of your youth in charge

of the land's fighting men. What I am saying to you is that you need to fathom the immensity of what has happened to you. One as young as you cannot possibly see how dangerous your position now is."

Everyone sat in tense silence, listening. Through the darkness of the trees and the looming mountains, dark shapes around us, it was as if danger was about to break over us here and now. I tensed where I stood. Some of the warriors were turning to the older man and staring at him. I saw some put their hands to their daggers. Medraut was on the verge of standing up and cutting the man down with his sword.

Arthur looked only at the old warrior.

He said, "You are Llachlan ap Noll."

"I am."

The man looked impressed, for the boy commander knew his name.

"Then you should do something for me," Arthur said. "As I'm too young to understand what's happened to me, you can tell me all about it. And when we get back to Deva, you can pick a troop of your most trusted men and ride out in hunt of Cynan Aurelius, help bring him to the justice Ambrosius wanted. His dying wish to me was to find Aurelius and bring him home for execution. You can tell me all that you know."

For some reason Llachlan found this funny; he roared with laughter and said, "You are giving me orders? I am not enlisted in your army."

"You are. I have inherited all of Lord Ambrosius' old men. You are mine now. But, if you don't wish to follow my orders, I'll then know whose side you are on, won't I?"

Arthur stood up; he bowed to Llachlan and came over to join me, leaving the man sitting with his mouth firmly shut.

So all the way back to Deva the following day, Arthur and Llachlan rode side by side, deep in discussion.

And as we got closer to the city, Arthur's horse began again her wild shying; here I heard Llachlan say to him that his horse was yet another mistake he had made—female of course, so was an unreliable mount to take anywhere, let alone into battle. "Never take a mare on heat into battle, lad. Stallions are the horses to ride into battle. And mares, when they come into season, upset the stallions, and this is the last thing you need when on campaign, wild stallions!"

But the real reason for Epona's shying was because the roads into the city were crowded with cheering townspeople. Hundreds, all lining the road and over the bridge and we rode in through them, proud and exhilarated, with Arthur riding his shying mare, trying to control her head as the crowds waved and called his name. Banners flew, the Westgate opened and the city was ours. Girls swooned at the sight of us, daring to come out and run alongside our horses.

I had never seen anything like it before! It was brilliant, elevating, exhilarating. The young unmarried girls of the city had somehow heard on the wind that the new Commander was a mere seventeen and his guard not much older, and here they all were, out to meet us. They stood in groups with their girlfriends, waving and calling.

For a moment I looked away from the girls and saw Val and Gareth also riding out to meet us. Val must have felt so ancient at twenty-six! Our friends joined us, Arthur delighted and laughing to see them again; they greeted us, ecstatic, as they led us through the gates.

I cried out to Gareth over the noise, "Where did all these girls come from?"

"All for you, Fox!" he cried back. "It's good to see you two again! What has Arthur done to himself since I've been gone?"

"No, what have you done to yourself?"

Since last I had seen him, he had been skin-branded down both arms and over his hands; blue bands and swirling circles and looking like a Pict himself. Before he could answer, we were all mustering in the main square and being welcomed by the stationed captains and city governors. Before all these important people, I felt breathless.

Arthur and I, we both outranked all of these men around us now. It was overwhelming. The feeling went to my head and I almost fell off my horse with the heat of it all. I looked away to get my breath, and when I looked back, Arthur was off his horse and shaking hands with everyone at once, no one giving him space now. Medraut cleaved to his side and finally showing his emotions; joy it was, and something like rapture on his face.

As I came closer, I heard a grab of what Arthur was saying to the stationed captains gathered around him, "No, nothing needs to change. Same men, same units, same captains, there's no need to change anything now. Stay as you were."

The old guard were delighted to hear this, and with Llachlan ap Noll standing at Arthur's side and nodding, they were satisfied that the new Commander was not going to relieve them of their ranks and duties. I think they thought the new-boy was going to demote them, or even get rid of them entirely. Still they wanted to see the document sealed with the Aquila from Ambrosius to truly know that this extraordinary happening was real and set in Law. It was planned for this very evening, a feast-come-meeting where Arthur would publicly lay his sword and the document on the table before them.

Proof-positive he was who he said he was.

We all moved away, leading our horses to water and stables, still surrounded by warriors, townsmen and magistrates, sending the stable-boys delirious at the sight of us and our warhorses. And as they tried to unsaddle Arthur's white mare, he stood back, laughing at their struggle. And when our horses were stabled and watered, we all walked out again into the city streets, still with an escort, walking back to the Officer's quarters where we had camped before.

Only this time when we entered the house, we found it much improved. Fit for a Supreme Commander. Rugs on the floor, a big dining table with silver candle-holders, comfortable padded chairs, a fully stacked fireplace. And best of all, the rooms had their doors back on, huge and heavy doors that were carved with symbolic designs by master-craftsmen.

The private latrines outside were scrubbed and clean and scented with bowls of whatever herbs smelled the best; the tiny back garden tended and planted with new spring flowers. The rooms we had before were clean and the beds lain with fresh covers of wolf-skins over linen sheets, the bolsters newly stuffed with fleece. Heaven. Just heaven. The door into the room Arthur would occupy was carved with something he stopped and looked at. He frowned, for it was the Eagle. And he did not want the Eagle. But he had to take it for now.

Then the three of us just stood looking at each other. We were alone, looking at each other before we broke into wide grins, and began laughing. It was the first time we three had the chance to be alone together since Arthur took Supreme Command, and we realised at last what he had truly done—done to us.

We were youths who stood on top of the world and we were fast in each other's arms; hugging, laughing, jumping, slapping each other on the back, falling into a wild wrestling game from room to room, pushing Arthur back and forward between us, and Medraut saying, "Look what you bloody done to us, Supreme Commander! A brat! Naught but a dark Silurian brat and look what he's done!"

I could not believe it was real, any of it. Delirious, ecstatic, we took him between us and wrestled him to the floor, piled on top of him, till I jumped up and said, "Any wine in this room?"

Looking then in the chest, where of course was the wine, and I poured out three glasses, red Egyptus glasses, and we toasted each other's magnificent successes. We drank most of the amphora before Arthur decided to tell us, "You know, you two, now that I'm Commander, there will be some who will want to assassinate me."

"Oh, shut-up," Medraut told him, "and drink your wine. You are not going to be poisoned tonight. Another night maybe, but not tonight."

"Snake, what I heard from Llachlan was that someone once tried to poison Ambrosius," and Arthur looked at his glass of wine, studied it a moment, then drank it down in one; he stood for a moment, waiting. "Not dead yet."

He was teasing us and we finished the amphora, knowing that if the wine was truly poisoned, we could all die together and be happy.

Not long after this there came a knock at the main door. Medraut opened it, finding a messenger from the senior magistrate, Cassius Lucien, who told us we had to wash, dress, and get ready for the feast in the town-hall. And the feast started out formal and very tense, the evening dark by the time we walked into the hall where a long-table waited with seated judges, captains and magistrates; our counsellor and chief druid, Lord Darfod ap Luca, all of them studying us with serious frowns and unbending wills.

We arrived dressed in our best cavalry uniforms, like Romans, carrying our helmets under our left arms and stood to attention before them. The elders saluted us and we returned the salute and Arthur began it without anyone having the chance to speak. He was carrying his sword and he placed it down on the central part of the table where sat the head magistrate, Cassius. Out came the Document that named him heir, and it too went down before them. Arthur stood back between Medraut and I. And as the

Document was passed from man to man to read, we three were inspected down to the last nail in our boots.

One elder looked at me and said, “Prince Bedwyr ap Pedrawg of Dogfeiling in Gwynedd, where is your father now, boy?”

I stiffened for this, saying firmly, “With Lord Uthyr Pendragon, sir.” A terrible hushed silence met my words; all the men stopped studying the Document and looked at me.

Then, “And Medraut ap Lot. Where is your father?”

The same. “With Uthyr Pendragon, after all, my father is Uthyr’s brother.”

“How interesting,” Cassius said. “Arthur, son of Uthyr, has personal officers who all have fathers who stand with the rebel Uthyr Pendragon. How curious. How unprecedented.”

They all glared at us as the Document was pushed from man to man, yet they all nodded, impressed when they read the legal words scripted by Lord Ambrosius himself, sealed with the Eagle standard, ratified by official army lawyers. In fact, every lawyer in Britain who stood for Rome had signed the Document. Another unprecedented act. The scrutinising went on; another elder even pulled out a piece of polished glass that he used to enhance the words on the page so his old eyes could read it better. I glanced sideways and noticed Medraut trying to control the smirk on his face. Still the blessed paper went around the table, till Cassius said, “I see there are some stipulations here that are not to the liking of some of us.”

Wrong thing to say.

Arthur stepped forward and snatched the paper out of the man’s hand and said, “Like it or not, it stands legally. Thank you for your concern,” and he rolled the parchment up and gave it to Padric, who had come as our lawyer, sitting at the table with the others.

“I think that’s enough,” Arthur added. “You have all seen it, and the sword is real too.” He took it back as well as the document and said, “Can we go and get something to eat now, please?”

They all continued to stare at him; no one moved.

He said, “What now?”

Llachlan answered, “Arthur, you are supposed to dismiss us, your captains.”

No response. Everyone stared at him.

Arthur said, “How can I dismiss you when I never summoned you?”

“Just do it,” Llachlan hissed at him.

“All right. Dismissed. All of you.”

All the men who were soldiers stood up and saluted Arthur as Llachlan shook his head, leading us with him through double-doors and into the main room, where we were amazed to find a decorated dining hall, benches and tables, all around a central table laden with food, and women waiting to serve.

We took our places at the head-table, sat through a round of tedious speeches, and Medraut struggled not to yawn. I tried to look interested, but if Arthur could sit staring only at which platter of food he was going to eat from first, I did not see why I should have to pay attention either.

But then silence fell.

Everyone sat looking at us.

The speeches were over and they were waiting for Arthur to make a reply. He had not been listening to a word that was said.

So he came to his feet and said, “Thank you,” and sat back down again. A moment of stillness, then it was on.

At last, the chance to eat and drink without control. The hall burst into noise; women serving, servants running everywhere, those hungry magistrates stuffing themselves even fatter. Everyone talked and a moment later, musicians came in to play and sing.

And Arthur said to me, “Is this madness? Lord Darfod just told me you are eating stuffed dormice, a Roman delicacy. Though I suggest you stick to hares instead.”

He laughed at me as I grabbed a cup of wine and washed my mouth out, for the idea of eating mice almost gagged me, and I swilled some wine to get rid of the taste. The wine flowed all night; I got so drunk Arthur and Medraut had to carry me home between them. They left me alone all the next day to recover.

And when they came home together in the early evening, Arthur walked in carrying an armful of rolled up parchments and a big heavy leather-bound book, all of which he dropped on the table in the main room and sat down on a chair. I was already sitting there, waiting for them with a stiff thumping in my head.

And when Medraut threw off his cloak, he glared at me.

He said, “We’ve been working all day, and all you have done is laze around here with the last of last night’s wine. Great work, Fox, some lieutenant you are.”

“What are all these parchments?” I said, trying not to feel the sting of his remarks.

“Maps,” Arthur told me. “And this big book, before you ask, is Ambrosius’ old Notitia; lists and lists of who holds what and where and how many. Roman precision. I got it from Padric.” He pushed the book over to me, saying, “Read it for me, will you? Memorise every bloody word, then tell me all about it by tomorrow morning.”

He laughed because this was what he was going to do himself, memorise every bloody word he read that was relevant to his command, and memorise it word for word, perfectly. This was the kind of mind he had, and he knew I could not do this kind of trick. I grinned at him. Damn his bones, he made me love him more than anyone else alive…

Though this was not all, for once settled he began to write a letter on the thin-slated wood tablets with ink and stylus that he had brought in with the maps; writing to his father, entreating Uthyr to support him in the coming Pictish wars. I looked through the Notitia as he did, and when he finished writing, he asked Medraut to deliver the letter personally into Uthyr’s hand.

Medraut refused; he cracked.

He cried, “You are using me as your errand-boy? Use Gareth, he’s our errand-rider. Bugger you, cousin.”

“Medraut,” Arthur pointed the stylus at him, “anyone else other than you and my father will merely throw this letter away. Gareth wouldn’t even get through the gates. You know Uthyr, you know him better than I do; he’s your beloved uncle. You can negotiate between him and me. And that’s what I want you to do. Negotiate as my representative. Take Uki with you if you want.”

“Oh, wonderful! You know Uthyr will probably hold Uki and me hostage if I go before him. He always does that.”

“I know he does. But you have your father on your side; your father is good to you, isn’t he? Lot won’t let any harm come to you, and being a hostage to Uthyr is merely formal. He knows what will happen to him if you are harmed. He cannot use you to lever me and he knows it. It won’t be

for long, just till I arrive. Take the letter, all right? And don't forget to send a reply," and he gave the bound tablet to Medraut, who took it with a snarl, glaring at Arthur and saying, "Can you at least wait till tomorrow? I'm not ready to go tonight."

"That's all right."

"You use me for all the rubbish jobs."

"Don't be so dim-witted. Can't you see? Mediating between Uthyr and me is probably one of the most important jobs anyone can do in this land. You are going to carry a huge responsibility, and it gives you a chance to show your brilliance, for who else would I pick but you? You are the only one I would."

Medraut gave way.

He sat staring at Arthur before breaking into a wide grin; pointed at him and saying, "You are one bloody clever bastard, but I still told you to get buggered," and he got up and went out, slamming the door behind him. Where the following morn, right after breakfast, Medraut carried on his fuss from the night before as he left with the letter, as he was told to do.

Weeks went by, and Medraut did not send home to Arthur with a reply. But Arthur never worried about his cousin; he got on with the jobs at hand, which these days meant training, training, training. I was delegated to work down at the amphitheater where our unit was striving to get back into shape.

There was training with horses, breaking in new ones, bringing warriors up on their combat riding skills. We began daily tournaments with mock battles, sword skills, javelin throwing with myself as trainer, and trying to get Drustan to sit on a horse and stay there.

And we all waited for Arthur to turn eighteen, where every day he was away somewhere else, readying the captains to take their units north to Luguvalos. The Picts were already raiding again, and sometimes in huge numbers. We would need every man in Britain for the coming battles, and Arthur had sent out for added forces to muster in Deva for the push north.

23: ARTHUR's FIRST CAMPAIGN BEGINS

So came the Twelfth day of Aprilis, and Arthur had purposefully arranged for the troops to leave Deva for the campaign north this very day, his eighteenth birth-day. As if he was giving himself the best birth-day

present ever invented; to lead out a war-host numbering four hundred riders. Added to these numbers would go counsellors, clan poets, supply wains, pack animals, camp servants, wives and whores, and anyone else who was willing to foot-slog the long leagues north to the Great Wall and fight in our cause.

And if I thought we had done many things in our young lives that were exciting, it felt like nothing compared to what was before me this day. Not even me, Bedwyr the Fox, had any true inkling of what Arthur was about to do. I truly felt it when I saw him waiting at the Northgate, mounted on his white horse, fully battle-dressed, the Roman bear-shield on his back, the polished helmet on his head with a black horsehair tail and chain-mail neck guard. The Armorican sword in its brilliant scabbard at his side. Was it really him? Eighteen years old and commanding everything around him with an air of presence that I felt I could take in my hand and swallow.

When I rode up to join him at his left-hand, I saluted him in correct and honourable manner as my Supreme Commander. He accepted me with a return salute.

Now under the bright morning April sun, we stood our horses in line to watch the troops filing out. For his command, Arthur had reinstated the use of the cavalry draco-standards, golden dragon-heads that screamed when riding into battle; the heads were held high, and as the men came out, the unit decurions, our captains, saluted him and moved on up the North Road, flying their banners, units with their standard-bearers at the head, the Old Guard still carrying the Roman Eagle in an endless parade of soldiers and horses, all that Britain could send to her defence.

I watched the troops filing by, hardly able to sit still in my saddle with exhilaration coursing through me; here I noted the restructure of our war-hosts.

While I had been busy with training down in the amphitheatre, Arthur met each day with his captains to organise the troops. Now there were ten units of forty troopers each, riding two abreast, each unit with its own standard-bearer and decurion.

Two wing captains, Valarius ap Weylin, praefectus ala, right wing; and Owain ap Morfan, the same of the left wing. Our own inner unit of the Supreme Commander was called the Clan Bear, headed of course by Arthur, with myself and Medraut as first and second lieutenants. Cai Long-man,

sergeant-at-arms, and captain of the rear-guard. And so as this moment lasted an age in me, I could feel Arthur beside me in the way a man can feel the hot summer sun on naked skin. His horse tossed her head and gave out a high neigh to the sky. And knowing it was time to ride to war, he pulled out of line and joined our unit when they came out, riding at the head with me at his side.

As we moved up the north road, I said to him, "Happy birth-day, Commander. You will remember this birth-day for the rest of your life."

"I don't think anyone will forget this day," he answered, riding with me to move forward to the head of our Clan.

And it was a long ride north to the Luguvalos, and with so many following in the train behind, it would take longer than it would have if we were only out on a scout alone as we used to do in the days before Ambrosius died.

In the end though we rode only as far as Mamucium that first day, as it had started to rain and Arthur stopped the ride to station ourselves in this old Roman marching camp. And as was proper, he had Ambrosius' old campaigning tent with him, his praetorium, and the men to erect it. As the Commander's tent, it went up in the centre of the camp, a place Arthur would share only with his private inner guard: myself, Cai, Gareth and Val, and his bodyguards on the outside.

Now as we set up camp, the army moved around us in good chaotic order, with men going down to the rear where they could gather rations from the suppliers following. Unit banners rose; fires were lit as the rain had eased; horses fed and tethered between the tents, cold air rising from the wet ground as evening settled in.

And still in some kind of exhilarated high, I went to organise our supper. I was soon back again, bringing Tegid with me, ordering him back as Arthur's personal cook.

Tegid went off to do his duty while the rest of us went into our erected tent and piled our gear by the doorway and stood dripping on the ground, watching some lads set up the camp beds for later. Arthur was nowhere to be seen, but I soon heard a staggering cheer come from what sounded like a thousand voices from somewhere away in the distance. I wondered what in all hell-fire was going on before I remembered it was his birth-day—someone must have told the secret. Most likely Cai.

And just as I was about to go and find the party, it started lashing down with rain again. It was getting dark and water ran like curtains off the sides of the tent, so I pulled down the flaps and tied down the door. It was not long before Arthur came home, soaking wet.

Here I swore at him, “Hoi! Look at you, you shouldn’t get wet like this, you have only just recovered from lung-fever. Get that fire stoked up!” I ordered one of the attendants around our tent.

The boys brought in a brazier and stoked it high with fuel; it was so bloody cold after such a warm day, and Arthur looked at me with a grin, cold as death and trying to find something warm to put on.

“Don’t you love being on campaign?” he asked me. “Especially when it’s your birth-day and everyone wants to have a party and it pours piss from the sky all over you instead, that’s what I like best.”

He started looking for a spare woollen shirt in his saddlebags when Tegid came in carrying a huge iron hot-pot full of his remarkable camp-stew. The boy was a genius cook and I wanted to kiss him for being so bloody good and arriving on time.

He set the pot down on its tripod by the brazier and said, “For the Commander’s birth-day, I’ve added extra rations of everything,” and he turned to leave.

“Who said you could go?” Arthur stood in front of him.

Tegid paled and stammered, “Sorry Commander,” and saluted him, waiting to be dismissed.

But Arthur said, “I mean if you cooked it, you can stay and eat some with us.”

Tegid answered, “Commander, I have already eaten. It’s why I am a cook. I get to taste everything I make in large amounts before anyone else.”

“Eat something, Tegid, you wouldn’t dare dig into the Commander’s pot.” Arthur stood his ground and Tegid was caught.

“Yes Commander,” he said.

Arthur then waited for Tegid to start spooning out his stew.

I stood watching them, feeling something…something in Arthur, in the way he moved, in the way he looked at Tegid. Changed? How could he not be changed after what had happened to him over these past months, what he would become in the future.

To me there was tension around him; an air of something that felt like the edge of a knife that he was trying to blunt. It was dangerous, cutting, even violent. But he was still himself, and he ordered us to sit on our camp-stools and stuff ourselves from Tegid's pot. Soon enough the rest of our Clan came in, dumping their gear and helping themselves till the tent was full and everyone talking at once. And of course it would be Cai to start questioning first.

"Tell me all about it, Bear."

"About what?" Arthur turned to him.

Cai crouched before the brazier for its warmth, and said, "What do you think, you goose? What are your plans? We're supposed to be your captains and you haven't said a word about your campaign plans. How are we supposed to know what's going on in your head? Are we to follow you blindly?"

I looked at Cai and tried to get him to shut-up with a stare.

I shook my head, no.

But Arthur stood up and faced Cai down.

He said, "Those are fair enough questions to ask." He stared at Cai and Cai shrugged his shoulders and went on eating his stew.

"Well, are you going to answer me or not?" he mumbled, mouth full.

"No."

"Oh, I see," Cai said, pointing with his spoon at Arthur, "you want me to guess, just so you can see me fall. I'm not taking the bait this time, Bear."

"Then do not ask me to give out my plans."

"Cai," Gareth stepped in. "Can't you see? He hasn't got any plans. That's why he won't answer, why he puts the question back on you."

"You think I don't have any plans, Gareth?"

Arthur turned then on him.

I came to my feet; said to them, "Enough. You want the glory to come? Then don't push. Don't push him."

Arthur looked at me. Everyone watched him, for he had the look of someone who cloaked a hard truth. Outside the rain pounded and he turned to the door behind him.

He looked back at us and said, "All right, but now, this is for your ears only. Because I trust you men. Trust you all."

Cai and Gareth glanced at each other.

Arthur said, moving to cover the tent door, “I haven’t told anyone this, especially not the old guard, but I will, just not yet. For what I want to do, we need more men, and I need to train infantry troops. But I don’t know right now if I can find those troops, or if Uthyr will support me against the Picts. We all know our true enemies are the Saxons, and the Saxons are the ones Ambrosius charged me to fight.”

Everyone remained silent, the rain outside making it impossible for anyone to stand and eavesdrop on what he was saying.

Everyone looked at him.

He paused, then went on. “What I’m going to do is dangerous and carries a high degree of risk. So for you, Cai, it all depends on Uthyr. And I know he won’t support me, so I’m going to occupy his fort, break down his defences, rout any supporters he has, and take his title for my own. You have long known I’m going to take the Red Dragon from my father. That’s what I’m going to do now. When we reach Luguvalos, I’m routing his forces and making myself Pendragon.” He sat down on a camp-stool by the fire and sighed; “Now you know.”

I said, “You are going to invade Uthyr’s lands? Simply that. Not the Picts at all?”

Arthur told me, “That’s right, Fox. You see, the old guard is expecting me to march right past Uthyr’s lands and cross the Wall into the North, as if we could do that. March right into Pictish lands and expect to destroy them? It’s madness. But I had to get the forces here to march north. Only the elders think it’s to fight the Picts. What I’ve really come for is the Red Dragon. Picts come later. But for now, I won’t let the troops go marching on, thinking what they think. By the time we reach halfway to Luguvalos, I’m halting the march. From there, I’ll tell them, and by that time too, they won’t resist me. I can have them. I can have them eating out of my hand by then.”

I studied his face. He was supremely confident.

“And that’s why you sent Medraut to Uthyr,” I said. “To open the way.”

He nodded; “I’m depending on Medraut now. Also by the time we reach Luguvalos, Medraut will have done half the work for me. If the Goddess of War looks down on me with favour, then maybe she will look down on my cousin too.”

“Jupiter’s hairy stones,” Cai answered. “You are banking on the Snake to help you? You take mighty risks, Bear, you really do. But whatever you do, I am yours to command.”

He saluted and bowed his big head. Still everyone looked grave and we all fell silent. Invade Uthyr’s stronghold? This idea was even more intense than mounting wars against the Picts.

Arthur answered our silence. “It might not be as bad as you think. If you all stand by me, you can have what I have. Under the Red Dragon, we will be the Lords of Britain and if you want this, you will stand by me.”

“Only because it’s your birth-day today,” Gareth mumbled. And everyone laughed. Just then the horn sounded the mark to retire for the night. We all rose together and got ready for sleep…

24: DESERTION FROM the RANKS

We marched on the following day and rode for three leagues before Arthur turned Commander and halted the troop; gave orders to his captains to ride up and down the lines to have all troops dismount and walk now on foot.

The old cavalry custom of walking our horses to save their strength for battle. And as it was customary to walk our mounts, all obeyed and dismounted, and when this was done, the journey continued with me glaring at Arthur because he knew how much I hated marching.

I began foot-slogging up the old Roman road through some of the most beautiful country in Britain. Rheged of lakes, valleys, rivers, mountains, fells and hills, so beautiful I wanted to weep. Though by lunch-time I did not care too much about landscapes of beauty. Already my hip was starting to ache. All so my bloody horse could have a rest. Bugger the bloody beast, happily plodding away at my side, snorting and making eyes at Arthur’s mare. I said to him, “Should I let my stallion mount your mare? I’ll let him shaft her blue if you don’t let me ride.”

“Don’t talk dirty in front of Epona,” he said, “she gets embarrassed. Anyway, I never said you couldn’t ride, just that you had to walk.”

“What kind of twisted logic is that?”

Gareth came riding up, calling out, “Mid-day!”

“Halt the march!” Arthur answered and we all stopped for a break. At last! I threw myself down on the ground, where I groaned to myself on my

back and looked up at the sky.

While I watched the clouds, Arthur rode off somewhere and I struggled up again to go and get my lunch before limping back to my horse. I always suffered whenever I had to walk long distances. And I was in a great deal of pain by the time we made our next night camp that evening. Around me, soldiers were working to set up the tents and I limped with my horse to water.

I stopped at the river-side. I stopped and started thinking, bothering myself about what Arthur was going to do when we reached Luguvalos, bothering myself even about Medraut.

I knew how brave the Snake was to have gone alone into that territory, but Uthyr was his uncle, and Uthyr loved Medraut far more than he did his own son. But what would happen when we got there? Would Arthur go into battle against his father? To me there was no greater evil than kin fighting kin, especially sons and fathers.

I recalled then that my own father was a part of it all. I stood by the river, looking down into the water. The sun was setting, the tent was up, the noise was high. After a while, I moved back to camp, where the pain as I walked went from my hip, down the bone in my leg to my ankle, up to my knee and back into my hip again. When I got back to our tent, I found something hanging outside the main door, mounted on the pole and shining in the setting sun. Arthur's Roman bear-shield. I stopped to look at it, for it marked the area of Supreme Command.

As he had no standard to fly from the pole, the shield stood in its place, till the time came for him to take the Red Dragon.

Everything was set when I went inside, my pallet was up and I fell on it, burning with pain. I closed my eyes, set my jaw and lay very still, breathing hard, all till I saw Val standing over me, saying, "What's wrong, Bedwyr, you look pale."

At once I said to him, "Please, go and find Arial for me…she should be down with the troop doctors, you know?"

He nodded and was gone.

I waited still for my doctor, and when she came, it was supper-time already, and I could smell the stew in the hot-pot Tegid had brought in. Everyone was in for supper except Arthur. I had not seen a sign of him since he rode off before lunch.

Arial came then to mend me, saying, “My sweetheart, what have you done to yourself?”

“It’s just something that happens to me sometimes, when I have to walk long distances…pain in my hip, in my left leg, down to my ankle… pain that’s agony, can you help?”

Gareth brought in a stool for her to sit on, and doing so, she told me to strip off with my breeches, and she turned me onto my right side and began working my left hip and leg. I moaned in pain, and she put me on my stomach and kneaded my lower back till I felt and heard a loud crack. She turned me again, and using oils from her bag, she began a deep massage of my hip and leg. The strength and power in her hands astonished me. She could reach down into the muscles, down to the bone and my skin began to flush and burn, a warming sensation that eased the pain.

I had never felt anything like it before, the power of her. And I watched her face as she worked; her concentration a will of power in itself. I smiled at her, she was beautiful, like one of those fair goddesses Arthur loved so much. But poor Arial had shrunk in size, only because I was taller than her at last. Seems I was still growing.

Her kneading went on for a long time, so long I allowed myself to enjoy it. I closed my eyes, listening to the voices around me. They were all there, our inner Clan, talking.

Val: “I don’t like the sound of what’s happening down there.”

Cai: “Neither do I. Sounds like rebellious talk. I’ll have to go.”

Gareth: “Leave it a moment longer, he has it under control. Don’t go blundering in now.”

Cai: “Who blunders?”

Gareth: “You do. You blunder and fall over your own big bollocks.”

Cai: “I’ll smash your skull in for that, you foul little weasel.”

Val: “Shut up you two, this is serious.”

Then I heard sounds coming from outside, somewhere to the rear of the camp. Voices raised. Sounds of anger and violence.

My guts sank and I called out, “What’s going on? Val, what’s happening out there?”

Val came to the door and told me, “Seems some of the men, the old guard, don’t like what Arthur had to tell them. He told them, you know,

about what he's going to do at Luguvalos, about invading Uthyr's stronghold. Trouble brewing, Fox, come on, get up and come with me."

"I have to go," I said to Arial as I pulled on my breeches, tied them up, put my boots back on and followed Val out into the early night. Torches were lit around the camp and we walked down to where I could see a large gathering of men. All in a wide circle they were, sometimes quiet, sometimes calling out and some with anger in their voices.

With me and Val came the rest of our Clan and we pushed through to the centre of the ring, the men allowing us entry. In the ring was a tall pole topped by a flaming lamp; in the light, and alone, was Arthur. He stood talking to the whole gathering, and as I looked at their torch-lit faces, I could clearly see who was for him; all of them. All save a small group that he stood before.

A heavy mood filled the air, and when I looked at him in the lamplight, he was as dark as night, and the men were white-faced from the force of his will. He drew out his Armorican sword and held it before them.

"Who returned to me this sword?" he said. "Who gave me this Command? Do you want to throw away what your own lord gave to me? Ambrosius. What would he think if he could see you now? You want to desert me?" He commanded the circle, walked around them under the light. "Who wants to walk out and return home? To what? To be old men in the night? My force is new, young, strong and powerful. And I will have all of Britain. All of it!" He moved back before the dissenters, faced them down.

He said aloud so all of us gathered could hear him, "I have not come to take pieces of Britain here and there, but all of it! I will not command a parcel of territory here or there, but all of it. Every fort, every city, every road, valley, hill, crag and stone will be mine. My name will be heard and spoken from one side of this land to the other. For who else will you have who can give you this? Who else can you name who will give you Britain, to make you Lords of the Land and have you remembered for long ages after we are gone? Name me someone! Name me someone now!"

"There are none!" a warrior called out. "If the old want to go, Arthur, then let them!"

"Aye!" another called. "Who here can name another leader who will give us what we want? Who is better than Arthur?"

As one voice, every man murmured none, none, no other. The feeling grew hotter, higher, my heart began pounding and I had forgotten the pain in my body. My hand went to my sword. I was ready to cut them down, those who would oppose him, while around me the supporters grew more demanding.

"Let them go, Arthur, if they are not willing to fight to have the power we need!" This voice was Cai's.

The lamp flickered in the wind. One of the dissenters stepped out into the circle, a man of around fifty years, greying.

He said to Arthur, "We do not recognise you, no matter what Ambrosius declared for you. You are not one of us."

Arthur said, hard; "What rubbish talk is this? Who are you, man, to judge me?"

The man answered, "I am Felix Quintus; you know who I am!"

"Aye, I do, but you do not know me. I'm as British as you are, a Gododdin father, a Silurian mother, grandmother, grandfather—"

"The Silures are all but gone from the land," the one named Felix cried back at him. "You are an unknown force. And even standing under this light, you are as dark as the cracks of mountains! We will not follow you to Luguvalos."

"Then I dismiss you from my ranks. There is no place for you here, old man. Because if you look around, you will see you are wrong. I have the blood of ages in me, the age-old blood to defend Britain."

No response.

"It is time for you to leave." And Arthur stepped back to allow the man to pass. From out of the circle twenty other men came forward to join their companion, all older men; men who had once ridden in the company of Ambrosius, himself dead and gone. These men were not prepared for the new force that Arthur brought with him. They were not prepared for him.

They took with them the last remnants of dissenters who had no place in our war-host; they moved out quietly. The moment was one of relief, struck with sadness. They would make their way home, either to Deva, Glevum, Aquae Sulis, or even Venta Belgarum, to live out the rest of their lives in sadness, remembering the glory days of their youth. As the old guard left the gathering, Cai detached himself from us and moved out after

them. The rest of us stood aside, allowing them to leave unhindered. Fifty men left our army forever that night.

All of them the last of Ambrosius' old captains. And what they left behind were all new men of Arthur's, all pure, all his, all newly-born under him. But still he stood there under the lamp, watching them go. I knew he wouldn't like to see the elders leave this way, but it was done…

25: THROWING OUT the PLEDGE-BREAKER

We were on the march again before noon the next day; a strong wind blew against us, but there was no rain. Clouds were scattering and rushing fast, breaking up and allowing occasional rays of sunlight to warm us. We rode in a long column, waving unit banners, all following the Bear of Britain.

And as we rode, Cai started singing some long and involved song. All about women and getting laid in fine fields of waving green grass before riding off to war. We laughed at him and rode together for the rest of the day till we reached our next camp at Galacum.

As we arrived late and had no intention of staying, we did not bother to erect the tents, but slept out under the clearing sky, no rain and the wind just a strong breeze.

Each stop brought us closer to Uthyr's lands; each stop brought increasing tension and a warrior's sense of coming conflict. The land hereabouts was beautiful and there were hundreds of places in the hills and valleys to mount an ambush. We sent out scouts and flanked our marching column with forward troops. Everything was quiet. The land seemed stilled and deserted.

I had never been so far north before, not many of us had. We were now in the land of the old Carvetii, even more ancient and gone into history than Arthur's Silures. I looked at him riding at my side, saw him watching the way forward with an intense stare; he had his smile on his lips again, the one that hid secret knowledge.

I had to ask him, "What are you thinking?"

"Thinking how bloody heavy this shield is."

"Take it off then."

"No, I need to carry it."

We rode on for a moment in silence.

Till he said, “Fox,” a serious note in his voice, looking at me with concern.

“What?” I said, now looking up into the hills for an ambush.

“You are getting burned by the sun.”

Sure, the sun had come out, and I had taken off my cloak to get some warmth on my skin. Damn his bones for noticing…there was a red flush on my bare arms. He laughed at me. His skin was turning brown and mine was turning red and I hated him for pointing it out.

Still everything around us was brilliant and silent; the only sounds we made were our horses clopping on, snorting, the occasional neigh, men talking behind us. Now Gareth riding towards us from up the road ahead, calling, “The way ahead is clear, Commander. Nothing on the road, nothing at all.” He reined in, and Arthur told him, “Gareth, go and change duties with Drustan; now is the time for him to prove himself a scout. Go and send him ahead. We’re marching on for the rest of the day till sundown.”

“Aye!”

Drustan then came riding fast from behind us, changing duties with Gareth. He rode by and we all turned in our saddles to see him go, giving him a rousing cheer from the ranks. This was his first time as a scout and he gave us a wave as he passed, at last having learned to stay in the saddle and not break his horse’s neck with his hard riding style.

We went on to our next camp. Two leagues from Brocaum, very close to Lord Uthyr’s lands.

Drustan came riding back as we set up camp to say there were no obstructions on the way ahead. All was quiet. So we made camp on either side of the road, surrounded by high looming hills. Sentries were set, and when it was dark, we had supper and settled down into our units for the night, intending to sleep out again under the sky. After supper, I got up from the fire and went for a walk to the outer edges of the camp. It was still some hours before midnight and I was feeling tense, so close to Luguvalos.

I stood looking up the road into the darkness, at the dark brooding hills around me, the silence and the cold. I pulled my cloak tight and walked forward, so dark in these bloody hills. I walked a few paces more and heard a voice calling my name.

“Prince Bedwyr!” called low from my left and I turned to see Llwch walking out of the shadows to join me. I stopped and waited for him, and

when he came to my side, I saw that something was wrong with him. He looked so nervous he was jumping out of his skin like a wildcat.

"Can I talk to you?" he said, breathless, always looking up the road into the dark. There was nothing to see and he annoyed me fast.

"What's wrong?" I said. "You look afraid of something, do you know something?"

He looked up the road again, then at me.

He came closer, whispering, "It's where we are going. He's going to invade my homelands."

I answered, "He's not invading, you fool, he's going for the Dragon."

"Taking the Dragon is an overthrow! It means he's invading Gododdin lands. This is my land and the men here are my fathers, brothers. Taking the Dragon means Lord Uthyr will fight and bring his forces against us. This is not what I joined Arthur for! I thought we were to fight the Germani, not my own kin. I won't do it, Bedwyr."

Then he grew more hostile, and I moved him away from the encampment, taking hold of his arm and feeling him shaking; he was trembling with aggression. "So what are you saying?" I urged him. "You won't fight if it comes to it? Arthur does not intend to invade or fight the Gododdin, he wants Gododdin allies."

Llwch was so sprung, he said whatever was in his mind without hindrance, "This is the start of a civil war, Arthur will start a civil war. He's a madman, dangerous, and I will not fight against my own kin. I won't fight in his army. I came to fight our foe-men, Saxons and Jutes, not my own kin. If this is what he wants me for, I will kill him myself, bloody Silurian madman!"

I warned him, "Llwch, are you threatening Arthur's life before me? For if you are, you are talking to the wrong man. Do not say before me that you will kill Arthur. You won't even get close, for I will slit your throat here and now. I'm warning you. What is your true intent?"

He was truly afraid.

He cried, "I will not be used to fight against my own kinsmen. All the men here in this army are Cornovi, Durotriges, Atrebates, Dobunni. That's civil war. Your Silurian is a madman. He's dark and he's evil. And I will not fight for him. Take me before him now so I can tell him this. I want to go back to my own people and warn them—"

"Curse you, Llwch, this is the end of you."

"Take me to him!"

"Aye, I will. You threatened his life in front of me, are you mad? I am his lieutenant and foster-brother. Come with me," and I grabbed hold of his arm and began leading him back to camp. He went with me, though I could feel him shaking still with aggression. He was sweating in the cold night air. I dragged him before our fire, where Arthur was sitting with Cai and Val and the rest of our Clan.

I pushed Llwch before him and said, "Commander, I have a pledge-breaker here. He says he will not fight against any Gododdin kin of his if Uthyr sends forces against you. And he threatened to kill you if you make him follow you any further. He wants to be released from your army. And I say we should get rid of him now before I kill him myself."

Arthur looked at me hard, then at Llwch. He stood up.

Llwch stepped back, stepped away, staring at Arthur with true fear on his face and in his eyes.

Cai also came to his feet, saying, "A traitor! He threatened your life, Bear, kill him."

"Stand back," Arthur ordered Cai. "Why are you doing this, Llwch?"

Llwch stammered, "You…you want to fight my kinsmen…I will not do such things. Those men are my fathers and brothers. How can I rightly do this? You would…would lead us into battle against my own kin. Let me go from here and warn them, you are a madman!"

Arthur spoke without anger; "I do not intend to fight my father. I have put checks in place to ensure against it, though I cannot promise that Uthyr will not lead his men against me. I plan to take the Red Dragon only, if I can, without bloodshed. I don't want war here anymore than you do."

"But you are forcing Lord Uthyr's hand," Llwch fought back.

Again Arthur moved closer, saying, "Of course I am. He's not going to give me the Dragon of his own free will, is he? You are questioning my Command, and my lieutenant said you threatened my life. You don't see the full picture; you only see the small, not the large. Leave these things to me. It's not your place to question my actions in war. The Dragon has to be mine to unite Britain under me. It's rightfully mine now that I'm Supreme Commander in Britain; tell that to your kinsmen."

A flaming dark fire came over Arthur now as he stepped even closer to Llwch, intimidating, darker than the night around him and it was true, he could have stepped out of the cracks of mountains, he was so immeasurably power-filled and dark.

He commanded Llwch, “You will leave now. And go before one of my men here kills you.”

Cai stepped in, anger flashing in his eyes. He said, “Bear, you cannot let a traitor just walk away!”

“Strip him of his weapons and expel him from our ranks,” Arthur answered. “He’s committed no act of treason, only treasonous words. Strip him!”

Cai glared at Arthur, for he wanted death and blood, but he obeyed and began stripping Llwch of anything that belonged to us as an army. Llwch did not protest as he stood still for Cai to strip away his gear; his dagger, his sword, and his shield would be left behind. As we had armed him, so we must disarm him. Even the boots on his feet. He was stripped of his place and nothing was left save the breeches and shirt he stood in. Without further talk, we escorted him out onto the road and expelled him from our ranks.

Myself, Howell, Cai and Val, we walked with Llwch to the very edge of the encampment, and with every man on his feet and watching, he was forced to walk away into the night, alone and unarmed, back to his own. A pledge-breaker, a traitor to our cause, a man who had threatened the life of our Supreme Commander. For this alone he should have been put to death.

For a while longer I stood to watch him walk away, feeling a churning inside me. I saw his figure disappear into the darkness of the night. And yet how could we keep a man who would not fight on our side in war? A man who had made pledges of loyalty, then broke them, a potential assassin? We had no choice but to expel him; either that or kill him as Cai wanted, but I knew Arthur wouldn’t do that so soon into his command.

Kill a man in cold-blood? No, he would resist such actions.

But as I watched Llwch fade from view, I felt the sense of some kind of conflict again rising inside me. The very first act Arthur planned to do in his power was to ride north to take the Red Dragon from his Gododdin father. It was tantamount to the start of a civil war. I drained cold and my skin pricked.

My own father was there too with Uthyr. Were my own thoughts traitorous? I could not move, for now a kind of mad conflict rose up inside me. And I questioned Arthur's actions. Why lead three hundred Cornovii, Durotriges, Dobunni and Atrebates into the far north and a possible conflict with our fellow British? And what of the Brigantes of Britannia Secunda? Would they join us, or oppose us? So many other nations; what will they do when they learn of Arthur's actions?

My friend was suddenly scaring me, and yet I had troubled over this conflict before, back that time at home when I had first discovered that my father had gone over to Uthyr's camp. Arthur and I had argued over it then, but I remembered that my father had made his choice and I had made mine. I went back to camp where I belonged, my moment of conflict over…

26: A SNAKE on the ROAD

So we again mounted our horses the following morn, and took the road into the north. We rode on through midday, and by early afternoon, I could see Arthur growing nervous in his saddle, his attention drawn to the way ahead. He seemed to be expecting something. We crested a hill and as we topped the rise and looked down, I pulled my horse up short, causing him to shy.

Below us an army ranged across our path.

Arthur at once brought our march to a halt. "Stand where you are!" he called. "Cai, ride back and tell the men to halt and stand where they are."

I was not expecting to ride straight into a fighting force right at this very moment and my heart leapt into my mouth. I looked at Arthur and he was smiling.

He saw my look and said, "It's Medraut. Brilliant, isn't he?" And he looked down at his cousin's forces below, barely cloaking the delight on his face.

Cai rode up again and said, "Commander, the warriors are standing. What in all bloody hell-fire is going on down there? Who are they?"

"It's Medraut," Arthur told him. "Further on is Luguvalos. We're camping here on this hill. Look, someone's coming!"

Three riders had detached from the war-host below and were riding fast up the road towards us. We stood our ground and waited. It was Medraut, two warriors with him. Two I had seen before. Another

unmistakable pair, Dafin and Irfan ap Clare, identical twins. As soon as the riders came close enough, the two cousins were off their horses and falling into each other's arms and laughing.

Me and Cai looked at each other.

Cai shook his head, saying, "Deadly, the pair of them, deadly."

I heard Arthur say to Medraut, "Did it work? Did you do it?"

"Of course I did! Don't you see them? My Gododdin…" And Medraut looked back down the road to the massing war-host below us. This army was not here to fight us, but support us.

Between them, and in secret, Arthur and Medraut had plotted this very event, and they had not told me.

Again I felt pushed aside, shut out from the workings of their minds, making me feel mixed up with pain and elation. Elation that Medraut had brought with him what looked like a hundred warriors to our side, men we would not have to fight, yet I felt stabbed with pain that they had excluded me from their plots.

As I sat watching, the two of them got back on their horses and Arthur turned to me and said he was riding down to speak to the Gododdin warriors below. He asked me to stay behind as his representative on the hill. I saluted him and turned about to have our troop camped in for the night.

Sundown. From the top of our hillock the air was cold and scented with spring; it was a beautiful evening, the sun casting long, long shadows across the green and rolling lands hereabout. There was a village down to our left, which we overlooked. Around me I listened to the noise of the workings of a marching camp in progress. Down the track, Tegid was cooking for those who had not gone into the village for food, and I could hear him laughing with his friends.

The tent was pitched and I kept the sides rolled up to catch the evening breeze as the wind came in from the coast. I stood at the tent door, waiting, feeling alone.

Only it was not Arthur who I saw come riding up the hill towards me now, but Medraut. I watched him coming, he rode up to the tent door and leapt off his horse and looped its reins around a tie.

And what I saw on his face when he came in to see me was some kind of change, something deep and desperate in his eyes. Something obsessive and destructive. He seemed pushed to his limit, and when he joined me, he

said nothing. He only stared at me, then began walking around me, sizing me up and down. I did not provoke him, but stayed quiet, watching him watch me.

He said, still looking me up and down, “Well, look at the Fox, look at you. I don’t see you for a while and you change into something beautiful.”

“What’s happened to you?” I urged him. “I can see it in your eyes.”

“Don’t you ever keep your comments to yourself?” He was angry, and cried at me as if I had insulted him. “What has Arthur been doing to you? I know,” he came in close to me; here he took hold of my chin and turned my face towards him, saying, “Look, you have grown so beautiful. So bloody good-looking, I would bugger you raw if you would let me.”

He burst out laughing.

“It doesn’t take you long to strike, does it Snake?” I told him. “Why don’t you keep your viper’s words to yourself? Have a heart.”

“I have a heart,” he answered, “and it’s broken and crushed by the weight he puts on me, but I do it. I do it for him, because he’s got both of us trapped. That’s what you and I share, Fox, both of us trapped by the Silurian.” He reached out again and touched my face and I knocked his hand away. “If you ever need it,” he said, “I’ll give it to you; give you the unbelievable pleasures of my snake’s cock. I know what you really want.”

He laughed at me.

I turned away and said, “What’s been happening here then? How hard was it to bring these warriors out on our side?”

“Not hard at all. They have been waiting for this day for a long time. My father helped, he’s turned on his own brother. Delicious, my family, don’t you think? Oh, and guess who Arthur is seducing now?”

“Who?”

He smiled, oh so beautiful he was; “Your father, of course. Came over to our side, because he knows which side to stand on, doesn’t he? It’s sad, you know, to see Uthyr crack like this, but he won’t go down without a fight. Too dense to give up without having to kill some men on his way down.”

Again he stepped in close to me, saying, “I even saw your father give pledges to Arthur. Now isn’t that touching? A sure sign of change, that is.”

No better news could he have given me. Hearing this changed everything. Thoughts of kin-slaying and civil war slipped away into

nothing. My father on our side! My relief must have been visible to Medraut, because it made him laugh.

He took hold of my arm and said, “There, it’s all been worth it in the end, hasn’t it? All this sneaking and plotting. I know you feel left out. But it won’t happen again. I’ll make sure of it. I have the power to make him suffer as much as he makes us suffer.”

“You make it sound as if he deliberately—”

“Deliberately what? Deliberately makes us desire him?”

He was burning me, and I said, “No, you think you know it all? The truth is you know nothing. To you, it’s all sex and power, no love. You do not love him. You just want what he has, his power. I do not.” He kept hold of my arm and answered, “And what do you want from him? I’ve seen the way you look at him. I know you are in love with him, and always have been, and always will be. So as I said, I know what you really want.”

I warned him, “Shut up! I only want to be the best warrior here. But what you want is more. Power; you cannot wield it like Arthur can. Just be easy for a while, or else I’ll go on thinking of you as his bane.”

He stared at me again, he said, “His bane? I’ll kill you if you make me your enemy.”

I laughed. “Kill me, and Arthur will slit you open, throat to stomach like a pig.”

Now Medraut stopped and thought about this; he grinned, “Maybe he would. Aye, you are right. He would. So we’re going to be friends again. I see you are still wearing my gold chain I gave you for your last birthday. See? You wouldn’t wear it if you hated me. But you see a kindred spirit in me—you are my brother sodomite.”

This was too much for me, and I pulled away from him, burning, burning. He laughed at me, and turned and looked out of the tent door, complaining, “Now where is he? Said he would be here…be here to slit me like a pig. I would enjoy that you know. You would be ill if you knew what I enjoy.”

I did not answer him.

I went and sat down on my kit on the ground and watched him. The tension and strain in him was obvious. Pushed to his limit. It was growing dark and I got up again to light the lamp. Medraut still stood at the door, watching out into the gathering night. He seemed distressed. Rich with rage

and a rude tongue he had, but I could not help but feel compassion for his suffering.

I went and stood at his side, asked him, “Tell me about your pain. It’s all over you.”

He turned to me, studying me.

“It’s not for your ears,” he whispered at me. “There’s something about you, Fox, that forces me to hold back the really hard truths, and the truths are hard.”

“Something Arthur made you do?”

“Na, nothing to do with him. It’s my family. Things in my family that those idiot Romani preachers claim will send me to hell. You know, I’m glad Arthur was rejected by our family. I’m glad Uthyr threw him out. If the men of my family had brought him up, I would hate to think how he would have turned out. That power he has? It would be black and evil by now… my kinsmen would do that to him. I’m glad it’s me instead. Because I love it. So do not ask.”

“Medraut—”

“I said don’t ask!”

He silenced me.

He said, “Look, here he comes at last.”

It was now growing dark, and we waited back inside under the lamplight. I heard Arthur’s horse coming up the road, a dark rider on a fair horse, jumping off and roping Epona to the tie. But when he jumped off, there was someone else with him, sitting up behind him. It was a girl. I stood up, watched him help her down, and with her down, he took her hand and led her inside. He stood for a moment in the doorway, still holding the girl’s hand.

He looked at Medraut and said, “You left her down in the camp. With all those warriors down there, one lone girl among them? How could you do such a thing? Didn’t I tell you to take her home?”

“I forgot.”

“You forgot. Don’t you care about her?” And Arthur pulled the girl closer to him. Medraut shrugged.

And with her standing in the light, I recognised who she must be. Even though I had never met her before, I saw the remarkable resemblances that ran through Medraut’s side of the family, for the girl was his sister,

Essylt Fynwen, and she looked like her brother, almost as if they were twins. Both of them in turn like their father, Lot. Even more remarkable was the resemblance between Lot and Medraut, for when together they looked more like older and younger brothers, rather than father and son.

I knew it then, the strange feelings that the Snake always made me feel. What was in his family was incest…close incest. It made me feel strange to see him, to see her, brother and sister from parents who were brother and sister; their mother dying only a few years gone, the year before mine. So I had to force my gaze away from them, absorbing me as they were.

Arthur said to Medraut, "You will have to look after her."

"But I brought her for you," Medraut protested. "Don't you want her?"

Arthur looked at Essylt. Torn in two, he loved women so much he seemed unwilling to bring another girl in too close to him, not so soon after Rhonwen's murder he wouldn't.

He said, "Medraut, take care of your sister yourself."

He turned to me and explained, "Your father is with me, Fox. You don't have to fret anymore."

"I know, Medraut told me. What's going to happen now?" and I sat down on my kit as he threw out the black bearskin on the ground that he slept on.

"Tomorrow we are riding into Luguvalos," he said. "Uthyr is not here; he retreated east along the Wall to his hall at Camboglanna with about sixty warriors. If he runs, I'm not going to chase him because Medraut has forces east again, where we can trap him. Have you had supper yet? I'm starving. Where's Tegid?"

"If you want to eat, I can cook," Essylt spoke up. She was sitting on the ground next to her brother and the look on her face when she looked at Arthur was wide-eyed enchantment. Her face itself was enchanting. Small and delicate, her skin was very white. She stood up, looking at Arthur for a response.

"No, it's all right," he told her. "I'll send a warrior for our supper. You just stay here with Medraut."

He went outside and spoke to one of the guards, came back in, and stood looking at us. He looked at Medraut, then at Essylt and she dropped

her head and sat quietly.

Tegid relieved the mood by bringing in our supper, the very thing that turned Arthur from Supreme Commander back into a starving eighteen-year-old. We were all hungry and ate together, not speaking. Arthur ate standing up, walking up and down, coming in and out of the tent, standing in the doorway, back in, and going to stand where the side was still rolled up to overlook the village. He stood…a dark figure against the dark star-filled sky…

27: LIFTING the DRAGON

Dawn the next day, I felt someone shaking me sometime before the call to rise. It was Arthur, shaking me to wake up. He and Medraut were already up. Something was going on. A streak of morning light was in the eastern sky, not much more than a soft glow. I threw my blankets off and got up.

Arthur turned to me, burning alive.

He said, "We're going into battle right now. Uthyr is launching a dawn raid." He turned to Cai, called, "Get back down there with the Gododdin!" Then to Medraut, "And you, get back down to your men." Then back at me, "I'll be back in a moment," and he was gone.

Outside there came a riot of noise as the warriors ran for their horses. I turned and started dressing, putting on my battle-gear, checking my sword, my hands shaking, heart thrashing; battle was on us now and my mouth dried. I felt a hand on my shoulder, turned, Arthur standing there.

"Stay close, ride with me, and don't move from my side. It's all right, I was expecting this. Last night I posted the Gododdin to watch for this very thing. It'll be over before it starts. It won't be too dangerous."

"Sweet Jupiter, I'm glad I'm on your side, you had it all plotted before it even came to it," I said to him as I followed him out to our horses. But he went back into the tent again, picked Essylt up from the ground where she sat, trembling and almost in tears of fear.

He hugged her and said, "Stay here. If you need company, go and find a woman named Arial, she's here in the train behind. Just walk down the road, but don't leave the hill. I'll come for you later when it's all over. Promise me you will stay?" He held her hands.

I called to him, “Arthur! What are you doing? Come on, the men are waiting for you!” I leapt up onto my horse and turned his head.

The sky was getting lighter now, with a streak of white light over the hills in the east, and when I looked that way, there was movement, a war-host coming, Arthur now next to me on his horse and together we turned downhill, taking our troop with us.

We thundered down the road, unit standard-bearers holding our draco-standards in the wind as we rode, the sound like a wailing scream, three hundred mounted warriors following at our backs. Uthyr must be insane if he thought he could rout us! We came downhill so fast it was near a clash of horses into the Gododdin side; here an ear-splitting roar met Arthur’s arrival.

They rode out in groups to meet him, rode around him as if there was nothing to bother them. I could not believe what I was seeing. Over a hundred Gododdin warriors all turning in a fierce company around him. They had already claimed him as a lost son returned to their lands. I half laughed, half scowled at them, for these men were like a band of wild brats. So easily I could have been one of them if my father’s grandfathers had not made the move to Gwynedd.

But watching all of this untamed Gododdin savagery, I knew this was the time I did everything Arthur told me to do, so I wheeled with him towards the west and galloped along a line of warriors till we reached where Medraut was waiting with his father at the head of their own war-host.

Arthur joined them and said to Medraut, “If you want this, take it! This battle is yours!”

Both Medraut and Lot saluted him and I saw as they turned back to their men that Lot was under the command of his own son. Medraut, in an extension of his and Arthur’s plot, was going to lead the Gododdin against his uncle, his father’s brother.

“Watch this,” Arthur told me as he turned back to my side.

We looked eastward and saw Uthyr’s men coming towards us, but as they came on, and seeing the forces amassed on the grounds around his stronghold, their advancement stopped, grossly outnumbered.

“Look at his horses,” I said to Arthur.

“I know. What does he think he’s doing?”

For what I saw was a broken force right from the start. Uthyr's men never even had warhorses like ours, but half-bred ponies, too big for real ponies, too small for real horses—naught but nags they rode. A detachment now broke from the lead of Uthyr's men and they charged into Medraut's advancing side, where they rushed into a forward head to head clash, ploughing into each other, and Medraut came cutting through the mass and killing everyone in his path.

It went on like this for a while, and as Arthur sat and watched, he said, "I will have to stop this. I won't let Medraut destroy him. He's going to go for my father and I told him no."

He heeled into his horse's sides and I followed.

With us went Cai, Val, Gareth, our inner Clan and around fifty other riders, all close to the heart of our command. We rode towards the rear of Medraut's force; there they were knocking men down and off their ponies, spearing and cutting, killing in a mass. But we rode through them all, our strength too great to resist. Someone hit out at me as I passed and I speared the bastard through his chest, for he failed to even hold up his shield! Though the danger was greatest on the outer edges of the field as some of Uthyr's men were using deadly Roman army bows made to launch from horseback. An arrow ripped passed my left shoulder and I dodged forward, finding that I was right in the thick of the fighting and somehow had become separated from Arthur.

The arrow had distracted me, and I saw my danger.

Being left-handed I was open on my left where the arrows were coming from. I swapped my shield to my left arm and again fought right-handed, finding these men as savage as any Saxon horde. I was caught in the middle of a fight on the outer left flank of Medraut's force and I lost all awareness as I hit out at everything that moved around me. I saw a wild-haired savage flying at me on his strange pony, saw his head split as Arthur came through, flashing his Armorican sword in the dawning sun and the man fell in a spray of blood and breaking bone.

Arthur carried right on through, slamming into another warrior with his Roman shield, wheeling and turning back for me. He gave me a look to follow him, though by the time we reached Medraut's front ranks, it was over. All that Uthyr had was already spent. He wasted almost his entire troop just to show he was no coward in war.

And as I sat breathing fire on my horse, I felt a great stillness fall across the land; the sun came out from behind the clouds gathered on the eastern horizon, spearing down in long morning shadows, the shadows of Uthyr's men reaching long before us. Everything stopped and stilled and Arthur sat staring forward, Medraut at his side; behind us, our warriors, two sides facing each other over a patch of ground, strewn with dead and dying.

No one moved.

Through the stillness and the early sunlight, a man walked out from the enemy side and rode forward; he stopped and called aloud, "Bring out Arthur the Silurian!"

Before Arthur could move, I said to him, "Keep your shield up, they're using arrows. They might shoot you dead. He's got nothing to lose now."

"Come with me, Fox, shield me on my right."

He lifted his own shield as I lifted mine and we heeled out together, walking our horses to the centre between the two sides; here we stopped. The warrior from the other side ordered him, "Take your helmet off, Silurian, so we know who you are."

"No," Arthur told him. "I will take nothing off. Uthyr knows it's me. He knows the son he threw away."

A moment later another man rode out, alone, came to a stop at Arthur's side, stared at him, and said, "Aye, it is you, Arthur-mab. Who else in this land has eyes as black as yours?"

"Why did you fight against me, Father?" Arthur answered him. "All you had to do was acknowledge me and none of this would have happened."

The sun now came out, shone in Arthur's eyes and he looked at his father, at a bitter man wasted by northern winds, chilled by the long years of cold, lost in the snow, refusing to love what he himself had brought into being.

Uthyr looked at the mass of troops and warriors that his son had brought with him from the south into the north.

He said, "How could I have ever imagined in my wildest dreams that you, you, my Silurian offspring would become what you became? How could I have foreseen such a remarkable thing? The idea of it stuns me

speechless. Even though I speak to you now, and see you, and hear you, you are everything they say you are. What a thing I wasted."

He leant over the neck of his pony, staring at his son as he sat on his tall white mare.

"Arthur," he said, "it hurts in my guts that you did this to me. A dark force they call you, but you were the most loving child, generous and kind and you loved everyone around you. You even loved me in my cruelty. But I cannot accept you, and you come now for what you want by right of force, brilliantly manipulating my allies, my nephew and my own brother to go against me. I deserve this final day. I deserve it all."

With the mass of warriors watching, stilled, Uthyr turned to his men and gestured to them. Another man rode out, carrying a banner. He gave this to Uthyr, who un-furled it in the sunlight, red and gold embroidery shining in the sun.

The Red Dragon.

So the sun now came burning down out of a clear morning sky; the wind came up, and Uthyr moved in closer to Arthur's side, showing him the banner. He opened it out between them and explained, "Aye, it was made by your mother, Igrain. All her own work, hand-stitched even as she was dying. Now something long concealed." He moved to the very edges of the banner, where there was a border of Latin letters running the entire length of the material on both sides. "See," he said, "these letters are woven through her designs and hidden, but if you look here, what do you see?"

Tense I felt as Arthur took up the banner and held it in his hand, moving his fingers along the edges, feeling and studying the raised letters. He saw what Uthyr had to show him. He looked at his father with amazement, a blaze of black fire in dark eyes.

"Aye," Uthyr confirmed, "even as she died, she stitched your name, her beloved son's name all the way around the border, concealed from me within the script. I only noticed it when all of this started…your name has been hidden in the banner from the very beginning. It's yours. Take it. Take it from me and leave my land." He pushed the standard into Arthur's hand and sat still, waiting.

The Red Dragon.

Arthur closed his fingers tight around the pole and lifted it two-handed to the sky, and the wind came and opened it out, wings to the sky,

and when he did this, a thundering roar from the throats of our warriors ran high over the hills and down into the valleys.

The sun took the red of the Dragon's wings and made it burn against the blue sky.

Arthur told his father, "No, I am not leaving. You cannot throw me out again. My name is here, and I am going to stay and fight. You have trouble with the Picts. I will fight them for you."

He did not wait for an answer, but turned his horse, leaving Uthyr behind. We rode together back to the Clan, Arthur with the standard up and flying in his hand, and when we came closer, he stopped in the middle of the field over Uthyr's dead. His mare began tossing her head again and rearing, but he held onto the standard, and when the western wind came up from the coast, the Dragon snapped and almost flew out of his grip. But he controlled it as if it wanted to tear out of his hands and fly free, and with the banner at last his, I thought he seemed more alone now than at any other time in his life; more alone, more separated from us, more different than ever before.

He then looked up as the Dragon flew over his head, and the warriors around us cheered so long and so high they were themselves flying free, British born. The Dragon was British born and finally I saw the pattern Arthur had already seen, made the connection he had already made, and I felt lost that I had doubted him. With his banner flying over Britain, the Saxons would come to know it as a sign of coming night over them, they would come to know his name and find it unmentionable. So many would find him unmentionable.

So he held the Dragon up for as long as he could and came riding over to me, so close, I saw his face streaked with tears, knowing it was his father who had made him cry. Arthur then threw the banner at me, and I caught it two-handed, held it up to the sky and the cheers rose even higher, and as I did, I saw Medraut's face; he looked twisted with desire and jealousy. The Red Dragon was Arthur's and not his.

Now Arthur came and took the standard back off me, and I turned with him as he rode down with it into the mass of warriors, rode through them and they parted for him, lifting their swords high, and striking their shields with their swords. The sound of them echoed over the Wall and

away up into the Pictish hills far beyond. No clearer sound than this was a challenge to war.

Still the Red Dragon rode through them, crying aloud so they could all hear, “I pledge to lead you, protect you, and uphold your personal worth! I will fight on your side and give my life for yours, for I am Britain and you know me! I am the Red Dragon!”

The warriors answered him with wild drumbeats on their shields. Again the sound echoed across the hills, and all the time I was right there at his side, though I moved back and calmed my horse, watching as Arthur rode up and down the lines before me. If the Picts would dare to come now they would be annihilated! He rode far away to my left and as he did, Medraut appeared on my right.

He waited with me, and when Arthur rode back up the line, he halted in front of us, crying out to all those who could hear him, “Here is my cousin, Medraut ap Lot! Who fought on my side and brought me to you! Without him, the Dragon may not fly in my hand today under Gododdin skies!”

The cheer was even louder now and almost blew us off our horses.

Then Arthur cried, “And here, Prince Bedwyr ap Pedrawg of Dogfeiling! Brother from Gwynedd! Loyal, true, a true Gododdin son!”

In front of hundreds of warriors, he had brought me into his moment. A moment that seemed to last an age, an age of the Sun. And when it was all over, we rode as an invading force into Luguvalos and took possession of Uthyr’s stronghold.

And by the end of that incredible day, Arthur had already commissioned as many copies of the Red Dragon banner as the townswomen could embroider. We settled in the hall of his father’s fort, a big wide space that was clean and scrubbed. The main hall had a deep fireplace embedded into the floor and it gave off an impressive amount of heat. The walls were stripped bare, and Lot showed us where the banner used to hang. Arthur ordered it put back on the wall, and there he stood, staring at it.

“It’s beautiful,” I told him, standing at his side and looking at it up on the wall. Such a beautiful piece of work, not a stitch out of place, full of life and colour and texture.

“Stitched it even as she was dying…for me,” he said.

I saw the pain on his face. I knew how much Arthur loved his mother, a woman he had never known, who had died eleven months after giving him birth. And to give Uthyr one grudging accolade, he had never loved another woman after her. Igrain was the entire world to him and as far as Uthyr was concerned, even now, it was Arthur who had killed her. Bitter, to blame a child for the death of his mother. But now with the Dragon back in its place, we gathered around the great oaken head-table in the hall, crowded with warriors who had taken possession both inside and outside the walls of Luguvalos.

As we did not have the power of Rome to back us, we became again what we always were, British, for we worked through sheer creative nerve. And how did Arthur control all this? He was everything; all that we were. The mood in the hall that night was exhilarating.

We were struck by lightning, devouring the energy Arthur blasted out around him. Energy to burn, he roasted everyone who came near him, and I saw Lot watching him with unshielded fascination. Desire. Danger signals were already ringing in my head, because Arthur attracted all kinds, the good with the bad. I watched. I studied. I felt. Medraut? No different, a creature of devouring lust.

We stood around the head-table with all our unit captains and Arthur gave them their orders for the following day. We were going to man the Wall and stay for a few months to gather information on the running of the Northern lands before moving back south.

Lot had mentioned interesting facts about the arrival of the people he called the Ulaid, that we knew as the Dal Riada from Hibernia off our coasts and further again to the north. Sometimes these people were friendly, sometimes they raided, sometimes they joined the Gododdin against the Picts, but mostly they were trying to settle and found a dynasty of their own. And I could tell by the look on Arthur's face that whoever these Dal Riadans really were, they did not concern him now. To him, if they were Gaels, then this meant they were not Saxons.

There was a map of the Wall-lands spread out on the table before us and we all studied it under lamplight. Some of the women of the fort began bringing in earthen plates of supper that they laid out on the table. There were not as many unattached girls about as there was in Deva, and I began to wonder at my chances of getting my bone away as I studied them. Mostly

they were older women, only three young ones, and one of them was Essylt. Arthur had sent someone up the hill to get her, as Medraut wouldn't do it, but she was here now with her gaze stuck on Arthur, as fascinated by him as were her father and brother.

I turned back to the map on the table. All along the line of the Wall were Roman camps that we could use to base troops and defend against Pictish incursions. Arthur touched on Camboglanna.

He said, looking at Lot, "Do you think you can bring Uthyr back? Do you think you can find a way to heal what's happened here, to talk him into giving up his hostilities and move back to support me?"

"I could not do it," Lot answered, "but my son could. Medraut would stand a much greater chance of winning my brother over. Uthyr always thought Medraut more his own son than you."

He stopped. Love Medraut more than you, he was going to say, for I could hear the trapped words in his mouth.

But Arthur looked back at the map; he said, "Now my father gets a taste of his own medicine." He looked again at Lot and said, "Would you send your son into a lion's den? Would you risk this for me?"

"I would," Lot told him. "Because Uthyr has no teeth to bite."

But Arthur said back, "I wouldn't risk Medraut anywhere near my father. I won't risk him. And we don't need him for anything."

Did Lot know that Arthur was testing him? The man looked confused, and I missed the rest of their encounter when I heard my name shouted from across the hall. I turned, only to see my father pushing his way towards me, a small group of unknown men at his back. I had not seen him for so long! And he seemed smaller now, or I was taller. I filled with joy and turned and ran to him; he grabbed me into his arms, hugged me for a long time. Everything was coming together, things broken apart now fixing back into place. I was back with my father and it felt good and right.

He held me back to look at me.

"Grown taller than me!" he laughed.

He turned to his friends, "This is my son, Prince Bedwyr, called the Fox. A lieutenant prince!" and he laughed with pride. He was beaming and was going to brag more. His friends reached out their hands to take mine, looking delighted to meet me. I did not know who these men were, they

were not from home, but were more Rheged Gododdin I thought, and they all spoke to me at once.

Though I turned to my father and asked him, “Where were you on the field today? I didn’t see you.”

“No, son, we took a rear position; if it had got any worse we would have come in, but no, we are all too old now for advanced fighting. We leave that up to you young ones.”

Another said to me, “What is he like really, this Silurian? If he is to fly over us as Pendragon, I want the truth. I have heard he is brutal, slays men indiscriminately and is a cold-blooded savage—”

I did not know what happened next, but the man suddenly stopped, everything stopped around me. For I found my hand on my dagger, gripping it, half out of its sheath.

I warned him, “Do not say such wrong words of Arthur before me! What you heard are lies, corrupt lies. Show me the one who said these things about Arthur and I will kill him myself.”

These words came out of my mouth without thought and I realised then what I was doing. And because I did not like the way these men looked at me, I nodded to my father before turning and walking away, leaving him staring after me. I thanked the goddess that no one else had heard me, so I went back to my place, trying to fight down the hard pounding of my heart. To me, Rheged was full of liars and traitors; they were everywhere. If the men here knew Arthur like I did, knew him but one moment, they would know and not have to ask such insane questions. The things that had fallen in place now broke apart again.

And I said to Arthur, low, “We shouldn’t stay here too long, the men here, they cannot fathom you. Do not stay too long.”

He frowned at me. “What’s wrong?”

“A gut-feeling. Something one of my father’s companions just said about you. Something wrong. Where are we going to sleep tonight and is it safe? I don’t like it here.”

He looked at those around him and told them to break apart for the night. “You all know what to do tomorrow. It’s over for today,” he ordered.

They all saluted him and began to break apart. It really wasn’t so late, only just after supper-time, but Arthur had accepted my warnings and we all moved aside, each to our own, dismissed and free for the rest of the night.

We joined with Medraut and he said to me, “I saw what you did. Come on you two, I’ll show you where you can have a bath. You would like a bath before sleep? Hurry, the water’s getting cold. You two stink.”

We followed him out a small door and into a corridor.

Here Arthur said to me, “Saw you do what? What happened to spook you?”

“He almost whipped his dagger out and stabbed someone, that’s what he did. He’s a troublemaker, all right,” Medraut told on me. He continued leading us down the hall, turned us right, then two steps down where we found a shut door. We stopped outside the door.

“Stabbing men now?” Arthur said. “What spooked you?”

“Inside,” Medraut said, and pushed the door open and led us into a room, a special room, a bath-room, he called it. And there on the tiled Roman-like floor was a huge bronze tub, Roman in style and probably from there as well. There was a small bench along the wall, a seat, a shelf with a hand-held bronze mirror, a comb and a razor and oil-soap, a large chest in a corner and a brazier for warmth in another. And the water in the tub was hot, just poured. The Snake had organised all this right enough.

But Arthur was on me as soon as the door closed behind us.

“All right,” I said to him, “it was one of my father’s men, said that he had heard you were supposed to be brutal, a killer, I think he said…a cold-blooded savage, oh, and you kill indiscriminately. I just snapped, and I did almost pull my dagger on him. But it was what he said; how and where do things like this get spoken about you? I don’t like it. If things like this are being said, it’s come from here, not the south. We shouldn’t stay here too long.”

I slumped down to sit on the lid of the chest and Arthur stripped off his gear, got into the tub and said, “Bloody, bugger, that’s hot! What are you trying to do, Snake? Boil my balls?” In the water, he said, “People read me wrong, maybe it’s from fear of the unknown, give me the soap jar.”

I tossed the jar at him and it fell right between his legs and into the water. He went under the water and came up again, soap jar in hand, scooped out the oil and washed his hair as Medraut threw a wash-cloth at him, while saying to me, “Are you suggesting my people are spreading lies about our beloved leader? There’s no danger here…except from me. Neither of you should take your clothes off in front of me.”

“Why don’t you shove off then?” I told him.

Arthur used the razor, looking into the hand-held bronze mirror and I asked him again, “How do things like this come about? All you have done is fight Saxons, how does this translate into you being a brutal, cold-blooded savage? Something’s not right; things like this don’t come out of thin air.”

“Hold this mirror for me will you.”

I leant forward and took hold of the mirror and watched him shave, using soap and razor and water and he looked at me a moment, then told me, “You are right that these things are not said about me in the south. So someone is here in the north making trouble for me or about me. Someone who hates me.”

Medraut said, “Cynan Aurelius.”

“That’s it,” Arthur turned to look at him, “and that also means,” he turned back at me, “that your father has a friend in his camp who has been in contact with Aurelius. I’ll talk to this man before the Fox here stabs his heart out.”

He finished shaving; he put the razor down, and we sat in silence, and I studied him, looking for the hurt, but there was a look about him that pierced through me, heart and soul.

I heard Medraut say, “I can get you a girl if you want one. I know this girl, she’s extraordinary. I can get her for you, if you want to shaft yourself to sleep.”

Arthur turned to Medraut and answered, “And what if she doesn’t want me? Have you ever thought of that? Have you ever considered what it must be like for a girl to be handed around for men’s pleasure and maybe fall pregnant?”

Medraut shrugged at him; “So what, she’s just a girl. It’s what women are for, isn’t it?”

Arthur stared at him; “What would you know, you have never had one. Stop offering me women. Stop offering me your sister like a whore. I’m not marrying your sister.”

“Do not reject her outright, you moon-blasted fool, it’s a good match, full Gododdin loyalty you would have by marrying Essylt. Brings us all the more closer, don’t you think?”

"I can think, doesn't mean I want." Arthur scrubbed at his hair with the soap again, then sank under the water to wash it out, came up and got out of the tub, stood dripping and naked before his cousin.

I sat watching them, they were unbelievable, and the look on Medraut's face was priceless.

He looked Arthur up and down and said, "You are so beautiful. What a beautiful long cock you have. Let me have it, let me make a man of you."

And Arthur growled in his face, "I will kill you for it first. Don't I get a towel?"

"In the chest the Fox is sitting on. There are fresh clothes in there too, most of them mine."

Arthur laughed at him, saying, "You know, Medraut, if you think I'm so beautiful, maybe I should marry you instead of your sister. This would make it an even closer alliance, what say you? Marry me? You cannot have my beautiful long cock unless you marry me first."

He advanced on Medraut, getting closer to him, forcing him to fall back against the wall. "If you think I'm so handsome, why not marry me? Come on, marry me. I can see it now, it can be a summer wedding."

Medraut stood trembling before him, and Arthur burst out laughing. The Snake had gone pale. I laughed at him too, then I got up and opened the chest. Inside, I found a towel that I threw to Arthur, dropped the lid and sat back down again. Here I started thinking about getting undressed for the tub, but I would not do it while Medraut was still in the room. Arthur might not have any fears of being naked in front of him, but I did.

And Arthur told him, "Do something for me, go and have another cot put in Uthyr's room, and take the Dragon off the wall and put it on my bed as a cover. Go on, you can do that, only kiss me before you go."

"You bastard," Medraut said as he went to the door; there he stopped and said, "Taking orders from a naked man, it is my very dream." He snarled and slammed the door on us as he went out.

"You know how to stoke him up the wrong way, don't you?" I said as Arthur pushed me off the chest to get some dry clothes from inside. He opened it, pulled out a shirt, blue and dark, and clean breeches.

He sat down on the closed lid, saying, "He loves me really. Sorry, Fox, I'll get out of your way and let you have a bath alone."

“Don’t you dare ever leave me alone here at any time,” I warned him. “There’s something dark at work here, Arthur, please, look at me.”

He looked, he was still naked. He had not even started to dress.

I said, “Where am I sleeping tonight?”

“In Uthyr’s old room with me. We will share everything. I get to sleep in the bed my father slept in, but Medraut will fix it for you. He will. He loves it when I flirt with him; it keeps him sweet and doing what I want.”

“Just do not push him too far,” I said.

Now deciding to get in the bath before the water went cold, and when I did, I scrubbed myself like mad with the soap, slid under the water and came up again, scrubbing my hair. It was so hot in this small room, the brazier burning and stoked too high.

As I scrubbed, Arthur said, “Can I tell you something?”

“Aye, you know you can tell me anything.”

He said, “My father…did you hear him today? He hurt me like stabbing out my heart. Why does he do this to me? Saying things about my mother dying. Why does he do that?”

“I don’t know. I cannot fathom that kind of hate. But he blames you still for the death of your mother, the dark force that killed her.”

“Do you think so? I’m a dark force? Am I?”

I answered, low, “No. You are not a dark force. I’m just scared of this place, what they’re saying about you here. Someone will kill you.”

“I know, we have to be safe, we have to stay together; and tomorrow, we will hunt for Aurelius ourselves.”

He came and crouched at the side of the tub, grabbed hold of my hand; we gripped hands in the way of warriors. He roasted me, and I wanted to get out of the water. He got up and found some clothes for me in the chest, then left me alone.

28: UTHYR’s HOARD

Later that same evening, Arthur led me to his father’s private chambers. I had almost forgotten in the strain of being in this place that he had lived here himself as a child before being constantly dragged back and forth between Uthyr and my father for fostering.

The room we were to sleep in was large and like the hall, swept clean and neat. There were deerskins on the floor, but the walls were bare. There

was a brazier, three chairs, candles on a small heavily carved table, a long bench by one wall, and a large bed covered over with the Dragon banner. There was a smaller cot opposite. Mine. With linen covers and bolsters. It would be luxury after sleeping for so long on the hard ground. We both looked at this bed and its cover.

Arthur intended to sleep with the Red Dragon. He made me laugh. The lamps were lit, it was warm. There were even guards outside the door, a wooden bar on the door, and I thought that Arthur would not get murdered during the night.

Still he continued to stand by his father's bed; looking at it, he said, "I don't think I can do this. I cannot sleep on this. Let's swap. You have this one," he ripped the Dragon off, adding, "Would it bother you to sleep where my father slept? I cannot do it. I would have nightmares."

I was not all that keen either, to sleep in Uthyr's old flea-pit, but I did it for Arthur's sake. I knew he wouldn't just have nightmares, he would have a falling-seizure, I knew it.

So we swapped places, and when the lamps were out and I was trying to sleep in this deadly place of Uthyr's, staring into the darkness because I could not fall asleep, I heard Arthur begin some kind of night-time suffering that came only after he had taken the Dragon. Night-seizures. It made no difference where he slept. He still had night-seizures. By morning, he was spent and aching all over. And yet he still got up early, stood up straight, and then collapsed down next to me. I was still curled up tight, and he lay next to me, breathing hard.

He said, "I'm not sleeping under the Dragon ever again! It gave me the weirdest dreams I've ever had."

The sun had not yet come up, and I turned over to face him. I looked into his eyes, deep brown eyes that seemed black.

"I had a dream," he told me again, "and a good one, someone was love-making to my prick, and she was a Silurian, and I won't let your delicate ears hear what she was doing to me."

"Go on, tell me."

"I don't want to tell it."

But then he said, "I want to tell you something else, things I've never told you before. But it's time to let you know. When I'm on the battlefield, I can see everything clear and brilliant and sharp, the whole world stands out

around me as if it's been polished to an incredible sheen. I can see things from far away up close. I can see eagles in the sky with their wings out to the sun, and leaves on trees like green adamant stones, blades of grass, and pebbles the size of rocks. Small tracks are big like roads, and when I draw my sword, it's not dull steel, but shines like a light in my hand. I don't know how I do what I do, Fox, because—"

And I could have screamed when someone came hammering on the door right at that moment, calling, "Supreme Commander!" Of course it was Medraut. "Commander, get up!" Bang! He hit the door from the outside. "I've got your breakfast here, seeing as you two are too bloody lazy to get up and come and get it yourselves. What are you two doing in there, sucking each other's cocks?"

I could not speak. I was on my feet. I went and yanked the door open and the Snake slithered into our room. I was so wild at him for saying what he did, I could have punched him down. I found Essylt standing at the door next to him, carrying in our breakfast on a tray and putting it down on the table between the beds. Once she had done this, she leant down and kissed Arthur full on his lips.

Medraut said to her, "Don't stop now, give him the full treatment, he's the Pendragon now. Get in and let him split you open, girl."

"Medraut!" Essylt snapped. "Stop being rude; do not say these rude things. Arthur and Bedwyr are our guests."

"My sweet arse they are, they are our conquerors. Come on, get out, I have something to discuss with our overlord here." He turned his sister about, and with his hand on her rear-side, pushed her out of the door and closed it. Arthur continued to lie still on my bed and I started helping myself to breakfast. Medraut went and sat on the edge of the bed next to Arthur, watching him, watching me spooning out porridge into a bowl.

"How did you sleep on your father's old cot?" he said to Arthur.

"I didn't. I swapped with Bedwyr. What do you want to discuss with your overlord? I'm ready."

I sat on a chair at the table and ate my breakfast, seeing Medraut break into a wide grin.

He looked at us and said, "How about launching a raid on Uthyr's Last Stand?"

Arthur glanced at me, raised an eyebrow, looked at the Snake. “Why? What do you know? You wouldn’t say that without a reason.”

“Of course there’s a reason.” Medraut threw himself down, lying out on his back next to his cousin. “You are going to love me when I tell you this…” He propped up on an elbow and stared down into Arthur’s face, saying, “We will be rich and finally have enough money to get married like you asked me.”

Arthur took in a quick breath, cried, “Fox! Did you hear? He accepts my proposal!”

“Congratulations,” I said, watching them fooling with each other like barrack-boys instead of the land’s elite warriors.

Arthur saying, “All right, what’s your news?”

Medraut told him, “It’s Uthyr; he’s sitting on a treasure hoard. He used to keep it here, but moved it when he knew you were coming. He has it now in Camboglanna, we should go and get it.”

I swallowed my porridge quick and sat up. “Treasure?”

“Aye, solidus coins and pieces made from gold and silver. A load of it.”

A slow smiled came on Arthur’s lips and he said, “How do you know this?”

“My father. He tells me everything. Here,” and Medraut dug into a pocket in his breeches and gave Arthur three gold coins, dropped into his hand. “Proof. Uthyr has a hoard of them; we should have them, use them to pay for what we need.”

For a moment Arthur played with the coins, turning them over in his hand, saying, “So what do I do, Medraut, just walk in and ask for it? Or take it by force and risk more killing in our family?”

“I don’t know! But I trust you to think of a way. You do want it, don’t you?”

“I want it. This treasure could fund my campaigns, at least for a while. I mean, what’s the point of just sitting on it? Coins have no value when they just sits in a hold.”

Medraut’s eyes shone; he said, “Then you will think of a way to get it off him?”

“Not right now. I haven’t had any breakfast yet.”

“Oh come on, you are my genius cousin, think of something.”

Arthur said, “I’ve just thought of something! Go away and find Bedwyr’s father. Tell him I want to speak to the one who insulted me, the one who knows about Cynan Aurelius. That’s what I thought of; tell them to meet me in the hall. Here, here’s some money for your trouble,” and he gave Medraut back the solidus coins and smiled, a devastating smile that left the Snake without a response.

He got up and left the room, saying nothing more.

Arthur and I looked at each other. “He’s learning,” I said.

So later in the day, we waited in the hall for my father to arrive with his men. The fire was alight in the floor, and there were two giant wolfhounds wandering around and sniffing at everyone’s crotches. Lot’s dogs. Arthur sat behind the head-table, looking bored, and I stood and played with the dogs. One of them had an eye missing, and I thought it fun to try and confuse it when I threw an old bone out on its blind side.

Arthur watched me and laughed, for the dog could not be fooled, and he said, “Foxes are dumb, outwitted by a bone-headed dog.”

I told him, “Be careful of what you say, Silurian. Foxes are clever, so watch out I don’t trip you up next time you walk down the stairs, trying to look important.”

“Bedwyr, I do not try to look important. I am.”

“Not when you are falling down the stairs on your face.”

He laughed; “So is that what you plan? You shouldn’t have told me, now I’ll be ready for it.”

I went to the table and leant down on it, telling him to his face, “You will never be ready for me. One day, I will pounce on you when you least expect it. I will surprise you yet.”

He answered, “I think you will too. There’s something hiding in you, Fox, something just waiting to come out.”

We looked at each other deeply for a moment. I wondered what he thought was going to come out of me. Only I said to him, “Have you made up your mind yet about these coins? Are you going for them?”

“Aye, I am.”

Just then a guard opened the main door and my father walked in with his brothers-in-arms at his sides. Arthur came to his feet and came out from behind the table; he went to meet his visitors and shook hands with the

newcomers as my father introduced them to him, then to the one who had said those things about him.

The man, Blandon ap Calix, was at least thirty years our senior. And he looked nervous, yet relieved to find Arthur was not going to cleave his skull at once. What he did find was an eighteen-year-old youth who gave nothing out that marked him as a savage killer.

We shifted some chairs around to the fireside and sat down, my father looking insulted when Arthur asked him and the others to leave. They saluted him and turned from the room. Alone now with Blandon, we sat looking at him. Arthur looked at me, and I started it.

I said, "Yesterday you told me you had heard Arthur here was brutal, a savage cold-blooded killer. Where did you hear these rumours?"

The man answered at once, "From the camps north of the Wall, from the Caw Clan. Just talk amongst the men. Half of them do not even know you are King Uthyr's son. Arthur, I was only repeating what I heard, not what I believe myself, sir. From Lord Pedrawg, as he talks of you as his foster-son, he vouches that you are fair and just."

"Why do you think these northern camps say this about me?" Arthur asked.

"From what I know of these men, they fear the unknown. You are unknown to them. They do not even know who the Silures are or where they come from. They do not know where you come from. All they know is that you are a dark power from the south, sweeping away everything before you. This is their talk, sir. Not mine."

"But you repeated it, as if there could be some truth to it. You had to ask Prince Bedwyr here what I'm really like. Do you come from these northern camps?"

"I do, though I will never repeat these lies in public ever again."

Arthur was quiet a moment, then said, "Do you know Cynan Aurelius?"

"Aye, he has connections with the Caw Clan."

Arthur sat up straight.

He said, "Do you have orders for the coming months?"

Blandon frowned, thought for a moment, said, "Lord Pedrawg was going to ask you, sir, to release him to go home. He feels too old now to continue fighting here, especially against the Picts. These people are too

savage for us old men. I was going to leave for home too; it is time for me to retire."

For a moment Arthur and I sat looking at him; then Arthur said the very thing I myself was thinking; "Blandon, why is my Prince's father in your company?"

Blandon bowed his head; answered, "No, sir, we are in his company. I have distant relations from Dogfeiling in Gwynedd. I joined him for news of my relations, nothing more."

"Which relations?" I asked him, for I knew of no relations of my father's, who were in contact with our Northern clans.

"Some ancient women from your mother's side, my lord," he answered me. I did not press for more.

Arthur finished it; "So Blandon, I want you to go home, and be a spy for me. I want you to find out as much as you can about Aurelius and his whereabouts, along with the Caw Clan. Aurelius is the brutal murderer, not me; he raped and murdered my pregnant wife in Viroconium, you must know about that. Do you know how to write?"

"Aye, sir, enough to pass orders into Latin."

"I'm going to be here for a few more months, probably till the end of summer. Send information here. If you cannot write it safely, bring it yourself or find someone you trust to the core. No strangers. And remember your link to me is strong. You are brother-in-arms to my lieutenant's father. You will keep all of this secret, I order it."

"Commander," and Blandon bowed his head and saluted. "I pledge to see you well if you can do this for me," Arthur assured him.

"Anything, my lord."

"All right, you can go now, though send me word before you leave for home."

Arthur stood up, Blandon with him. We escorted him to the doors, and just before he left, Arthur offered him his hand.

They shook hands like warriors and Arthur added, "You understand what I want from you?"

"Perfectly, Commander," and again the man bowed and saluted before leaving, the doors closing on his back. I turned to Arthur and said, "There, we're getting closer to Aurelius all the time, a little closer."

“A little closer,” Arthur repeated and turned away, ready to get on with the day.

29: BEDWYR’s FATHER SAYS FAREWELL

Medraut had taken charge of billeting the troops; he knew the area well and had set the men up in three camps: Maglona, Maia by the sea, and Voreda. The entire area around Luguvalos was populated with old Roman forts and marching camps, a strategic area for defence of the Wall.

And in the end we spent most of the day riding the camps and visiting the troops, where we gave orders for the beginning of intense training routines and tightly reined-in discipline. And this discipline would be Medraut’s to control. The Snake was a powerful disciplinarian.

For all Arthur’s charismatic aura, he was no disciplinarian and this side of his command often brought him a lot of conflict. As I knew him, his nature was to uphold individual freedom, individual responsibility, not authoritarian rule; he was no Roman. Arthur’s Silurian heritage made him want to buck authority. He wanted to set people free, men and women alike, rather than whip them into dog-like slaves. This was Medraut’s to do. So Arthur had authorised the Snake to rule the disciplinary codes of conduct while reserving the right to override his tendency to have men executed.

Then we rode through the area of the old Maglona fort and picked Medraut up from the training ground there. Also there we picked up another who had been missing from our ranks; Uki Wolf-leg. Medraut and Uki were now lovers, and Medraut had hidden Uki away in Maglona and ordered him not to engage in battle, for it seemed the Snake cared about Uki enough to want to keep him protected from war. But now, as Arthur was planning on training men for the Pictish wars, Uki had to come back into the Clan and train.

Yet what was the Snake doing when we found him? Standing with his hand on his sword, watching everything around him, thinking himself lord of the army. As we pulled in at his side, he saluted Arthur like a true soldier, even waited till he was spoken to.

“Can you spare me your unit?” Arthur asked him.

“What do you want them for? What’s wrong with your own men?” The respectful soldier slipped away and the true Medraut came out.

“I’m going to visit my father,” Arthur said. “You want that treasure off him, don’t you?”

Medraut’s eyes blazed with delight. “You thought of something?”

Arthur told him, “I just thought I would do what I said. Just walk in and ask for it. And if that doesn’t work, well, we will see.”

“Could be disastrous, you know.”

“That’s why I’m taking a unit of your men with me. They can stand up to my father, right? If he decides to fight.”

“It’s a long ride to Camboglanna from here, isn’t it a bit late in the day for this?”

“I’m not going today, I’m going tomorrow. I want you and your unit to ride back to Luguvalos with me now. Then we can leave at dawn tomorrow. All rested and ready. Come on, Medraut, stop slacking! Let’s see how quickly you can muster a troop. We’re going into battle now.”

True to form, Medraut responded at once.

He cried out across the training ground for his troops to run for their horses and mount, ready to ride out at the instance. Me and Arthur sat on our horses, watching the action around us. Medraut off to his own horse, riding in to rally the men he wanted, leading them in a fast trot before their commander, with Uki at their head.

I said to Arthur now, “I bet he’s panicking for his men not to let him down.”

Some of the men were riding into each other now as they tried to form up the lines. Still, they formed well enough, though many of them, as I watched their faces, seemed intimidated by their new Pendragon. And it almost fell apart when Medraut turned and rode off towards the barracks and was gone for what seemed like ages. The men waited tense for their unit captain to come back and join them, so did we.

Arthur said, “The bastard is making me wait. I’ll make him pay for this.”

“Don’t bother,” I answered. “He’s only succeeding in making himself look inefficient in front of his men. They’re embarrassed now he’s not here.”

We waited some more and when Medraut did not come, Arthur turned to the men and cried, “Move!”

He turned to ride home, taking Medraut’s men with him.

Leading on, we saw the Snake now coming our way, carrying a standard, and it was a new standard. The White Wolf's Head Snarling had been replaced with a flying, winged White Snake, head striking, bared fangs.

He rode up to us and said, "Sorry, but I had to go for my new standard. Essylt made it for me. If you all insist on calling me the Snake, well, why not? You are going to get what you asked for."

Arthur said nothing, but looked hard as we escorted him the three leagues home to Luguvalos, where at first crow the following morn, we were back out again, taking the east road towards what Medraut called Uthyr's Last Stand, his second hall at Camboglanna.

It was a fair and beautiful morning, a chill in the air, but sunny.

And Arthur had made a point of wearing his Silurian colours to confront his father; the colours of the cloak rich and bright as he had given it to a woman to clean, and so he was unmistakably a Silurian. He carried the bear-shield for added impact, and the Armorican sword shining in its brilliant new scabbard at his side. And going helmet-less as he often did, wearing only his favourite sun-rayed headband, he bore an air of individual confidence that swept over the entire troop.

Around him, all of us inner Clan carried two swords; a spatha and a gladius. Along with our daggers, we also carried spears and shields, going fully armed and prepared for battle if Uthyr wanted it.

Next to Arthur, Medraut rode carrying his new winged White Snake standard, blowing out before us as the wind came in from the west. Just behind him rode Uki Wolf-leg, happy I suppose to be allowed out of camp.

The land was open, high, green and sweeping, and the way ahead was clear. And though the troop behind us were all Medraut's men, we had also brought along some of our own; Cai and Val, and Arthur's four shield-men, the deadly four who had thumped me black and blue back on Caer Cadwy, so long ago it seemed to me now. I no longer held that beating against them, and they considered me now with respect. With Arthur's loyalty to me, they in turn thought I was worth more than what I seemed back then.

So we rode along, unhurried, enjoying the morning sun.

Medraut said, "So cousin, how are you going to get the treasure off your father?"

Arthur's horse answered for him. She let out a high neigh and Arthur laughed, saying to Medraut, "That's how!"

"Shit," Medraut swore. "I hate it when you do this. Hiding things. Isn't that right, Fox? Keeps it all to himself."

"Think how boring it would be if we knew what was going to happen before it happens," I told him. "No suspense in our lives then."

"You like it then, when he hides things from us?"

"Of course I like it."

The wind snapped the flying White Snake, and we saw Uthyr's hall up ahead. I admit it was a beautiful place, catching the winds and the air, full of northern sun. There was a gathering of men outside the hall, watching us approach. One of them ran inside. A moment later Uthyr himself came out and stood, hands on hips, waiting for us.

Seemed to me he was not ready for any kind of battle right now, for his camp was sleepy, quiet, and he must surely know that any attack he could possibly launch against us would be destroyed even before it could start. Uthyr had no choice other than to welcome us into his hall, which he did.

Pulling up close to the main entrance, we dismounted and left our horses with the grooms in Medraut's troop. And seeing Uthyr again up close, I could not believe this man was Arthur's father. He was nothing like his son; they could have been two completely unrelated men. Uthyr was much more like his brother, Lot, and again similar to Medraut. They were very handsome men, all of them. Uthyr was slightly shorter than his son, thin, wiry, deep set green eyes, light brown hair, ribboned with grey; he was still handsome in his age of fortieth decade. He wore his hair in braids and had a long moustache; there were faded markings on his forearms, skin-brandings of some kind.

And again seeing him up close, I remembered Arthur telling me a long time ago how Uthyr had once told him that he was another man's son, a claim that was not difficult to believe. Arthur stood in front of him, and there was a hard mood in Uthyr this morning. He looked his son up and down, impressed, though trying to hide it.

He swallowed, as if forcing down his fear when he said, "So, my son, you come to visit me, and Medraut too, my traitorous nephew. No Lot? My brother not here?" and he searched through our men, looking for his brother.

“No, he’s not here. And I’m not here to be social,” Arthur told him.

“Then I will make it. Please come into my hall, it’s time for a morning mug of ale.” He turned and went inside.

We followed, recognising the interior of his thatched-roofed hall the same as any other. A central fireplace, benches for eating and drinking, a table for the headman, Uthyr himself, his personal belongings on display, weapons and a few banners to decorate the wooden walls. Uthyr gave some directions to a handsome red-haired woman, then turned to us and offered us a seat at his table.

Only Arthur accepted, with Medraut and myself standing as guards. Cai and Val just next to us, the shield-men on guard at the main door. There were more of those prowling wolf-dogs sniffing around, and one of them growled at Medraut, and he glared at it and nudged it aside. In this hall, I admit to feeling deep tension, for Uthyr gave me the evil-eye, maybe trying to place me.

Till he said, “And who are you, boy? I feel I should know you.”

I bowed to him; “I’m Lord Pedrawg’s son, Bedwyr.”

“Of course!” he cried at me, a smug tone in his voice. “The beautiful Prince of Dogfeiling; the son of another of my traitorous brothers-in-arms, your father, my traitor. You two boys grew up together, foster-brothers. Seems it was not all bad then, the things I did you, son. You have Bedwyr here as a friend. Let’s hope he stays more loyal to you than Pedrawg did to me. Your father, Bedwyr, he should be made to pay for his disloyalty to me; he turned his back on me and chose my…my…brilliant son here to boost in war, and not me. And now young Medraut has come to gloat.”

“No one is gloating,” Arthur answered him.

Medraut stepped forward, speaking in anger, “Now you know, Uncle, how it feels to be rejected by your own family. I tried to warn you, tried to talk you round, and you could still be seated in Luguvalos, a friend to your son even now, but you wouldn’t listen to me. What reason is there in fighting against the strongest force in the land, rather than bearing with him? You are an ignorant old fool.”

Uthyr nodded agreement; “Aye, I am. Fool to have loved you like a son. Fool to have trusted Pedrawg as an ally!”

Uthyr’s words made me burn with anger, as he spoke about my father in such an insolent way, though I kept myself still for Arthur’s sake.

Medraut stepped back and snarled. The dogs growled and the red-haired woman came into the hall, carrying mugs of beer on a tray; she put the tray on the bench and no one moved to take one.

"You will not drink with me?" Uthyr complained.

When Arthur did not move to take a drink, Uthyr paled and lost resolve. He eyed his son in the way he did to me, a kind of cold judgement.

He said, "Then what are you here for?"

"You have something I want."

"Me? How remarkable."

"No need to remark on it, Uncle," Medraut said, putting a hand down on Arthur's shoulder. "There it is over there; that's the chest, sitting in the back corner there. That's the one Lot told me about. Uncle, you haven't even bothered to hide it."

It was true, for I could see the chest openly on display, though placed in a dark corner at the rear of the hall.

At once Arthur stood up and turned to give orders, "Cai, Val, go and get it, load it onto the cart."

Cai and Val obeyed, walking over to the far corner, and between them, they lifted the chest by its bronze handles and began carrying it to the cart waiting outside. And by the way they had to struggle with its weight, I guessed it was full to the brim.

Uthyr did not move; he sat where he was, opened-mouthed.

Though he turned to Arthur, who stood over him without concern, and said, "Stealing from your own father now? That is my property."

Arthur gave him a cold look, and said, "It's mine. It's what you owe me. Let us call it compensation for the years of abuse I took from you. Payment for the black eyes I took as a boy, the humiliation of being rejected by you in front of the men of Ambrosius. A debt you owe me for spitting in my face and calling me another man's son, for blaming me for the death of my mother, I can go on and on. I'm having those coins for that. Come against me over this, Father, and I will burn down this hall around you. Think of it as your debt repayment to me."

As Arthur stood over his father, I saw Uthyr's face grow white, his lips narrowed, and he turned to see if any of his men were watching; though the hall was empty except for the red-haired woman who had brought in the ale. Uthyr looked outraged and Arthur continued to stare him down.

Cai came back in, saying, “Commander, the chest is loaded and ready to go.”

“Good, we’re leaving now,” and Arthur turned and walked out of the hall, leaving Uthyr sitting where he was, stunned as if clubbed over his head. And when we walked outside into the clean air, I took in a breath, relieved to be out again in the sunlight. Arthur went over to check that the chest was secured on the cart, and when he did, Uthyr came out and shouted something at him.

Arthur did not move; he did not turn around. He stood with his back on his father, listening to him say, “I have information for you, boy; information for my coins returned. I can give you Cynan Aurelius.”

“He’s bluffing,” I said to Arthur. “Don’t listen to him.”

But Arthur only looked over his shoulder at his father, glaring at him.

“That is right,” Uthyr said, coming closer. “I have information on your traitorous Cynan Aurelius; but I want my coins back in return for this information.”

Arthur turned towards him, but I grabbed his arm and held him back. “Don’t take his bait,” I warned, feeling the tension in his body.

But Arthur did nothing other than stare deep into Uthyr’s eyes, using his black stare that few men could withstand when he forced his power against them.

He answered his father, “Do not think of trying to outwit me, because if you try, you will fail miserably, so don’t even think of it.”

He turned away and walked to his horse, mounted, and with me at his side, he called to our troop, “Move on!”

So we did, turning back west for Luguvalos, taking the coins with us and leaving Uthyr standing at the door of his hall, staring after us, probably feeling defeated that Arthur had refused his bait. But as we rode on, wind in our faces, sunlight on the green and high hills, I could plainly feel Arthur’s mood.

It ran all through him, and before I could say anything, he forestalled me, telling me, “He’s not bluffing, you know. He wouldn’t say such an important thing if he couldn’t back it up. He knows I would find out any bluff at once. No, he knows something all right. Something he would never have voiced to me if I had not come for those coins.”

I said, “What are you thinking?”

Arthur looked at me; he had already figured it all out.

He said, “Of Lot. He used me to get the coins off his brother; he may even want me to destroy my father, but he won’t ask for it outright because he knows I won’t do that.” He gave a dry laugh, adding, “Lot thinks I’m going to share, or at least give him part of the treasure for having Medraut tell me about it. But who is it that has the coins now?”

“You do, but who is it that has the information on Aurelius?”

“But like you said, Fox, don’t take his bait. And I won’t. We can find Aurelius ourselves; we are the ones with the money. Lot has put a great mound of wealth right into the hand of the most powerful man in Britain, and I’m not letting him have a single share. All of these men here in the north, they are powerless without me.”

We rode on for a while in silence, with Arthur smiling to himself the whole bloody time.

A moment later, he said, “Has your father left for home yet? He hasn’t come to see me.”

“No, he’s still here. He’s camped on the coast.”

“That’s right, at Maia. I need his help.”

“What for?”

“I want your father to take the coins to Dinas Emrys when he goes back to Gwynedd. They have a smelter there; I want these coins melted down as soon as possible.”

I said, “And what will we do with the chest till then? We will have to hide it somewhere. Do you trust Medraut with this?”

The Snake, riding ahead of us, could not hear what we were talking about. I looked at his back and wondered how much he was involved, if his father had merely used him as a go-between or was he part of the plot to reclaim the gold that Uthyr and Lot had probably been fighting over for some time.

“I do trust him,” Arthur answered, “but I don’t want him involved, it would only put him up against his father, where he will be used again. And we don’t need to hide the chest. We will take it to your father right now. But first we need to know how much we have, it needs counting.”

It was around six leagues from Uthyr’s hall back to Luguvalos and in the end we halted the ride, enjoying the freedom of the moment and the

beautiful high-land around us; here we sat under the sun and counted the coins in the chest.

We sat on the ground with the sun shining over us, where between us all, we counted a massive nine hundred solid gold coins that shone in the sun, all mixed in with other kinds of riches; necklaces of gold, bracelets and bangles and rings.

"Where on earth did he get all these coins from?" I asked, weighting some of the gold in my hand.

"Roman hoard, stashed under the altars. That's where the Romans used to hide their money to pay their soldiers," Arthur said. "It was probably left there or abandoned during a Pictish raid long ago. The jewellery looks like stolen property too. It's ours now."

He watched as we closed down the lid, and when all of this was done, he ordered Medraut home to take his troop back to barracks at Maglona, while we remaining eight rode with the chest down the Roman roads to the coastal station of Maia, where my father was camped with his men.

Once at Maia we found my father set up in a small wooden villa by the sea and planning his retirement. At fifty-two years old, he knew it was time to go home and rest with his brother, Tannan, on the shores of our lake. And when he saw Arthur coming to visit him, he seemed overjoyed to see us, to see me in particular.

He grabbed me into his arms and hugged me hard, saying, "I am proud of you, son; you have turned out the way I had planned and hoped, despite that little madness you went through when you deserted the army… all of that is over with now, and you have redeemed yourself. I will not pretend that you did not anger me mightily, but it was Arthur I blamed for that. But now both of you have redeemed yourselves. Son, you are brave and fight without fear at the side of your foster-brother and Commander."

He looked then at Arthur, and said, "How could I have ever known you would become who you are today? To be where you are now has been a terrible struggle for you, but you have overcome all your obstacles to shine over us as a great leader in the way of Ambrosius. And your loyalty and love for my son inspires and impresses me, for you fought for him endlessly, stood by him through his troubles, protected his life and you will go on doing so for the rest of your lives. I see this now, and I was wrong, so

long ago, to have thought of you less than I do now. Please forgive me, Arthur. I trust you fully with the life of my son."

Arthur bowed his head and saluted him. He said, "I vow to protect your son throughout his life. Never fear of that. I thank you, sir, for your support of me in my command. But Lord Pedrawg, now I need your help."

So he told my father about the coins and what to do with them; that they must be taken to Dinas Emrys and there smelted into ingots, and stashed till we could come for them. Yet even as ingots Arthur knew they were near worthless without trade with the Continent; all of this was for the future.

"But for now don't leave till I send you written and signed instructions," he told my father.

"How shall I take the chest to Dinas Emrys?" he asked.

"Best way is to put it on a ship and sail down the coast to Segontium, then via road to the old fort. Will you go home that way, by sea to Deva? Or do you plan on taking the road?"

"To Deva by road."

"No, don't do that, my lord. Go via ship, straight to Dinas Emrys. You will have all you need there till the coins are done. If you need anything more, just send a messenger to me for help."

And it was settled. The coins would go via ship down the coast to Segontium, as Arthur said, the escort being my father and some of his men. But just as we were about ready to leave for Luguvalos, my father again took hold of me in an embrace, embarrassing me by the way he clung to me. Then he did something that left me stunned. He took Arthur's hand, then mine, and joined us together, crushing our hands together in his.

He said, "I used to fear that you, Arthur, were taking hold of Bedwyr's mind too deeply; but it was only love and understanding you gave him, and he responded. I used to think it was dark, your love for each other, but I was wrong, very wrong. Together you two will change the world, and men who change the world must be joined heart and soul, forever."

He squeezed our hands under his and I felt myself burn with embarrassment, while Arthur watched him as if my father had just shown him a shining jewel in the sunlight. When we finally managed to pull away and take horse back to Luguvalos, I rode in a overwrought mood, baffled by my father's intensity, and I wondered if it had something to do with him

leaving the world of fighting men and going home to a quiet retirement; his way of saying farewell to battle and fighting men, the new guard, as we were now called.

Arthur rode at my side, himself quiet and thinking, till he said to me, “He’s right you know; we are joined heart and soul, forever.”

He did not look at me when he said this, he looked only ahead. He always looked ahead, with me riding on and feeling a striking sense of wonder for the way he thought.

After we stabled our horses, we went to our room and changed out of our battle-gear and into shirts and breeches, then we thought about having baths as we went down to the main hall for a drink of ale. And found Medraut home before us when he was supposed to be down at Maglona. It was almost time for lunch and the table was already laid, but the Snake had cleared the hall of all but himself, and he pounced on us as we came in.

“Where in all hell-fire have you two been, and what did you do with that chest?”

“And what are you doing here?” Arthur countered him. “I told you to stand at Maglona with your men. Disobeying orders, Medraut, not good. How would you like a taste of your own disciplinary tactics? And where the chest might be now is none of your business.”

As they launched into another of their passionate arguments, I went and sat down on a chair by the fire, though first picking up a mug of ale. I wanted to watch the show in comfort.

And I had to admit that whenever Arthur and Medraut went at each other head to head, I enjoyed it. It was fun. So I sat down, mug in hand, smiling at them to get on with it. They were standing head to head, almost butting against each other like young rams for the killing of the other.

“It’s all of my business,” the Snake cried. He too had a mug of ale in his hand and his hand was trembling. “That chest was supposed to come back here.”

“Why?” Arthur stood in his face.

“Because…because my father wants it. Or at least some of it.”

“Your father has no say in the matter. You told me to go and get the coins, and I did. You said nothing about giving a share to Lot.”

“Those coins, you took them all for yourself?” Medraut glared at him. Arthur admitted at once, “I took them. To fund my campaigns,

compensation for—”

“It’s thievery!”

“The coins were Uthyr’s and as I’m Uthyr’s son, so, they are mine. Your father, Snake, set me up to take those coins off Uthyr, thinking I would bring them here for him to take a stake. No, no stake for him! The coins are gone and they won’t be coming back to Luguvalos, ever. Do you honestly believe you can set me up and not have me discover your ruse? That you can put such a thing right into my hand and not have me figure out what you have done?”

Medraut let out a strangled wail and turned and hurled his mug at the wall where it splintered.

He turned back, panting, saying, “My father will gut me for this! You have dropped me right in the pig-shit now. I had to go through all manner of hell-fire to get you the support you needed here against Uthyr. Lot will think you a traitor now.”

Arthur barely flinched. “I don’t care what he thinks of me. What he’s learned is he cannot use me for his own ends. And just as I can burn Uthyr to the ground, so I can do it to Lot. Don’t think of trying to oppose me over this. Think of it as an investment in your own futures. If you had the coins, you wouldn’t know what to do with them any more than Uthyr did. Only I know how to transfer wealth into something that will benefit you. Tell your father that.”

Medraut did not respond. He just stood still, breathing like a devil in heat and staring at his cousin. He cooled, and said, “You are right. Lot would only have sat on the bloody things and used them to goad Uthyr with. Giving them to you, you will turn them into wealth, I know you will.”

The Snake turned aside and looked at me, as if he had only just noticed me sitting, watching. The bastard winked at me.

But Arthur went after him, took his arm. “If you have trouble with Lot, give him to me. I know what he does to you.”

Medraut pulled away; “No, Arthur, don’t think me innocent, I’m not. I give as good to him as he does to me, if not more so. I can bend him. I bend him into any shape I want him, he won’t give you trouble over this. I swear it.”

Arthur said, “What about you? Are you going to give me trouble?”

"You think I care about coins, money, wealth? I don't care about these things. Watching my father and uncle fighting over that chest for all these years sickens me. I hate it. I hate money and what it does to men. It's a necessary evil, that's all it is to me."

Neither of them said any more.

But Arthur gave way first this time and pulled Medraut in, an arm around his neck, saying, "Do not try to fool me with games and ruses again. It will never work. Just…just stay mine, because I can see what's coming. Stay by me and you will be safe."

Saved we were then by someone banging on the door

It was time to open up for supper.

Medraut went and opened the doors, and the hall's retainers filed in. Lot too came in with them, and he gave no sign that he had lost his precious chest of coins to his Silurian nephew. And so we sat at the head-table and ate and drank and the day became night, mellowing into a fine evening of drinking, song-singing and poetry.

Everyone kept on drinking and I went across to join with Cai and Val, Glenn and Howell and a few others near the main door, mug in hand, as Essylt had snatched Arthur away into a corner and was drooling over him, trying to get into his breeches.

I felt sure she wanted to put into action a plan of seduction, a seduction that would result in a pregnancy, which in turn would force Arthur to marry her, because he was so bloody gallant about women not to marry a girl he had made pregnant. And Essylt was truly beautiful, a tormenting female version of her brother.

And I could not really see the harm in her having Arthur for herself. They would be good together, I thought. A good match, better than the last one. Essylt Fynwen was true to her name, White-neck, white skin, alluring and noble. There was also no doubt in my mind she was in love with him to the point of driving herself mad. She never took her eyes off him, and sometimes she even looked sick with love. Pale, consumed, drenched in it, drowning.

I turned away from her, swallowing a mouthful of ale; the drink was good and I made sure I had my share. And I really did not mean to go and interfere, but I got sick of listening to Cai telling me the hideous details of what the Picts did to anyone they captured in battle–that they roast men

alive over a fire, or eat your inner organs raw–and I turned away and staggered off to join Arthur in the corner, or at least, just stand still till I fell over.

I propped against the wall, hearing Essylt say to him, “Will you come down to the stable and see my new pony?”

He said, “Na, I’m going to bed now,” and her hand was in his and her eyes were glistening. My head was swimming and I started to sink; saw him pull away from her and she looked right at me.

She looked distraught when she said to me, “Bedwyr, please help me, why doesn’t he want me?”

I said, “He’s not interested in women,” knowing as soon as I opened my mouth that the words I spoke were not what I meant to say. I meant to say, ‘After what happened to Rhonwen, he is wary of bringing another woman into his heart’, not that he wasn’t interested in women at all, and it all came out wrong. And I saw tears fall down her cheeks. Now I knew it was time for me to go to bed as well, and I staggered out of the hall, just sober enough to not fall flat on my face as I went…

30: MEETING the KING of the SELGOVAE

I woke with an ale-sorry head, but this did not stop the routines of the day beginning all over again, the same as any other in the army. A long day that did not end with the evening, as Arthur took us out under moonlight that night, riding north in a troop of eighty riders.

We were heading for Castra, Camp of the Scouts, a two-hour ride north of the Wall. Most night riding was done in silence, but as we were still safely within our own territories, talking was allowed. Even so, it was quiet, only the horses’ hooves and jangling reins in the night. The moon was full, throwing soft light on the road ahead.

The land around so beautiful in the glow of the moon’s face. We rode on northward in silence, cold wind in our faces, silvery-grey clouds sometimes blocking our light. There was no hurry; we would be at Castra in another hour, just in time for a late supper before bunking down for the night.

There was also a settlement at Castra, for this was the land of some of the wildest tribesmen in Britain, the Selgovae, and north again, the Votadini, wild clansmen, answering to no law other than their own. Those men fought

against the Picts, they launched wild raids to rustle each other's cattle, they fought like demons, and maybe somewhere among them was hiding Cynan Aurelius.

After a while, Cai pulled up on my left, and even though he had moved from his stationed position in the troop, Arthur did not question him. At first quiet like a stone, always fierce, always strong, Cai started to hum a song; his song grew a little louder, then louder again, till he burst out into full voice, the noise of him echoing down the road and back again, singing some old randy barrack song.

"I am the adventurer! Adventurer! Harken to the words I sing! Women beg with wide open legs–to the adventurer!"

"Shut-up, you bloody loud-mouth!" Medraut called out.

As the night deepened, I heard a sudden boom come from away to our left. Cai fell silent, the horses walked on. Then again; boom, boom, followed by a long roll of drums beating out a rhythm; eerie, cold, seemingly far away, but coming closer as we moved forward, deep dooms through the night air and we all shifted restlessly in our saddles.

"What is that?" I said to Arthur. "Not Pictish war-drums?" I felt the chill of the sound running through me. Were we about to be attacked?

"Keep riding," he said, turning to look at the troop behind him. He called, "Keep in formation! Walk on!"

The drumbeats came closer, the sound of it lifted the hair on my arms and neck, chills up my back-bone as it turned to the pounding booms of a war-threat. We kept to our formations, all save Arthur who heeled his horse ahead of the rest of us.

I almost called out after him, but he went only a few paces and stopped, called back, "Halt!"

At once we reined in and stood where we were, watching our leader as he sat out on the road, alone. A moment later he called, "There are riders coming, only three, so hold where you are!"

He trotted back to join us, saying, "There's a faint light over by that hillock, do you see it? If you look, you can see the shapes of huts, see? Wait till the moon comes out again."

A large cloud blocked the moonlight, though sailing by as I watched, revealing the shapes Arthur had seen, revealing riders approaching.

As the riders came close, one called out, “Who travels our road at night? Who travels with you?”

I recognised the voice, it was Gareth.

“Come closer and see!” Arthur called back.

“Is that you, Silurian?” Gareth said, riding up to join us.

“It is, Supreme Commander in Britannia, how goes it with you, Gareth ap Gan, and why didn’t you send me a report today?”

Gareth came in close and saluted.

He and Arthur shook hands the warriors’ way, Gareth saying to him, “I cannot believe you are here–are you some kind of augur? I’ve been sending you mind-messages all day, calling for you to come and you did! How did you do that, Silurian?”

Arthur said, “Couldn’t you have just sent me an errand-rider? I came because you didn’t send your report and that made me restless. What’s going on?”

“Picts, of course,” Gareth told him. “I’ll take you back to the village. The Selgovae here have suffered some attacks, and I almost lost some men only yesterday, trying to defend the outer crop-lands beyond and over that hill, you can see it in the dark. Come on!”

Gareth turned back down the road, we followed.

We took a dogleg towards the village, palisaded and with the main gate open, through which we rode in file, almost riding directly into a pen of pigs. All of the village men were there to greet us. It was they who were making their drumming music, knowing that we were coming. Their clever idea of welcoming us and warning any possible attackers that reinforcements had arrived. Our troop then rode around the inside of the wall, spreading the horses out and dismounting.

Grooms set to work to tether them, as we went to meet the village chieftain, introduced by Gareth. The man’s name was Garwy Hir, son of Angor, King of the Selgovae, a man with grey eyes as piercing as an eagle’s, and just as imperious. Garwy was already well known to Medraut, who had fought with him against the Picts many times before.

The village was large enough to house us for the night, and as we stepped before their king, I took a quick look around me. For this was the first time I had ever been in a real British village of the old style. Twelve large roundhouses loomed in the darkness, and the men here were wild and savage. They were true untouched Selgovae, and Garwy greeted Arthur with proud reverence.

Only the higher-ranked members of our Clan were allowed into the king’s roundhouse. The rest of us would be billeted in outer houses, and as we filed into Garwy’s private domain, the women stood to greet us. And even though the Selgovae were as British as we were, it was like the meeting of different forces; it was all so strange and different.

Before standing for us, the women were sat on small stools, weaving at looms or grinding grain of barley. The children slept back against the wall, the walls themselves hung with skins of deer and joints of smoked meat; cured skins were on the ground to sleep on; bronze lamps swung from the ceiling and a central fire burned with peat. Home-made weapons hung

from hooks; heavy wooden clubs and crudely made swords. Also inside were beautifully carved chairs, Roman in design, and two long benches with bolsters.

With us gathered around him, King Garwy Hir explained to his people in rapid speech who we were and why we were here–and not a single one of them was prepared now for the Silurian.

They looked at him, stared at him with unhidden delight.

Arthur bowed to everyone; men, boys, women, old hags and girls, and they all looked at him with wide-open eyes. Maybe to them he was like a black-bred stallion standing amongst a nation of white hill-ponies, for these people were all so fair.

Some of the younger women with hair dyed lime-white and long, fair white northern skins, and I heard one of them say, "A Silurian…what manner of being is that, I wonder?" and laughed right out loud. But they were spellbound. Gareth had told them he would send for the Pendragon, he had told them that Arthur would come, and so here he was, standing before them. The people here believed all the tales Gareth had spun them.

Outside, the drummers started up again and the king turned to his women and ordered them to find us something to eat and drink, then offering us a seat at his fire.

We all took our helmets off and sat down on the long cushioned bench; the others stood near the door or sat before the fire. Garwy sat down in a carved Roman chair, staring at us one by one, fifteen of us inside his house. He was an old man, wizen, dried, with a long white moustache and hair pulled back in a single braid down his back. His hands were gnarled and stuffed with heavy silver and gold rings; he wore a white shirt, embroidered in red thread with Selgovae designs, his breeches patched with leather.

"Welcome," he said, his voice deep and heavily accented, though we could fathom him well enough. "Welcome to my village, to the land of the Selgovae. Welcome, Arthur Pendragon of the family of King Uthyr and Lord Lot." Staring only at Arthur, Garwy said, "And it is you our King Uthyr gave the Dragon to?"

Arthur answered, "I am King Uthyr's son, Lot's nephew, and first cousin to Medraut here. And this is my foster-brother, Prince Bedwyr, the Fox, son of the King of Dogfeiling." He put a hand on my shoulder.

The man Garwy looked at me, and I bowed my head to him.

He asked me, “And where is Dogfeiling? From where?”

“In Gwynedd, far to the south. I am Gododdin.”

The king nodded; he said, “And your foster-brother, our new Pendragon, he is King Uthyr’s son? Cousin to Medraut ap Lot?”

I frowned at the old man. “Of course he is, he just told you that; he wouldn’t be here otherwise. Why do you ask these things?”

“I know that King Uthyr gave away a son. Now this is him returned? Who is your mother?” he said to Arthur.

“Lady Igrain, daughter of Silurian lords, descended from the line of the Imperator, Magnus Maximus.”

Still the old king continued to study him, caught perhaps by the deep darkness of his eyes.

In fact, he held Arthur for so long with his studying gaze that Medraut spoke up, “He is my cousin. I wouldn’t be sitting here, nor ride with him into battle if he was not. These are the truths of our family. Take my word, my Lord Garwy, do not make such a show.”

“Of course he is your cousin!” Garwy cried at him. “He may be dark as a crack up a fairy’s arse, and you may be fair, but I can still see a touch of the Snake in him. I am only testing him. And…your cousin carries some mighty sword. I have heard this new Pendragon is blessed by goddesses.”

Now all his women murmured agreement.

Garwy went on, “Arthur has seen the Goddess with his own black eyes, they say. He carries a special sword, I see it even now. Show it to me, Pendragon. Show me your sword from a strange place.”

Then the old man’s eyes fell from Arthur’s face to his Armorican sword, held across his lap in its special scabbard. And Arthur knew he must respect the king’s hospitality, so he stood up and drew out the blade; it rang with sound, shone in the lamplight, the old man gasped and sat back as Arthur held the blade close to his face.

“Where does it come from?” Garwy begged, staring down at the patterned-blade and bringing up a finger to touch the point.

“I won it in battle,” Arthur told him. “I killed the barbarian who had stolen it from our people. It’s home now where it belongs,” and he slid the blade back into its scabbard, locking it in place before sitting back down again.

Everyone in the house had fallen silent when the blade came out, and this was when I noticed an old woman sitting not far behind Garwy, watching Arthur with an intensity that consumed all of her attention.

Beside her sat a handsome young girl. Handsome, because she had a strong boyishness in her features. I only knew she was a girl because of her long dyed white hair and large breasts; if not for these things, she could have been a youth around our own age. She too was watching us, all of us with deep intent, her eyes glancing back and forth between Medraut and Arthur, resting a few times on me, then up at Cai, at Val, around in a circle. I watched her; she seemed hungry. Starving. Desperation in her eyes. Outside the drummers stopped their pounding.

Garwy said, "Will you protect us from the Picts?"

Arthur told him, "I will, but only for a short time. I do not have the resources or the men to station troops permanently in this region. I am not Rome. My warriors go where they are needed, they fight where they are needed, but I cannot station permanent garrisons anywhere in Britain; my force is mobile and we go where we're needed. Even now I should be somewhere else. From the north to the south, these are the lands I must protect."

Gareth spoke up, "Picts came in yesterday and raided some cattle, they didn't engage us in battle, but skirmished with a few of my men. No one was killed or injured, but I know they will be back."

"If they come again, they will come in numbers," Medraut said to Gareth. "They always do. Garwy, my lord, how many do you have able to fight?"

"I have maybe a hundred and twenty or so able men scattered around this territory, three of them my sons, but I can call in many more. Though we are only hunters."

"I told the king here that you would come," Gareth added to Arthur. "And you did. I said you would answer me within this day, and you did. You haven't come here to leave this village undefended. You came for a reason."

Arthur answered him, though addressing Garwy, "I can only do what's within my power, for the Men of the North need to unite. I want to put in place a strong power base from here, run from Luguvalos. I want to make you strong so you can defend the northern frontiers for many

generations to come, if only Uthyr would stop opposing me. But I swear, my lord, I did not come today with forces enough to battle numbers. I came to visit Gareth here and find out why he had not sent me his reports. There's nothing magic in this, my visit."

Garwy laughed. "Ah! Nothing magic? You exude magic, you holder of a mysterious sword, killer of enemies, Master of the Dragon, mind-reader; the Gododdin over the hills think you start fires where you walk, and the Cornovii whisper of the coming of a High King. You see goddesses, and you try to tell me you do not have the forces to defend me this one time? Ah!" He turned then and cried, "Where are those girls with the ale? With supper? Go and find them, Indec."

The handsome girl got up, and looking at us as she left, she went out of a rear door.

Garwy said when she had gone, "Come now, all of you relax; take off your weapons and armour and rest. After supper, I will let you sleep without any more questions."

Arthur stood up to take off his armour; we all did the same, eager at last for something to eat and drink, to sleep. The interior of the roundhouse was warm, and there were plenty of skins and blankets and bolsters to make it a good night of rest. The women brought what supper they could spare and we ate standing up and getting ready to sleep. I had to go outside and get the bearskin off my horse's saddle, where it was strapped in a roll; Arthur's own bearskin that he had given me to sleep on for myself.

And when I came back in again, everyone was more or less ready to bed down. The women taking the used bowls and mugs and leaving the house with their children. Garwy Hir blessed us goodnight and he too left—we were alone. The Selgovae went to another roundhouse for the night, giving us space to spread out and sleep…

31: THE FOX FINDS a PICTISH DAGGER

Mid-morning the following day, Arthur led our troop up the main road, split us in two and posted us each half on either side of the road and stationed up the hillsides.

Because Gareth was with us, we had a band of a hundred and twenty riders. Even with the extra men, the situation if we should run into a hostile

Pictish force, would remain serious. As Medraut said to Gareth the night before, the Picts often raided in large numbers.

The sun was now rising before us and shining down over the rolling hills, and most of the troop was dismounted and standing in groups, watching the land around them. I sat on my horse and let my feelings go free into the vast horizon.

Away to the north and east, where the sun came and burned down on the hills, were the original homelands of my Gododdin; where my great grandfather had been born before he had brought the Stags in migration to Gwynedd. Far away to the west and north were the lands that were opening up to the Dal Riada from Hibernia. I wondered what these people were like and if I would ever meet them.

After a while of watching the landscape, I got off my horse and let him graze the long sweet deer-grass underfoot. Spring flowers were waiting to open to the sun. Northward, I saw a dark patch of green made by an oak-wood forest.

I wondered if Picts were hiding there, deep and hidden in the trees. For it was their custom to camouflage themselves, and the way they skin-branded their bodies with blue woad made them blend into the hills and forests. I also knew they used poisoned arrows. On the hillside stood Arthur and Medraut; next to them, Gareth and Val, with Cai wandering around impatient and kicking at the ground. They were all looking out into the north. I went over to join them.

Here I heard Medraut give Arthur his usual deep ideas about tactics: “We will get slaughtered if they come now with numbers. You want to get slaughtered for one Selgovae village?”

“This is not about one village,” Arthur answered. “This is about building alliances and power in the north. I need to ally with the kings of this land. What do you think I’m doing here? As Pendragon, it’s my duty to protect these people, right here and right now.” Saying this, he went back to looking out into the distance.

“They use poison arrows, you know,” Medraut said in a warning voice.

Arthur answered the same; “We have arrows too, better than theirs. Roman crossbows in the hands of your own men. You want to use them?”

I stood back and listened to them argue. Medraut did not answer.

Arthur again, “How strong is their poison?”

“I never saw anyone die from it, but it all depends how deep the arrows penetrate.”

Cai interrupted, “If they’re going to come, let it be now, I’m bored,” and he wandered off again towards his horse. Here he stopped and called back, “Why not send Gareth to ask them to come? He looks like one of them. Skin-branded from head to foot, they will think he’s one of their own! Send him, Arthur, get it over and done with.”

Arthur looked at Gareth, smiled and said, “That’s a good idea, go on, Gareth, ride up the road and see if anything is coming.”

“Are you being serious with me, brother?” he cursed. “I will get ambushed.”

“No, I’m not being serious with you, Gareth. I really meant to say, suck my cock.”

“I would rather ride up the road.”

“Aye? Isn’t that what I told you to do in the first place?”

“I’m going then.”

“But don’t be gone long,” Arthur blew a kiss at him. “You know how much I miss you when you are gone. I need you to suck my cock.”

Everyone laughed.

And when Gareth walked by me to his horse, he said, “One day, one of these days, I’ll yank his prick right off and offer it up to the Picts as a trophy, the prick of Arthur of the Britons…yes, I will.”

He mounted and turned away down the hill, where we watched him gallop up the road and disappear into the near distance. I laughed at him. Gareth never spoke much, but when he did, it was worth listening to. And none of us worried about him. He knew what he was doing. He was a perfect scout; wily, quick and skilled. Most of his moaning and complaining was a result of sheer laziness, rather than fear of what Arthur told him to do.

So we waited on the hilltop, getting baked by the sun. I sat on the grass, and looked away into the west. And for some reason on this hillside, I began to feel apart from the rest. I was afraid of the Picts; they were an unknown force to me. Medraut had fought them many times, and Arthur was not afraid of anything. Cai lusted for battle, it was his reason for living. Valarius was quiet and brave, and Gareth, indomitable. But me? My heart was already hammering.

And yet baking in the sun like I was, I knew I would do what I had to do when it was time, and still I was afraid. I sat where I was, getting hotter. I looked up once, looked at Arthur, he stood watching me. He came over, covered me with his shadow, and gave me his shade. He never felt the heat. We had all taken our helmets off, or else our brains would boil under the heated metal, and Arthur was wearing again his sun-ray headband. He wore it constantly whenever his helmet came off, and to me, those suns around his forehead told a story of light. Light in his head.

He crouched down at my side, put a hand on my head, gripped my hair and pulled my head back. He looked into my eyes. "Hold up, Bedwyr-brawd, it's not so bad up here."

"I'm all right," I answered.

He gripped my hair even tighter; he put a hand on my face, held me still a moment before moving his hand down over my neck…a stroke, a touch…

He said, "I know what you feel…"

And what did he make me feel?

The way he looked at me, deep inside me…his eyes dark…

I took his wrist and squeezed, sighed his name, "Arthur…"

"I know. We're strong together. We will weather together. Never part, strength to strength." He released me, then got up and went back to his position on the hilltop, looking out, looking for war.

I sat for a moment, feeling strange, that Arthur had touched me in the way he did, but I got up then and went to join him. We watched the distances and the forest; there was nothing to see. Just land and sky and the road running north, bending slightly west. And my heart was pounding.

"How long are we going to stand here?" Medraut again. "I'm boiling; it's so hot up here."

"Just wait till Gareth comes back; we cannot leave without him," Arthur said.

So we waited some more, and most of the men had spread out on the grass, resting. It was hard to say how long we waited, but the sun moved higher again, maybe an hour. I wanted to piss, so I turned aside and walked further up the hill, saw a clump of flowers by a jutting rock and decided to water them. They looked thirsty in the hot sun, so I gave them a long stream.

There was a ladybug on the petals, I sprayed it, and as I did, I heard Howell call from further down the hill, “Here he comes! Gareth’s coming back!”

As he called, I heard something else; an odd sound, a kind of distant hoom, hoom, hoom, and it made my skin crawl. I looked up, finished watering the plants, laced up my breeches and turned, there, again, hoom, hoom…

“What is that bloody din?” I called.

Arthur walked over to join me; told me, “It’s them, the Picts. It’s their war-chant. They are coming.”

Instantly my guts turned over and my mouth dried.

Again, Arthur touched me; this time he gripped the back of my neck and pulled me to him, saying, “Do not fear; you are with me.”

I never answered.

Only Gareth was back, riding up the hillside and calling out as he came, his horse all lathered, “Arthur! Come on now, we have to retreat. There are at least two hundred of them, maybe more!”

“Tell me what you saw.”

“At least two hundred, including thirty pony-riders. And of course their archers. All coming this way with the riders in the lead.”

“We’re not retreating,” Arthur ordered us. “If we retreat, they will carry on to attack Garwy’s village in force. We have to cut them down before they can. We will meet them on the road.”

Gareth looked afraid, holding onto his horse’s reins as if he was still galloping down the road. His fear spread to me, but Arthur seemed unmoved. Seemed as calm as a soft spring breeze.

“Medraut!” he called, “gather your men, now! Cai! Get those men up and mounted and follow me!”

He walked towards his horse, but stopped, grabbed me by my tunic and pulled me with him. I had frozen to the ground.

He said, “You know where I want you, you know what to do.” He dragged me with him to our horses.

My shield and spear were lying in the grass where I had left them. I picked them up, mounted my horse and turned.

Once on horseback, I felt better. I knew what to do when I was mounted with my spear in hand. We rode down the hill in a mass to the

main road below; here we gathered together. There was still no sign of the Picts, but we could hear their war-chants, two hundred savage voices sounding as one, a deep and spine-chilling sound that echoed down the hillsides, washing over us like a great wave.

"Drustan!" Arthur called to our young scout. "Ride back to the village and warn them the enemy are coming, tell them to be ready. Tell Garwy to have his warriors stand for possible attack if any of these Picts break through. I want you to stay with the Selgovae, wait for us there. Go now!"

Drustan looked relieved that he would not have to stand and go into battle with Gareth's unit. I saw the look on his face as he turned and galloped away south, heading for the village. Already I was breathing heavily and I tried to control it, taking long deep breaths that I held in check. I gripped my spear harder. Arthur then turned to Cai. On the far left of the troop, I could not hear what they were saying, but watched them talking intently and fast. Cai nodded, saluted, and pulled out his unit and rode towards the hill on our left, a high hill, its flanks steep, but not too steep that a horse could not ride the slope.

Next Gareth got his orders.

I heard Arthur say to him, "Protect Cai's unit in his rear, which will be the head of the Pictish foot-soldiers. No one is to engage in deep fighting with their warriors; do not penetrate their mass, keep always on the outer flanks."

He turned next to Medraut; told him, "Fight your unit on the enemy left flank; don't try to break their rear from the head. If I see you doing that, I'll have you dead on my sword! Give them a volley from your crossbows. The rest of you will fight with me on the right flank, a downhill charge, fight and retreat.

When Cai has done his job, we will retreat all of us back south. Let them chase us if they want this village so much. How much is it worth to them? How eager are they to die for a few cattle and sheep?"

Just as he spoke, there came another chilling war-chant from the road ahead. I looked up the hill, saw Cai and his unit were ready and waiting.

"Ride!" Arthur called.

Medraut's unit gathered and took the high ground on the enemy's left flank. The rest of us followed Arthur to a position close to Cai up the hillside, which was the enemy's right. The Picts were boxed in, with hills on

their left and right, both covered by our units, while at their head waited Cai and Gareth; Arthur had put their two units together, one to attack, the other to defend.

As we rode up the hillside and took our positions, Arthur said to me, “Fox, get on my right.”

“Let me stay here.”

“Get on my right!” and he drew his sword.

I moved, and as I did, he called, “Spears down!”

His sword went back in and our spears came down.

Ahead and away to my left, I saw Medraut’s men launch a round of arrows.

“Too soon,” Arthur said under his breath as a cry went up from Medraut’s unit; they charged. The enemy had not yet come into full view, but waiting, heart pounding, I saw a group of painted pony-riders come around the bend. And as soon as they did, Cai’s unit attacked, heading a charge to the rear of their riders to cut them off from the main body of enemy.

Here Cai began taking riders down. Most of the mounted Picts tried to escape by fleeing down the road, but Cai’s men were too fast, our horses bigger and faster, and the enemy was run down and hacked to pieces in an instant. Cai’s Roman warhorse was so big I saw him scatter and trample the riders who fell under him. Arthur certainly knew what that felt like, having been a victim of Cai’s horse himself. I looked at Arthur now and wondered in a flash what he was seeing; was he seeing in the way he told me about? With intense clarity, making him see rocks as big as boulders?

Only I saw Cai’s men running down and destroying what cavalry the Picts had. As he did, Gareth moved to block the head of the main body, rounding the bend. What I saw was naught but a rabble of untrained warriors, half naked, no armour, no helmets, only small shields, spears, swords, knives, a few archers, nearly all of them skin-branded in blue, and screaming.

They broke left and right, but the right flanks checked themselves when they saw us stationed above them on the hillside. This was when we charged downhill, slamming into those screaming Picts from our hillside position.

We split their chests with our spears, my ride so powerful I saw the first one I hit burst like a fruit; he had no idea what had happened to him. I wheeled, turned and rode in again, losing all fear. Once the battle was on, my fear fled like the men I rode down, smashing my shield into a man's face, spearing another through his throat, turning back up the hill for another charge, and still the mass of them, ugly with fear and rage, seemed huge and it was near impossible not to become trapped within their swarming numbers.

We broke the charge and regrouped up the hillside, only to charge down again. Just ahead of me, Arthur was splitting skulls with his sword, bounding over dead bodies on horseback. Far ahead again the Snake was holding the left flank, though the Picts on that side were already breaking and scattering for the hills, while behind us, Gareth and Cai were charging the head of the main mass.

We were forging ahead across the right enemy flank in a cutting line when we broke out into free ground, no enemy now, for they had all fled up the eastern hillsides; most had gone over the top, surely not expecting to find a defensive force here to meet them. Medraut's side was chasing them down.

In front of me, Arthur turned back, rode to my side and cried, near breathless, "Bedwyr, go over to Medraut's side. Look, most of the enemy have fled that side, but keep moving south, join with Cai when you reach the bend in the road and wait for me there."

"But what about you?"

He did not answer me, but gave orders to some of the others coming up to join us. "Ride down those escaping Picts! Kill them, then ride back to join me and Cai." A band of Picts was fleeing north for home ahead of us and our men heeled after them.

Arthur turned back to me, "I need Medraut back, he's gone after those in the east. I want you to bring him back before he gets himself cut-off and wiped out, but don't engage in any fighting. Just bring the bastard back again, join with me and Cai; do you see?" He pointed back down the road towards the south with his spear. I turned to look; he said, "Only about forty of them left. Hurry!"

He gave me a shove, and I turned and rode downhill, galloped over the flat land before the road, crossed the road and made for the eastern hills,

where the main body of Picts had fled. When I crested the hill, I saw the Snake's men had surrounded a small band of Picts and were riding in and out, killing them.

I called out, "Medraut! Retreat! Follow me!"

He did not hear me so I rode in closer, cried again, "Medraut! Retreat! Arthur wants you out of here!"

He heard me this time, turned to face me, his own face covered in blood. And he looked near mad with killing-lust.

He cried back at me, "Fox!" Now pointing towards my back.

Whatever he pointed at, I failed to see it. I only felt it; felt something hit my left upper shoulder. There I caught a quick glimpse of a Pictish warrior fleeing wildly downhill; the bastard had jumped me from the higher ground at my back, filling me with a crushing numbness, and crippling my left arm.

I dropped my spear, gave a gagged cry of pain and slumped over my horse's neck. I thought I had been pierced by a spear from behind and I dropped and lay on the grass, gasping, rolling back and forth in pain, growling like an animal.

My left arm had gone limp and I could not move it. I felt the hot wash of blood running down the inside of my tunic sleeve. I tried to get to my feet, head spinning and my arm loose and weak. I couldn't explain it, but it felt like my bone had broken, and when I looked, I saw the head of a great knife sticking out of my left upper shoulder; it was fully embedded down to the hilt.

Instinct told me to pull it out, yet when I took hold of the handle, the pain was agonising, and as I tugged, I found the bloody thing would not move. I knew from training days that I could make it much worse by trying to remove it myself. I guessed the blade had somehow lodged in bone or muscle, and if I tried to remove it myself, I feared I could cripple my shoulder forever.

So I left the thing where it was, knowing I needed help. I dropped to my knees, praying that I wouldn't be caught out alone by the enemy. And as I looked around, I saw nothing, no one. A strange silence covered the land, and I knew I had to get back onto my horse and…and nothing. I slumped as I tried to stand. I got up again, grabbed a hold of the right front pommel on my saddle and tried to pull myself up; blood was dripping off my fingertips

of my left hand. I groaned again, then my grip slipped. Though I lost strength, somehow I managed keep on my feet, but only for a moment. I slumped to the ground near my horse, wishing someone would come and find me. And I was terrified of being caught by Picts, for they would rip my guts out if they found me.

Once more I got to my feet, but I could not get up on my horse, so I would have to walk. My chest began burning and I couldn't swallow. I turned and picked up my spear right-handed and started walking back south, using the spear to lean on like a staff. I walked for what felt like ages, and as I came over the hill and back towards the main road, I saw before me a mound of bodies, some still alive, most dead. I knew I could not keep walking the way I was, as I could feel blood running down my back, under my armour. I tripped over a body and slumped to my knees, fell onto my right side and lay there like a dying Pict…

32: THE FOX in BED

Sometime in a dream I felt a hand on my face. I think I had fallen unconscious, and finally I was waking. Above me the Silurian.

Relief flooded me. I heard him say, "Pick him up…gently."

I felt a wave of pain as he and some others helped me up onto a cart to take me back to the village—though I was not alone in the back of the cart. Beside me was a pile of our own dead. I knew they were ours because of the way they were dressed, their shields over them, their swords in their hands, but I could not look at their faces. I did not want to see who they were.

Arthur jumped up into the cart beside me and took hold of me, held me in his arms, holding my blood-soaked hand in his, taking away my fear, because if I was dying, oh my Goddess, he was all I wanted to see as I left this world.

He said, "It's not so bad, you only feel weak from loss of blood. We cannot get the knife out till we get back to the village. Took me ages to find you from out of all these dead men. I would never leave without you, would never in all the world leave you."

I felt the cart rocking us as we took the south road, lulling me, rocking me to sleep as I listened to his voice.

“Fox, I broke Medraut’s skull for not staying with you, or at least sending someone back to find you. I broke his skull.”

I said, “Am I dying?”

“No, you just lost some blood; makes you think you are dying, that does.”

“Who died? Who are these dead?”

I looked into his eyes and saw the suffering.

He said, “Later, I’ll tell you later when you are not so weak. Garwy will help, will get some food into you and you will feel stronger then. You need strength to get this knife out.”

He was right. I could feel myself slipping back to sleep and I let my head fall against his chest, where I felt an intense peace as I listened to his beating heart, intense peace. I went rolling in and out of sleep all the way back, and by the time we pulled up at the roundhouse door, I was ready to pass out.

The village had not been attacked, and Garwy Hir, when I opened my eyes and saw him standing there, he looked brainless with delight that his people had been saved this one time. But then I was being carried inside along with the other wounded, and laid to rest before the fire, stoked up high to warm us. And as I lay there, breathing deep, I heard a sound come from behind; someone was playing a flute, another on a harp, a sweet tune to soothe us wounded.

Then Arthur was with me again, telling me, “There’s someone here to help; Garwy was quick enough to send back to Luguvalos for medical aid.”

I looked up and saw Arial standing over me. I sighed in relief. My doctor! She knelt to my side, told me, “First I want you to take some broth for strength,” and she began lifting me up, while another maid put a bowl to my lips. I tasted a warm salty drink, beefy, though there was nothing to chew. I sipped the broth, and as I did, I felt Arial cutting through the sleeve of my tunic to the shoulder.

As the tunic was leather it took a long time for her to cut my arm and shoulder free. I thought I would howl in pain, but my arm was numb. I was numb all over and felt viciously ill. Around me in the house there were many others being doctored, women helping with the wounded, and a few orderlies from Luguvalos. The news of the battle would have already reached the old fort; Garwy would have made sure of that. But I sat still,

sipping the broth and praying for the knife in my shoulder to come out without killing me.

Arthur said, “Looks like it’s gone into his blade-bone here. And it’s a long knife, Fox, so it’s not going to come out easily.”

“No,” Arial agreed with him, “I do not think it will. I think it has glanced off his blade-bone, that is, scrapped down the bone itself and come out near the skin. I can feel the tip of the knife here…”

I yowled when I felt her fingers feeling for the blade under my skin. She said, “My beloved Fox is not dead!” and she laughed at me. The leather was cut free and my shoulder exposed. Arial sat me forward and began wrapping a bandage around my left arm and around my chest, intending to strap my arm down as the knife came out, to stop me from thrashing around from the pain and making the wound worse.

“Drink more broth,” she ordered me.

I did as she told me.

Arthur said, “Oh, you should see this, Fox, it’s right down to the hilt. Never seen anything like it before. It’s beautiful.”

He laughed and I snarled at him. Again Arial told me to drink up my broth, then she went away. Someone called for Arthur and he too got up and went, leaving me to finish my drink and look around the room. Here I saw many others in trouble. Over by the back wall, still near me, was Cai; he sat with his left leg out in front of him, a slash above his knee, being bandaged by another woman.

He gave me a nod and wink and called, “Great battle that one! I see you have a small Pictish souvenir to take back to Luguvalos with you; you must keep that knife, Bedwyr, something to remember this day. You have the most amazing wound I’ve ever seen.”

He too laughed and everyone stopped and looked at me, at the hilt of the knife sticking out of my shoulder. Beautiful, my arse.

The numbness in my arm felt deep, the pain of it also in my back, my neck, and even my jaw, and when I tried to look at it, I could not turn my head, though I could see the handle of the knife sticking up from my shoulder. A group of people came over to take a look. None of them had seen anything like it before, and they all began giving their opinions on the best way to remove it. My arm was dark with dried blood and some of Garwy’s men went telling me the best way to cope with the pain; to bite

down on a piece of wood was the favourite, or just scream. Listening to them giving all this advice, I began to lose my temper, ready to kick out at them if they came near me. And why was Arial taking so long?

I looked for her, but she was tending to someone who was far worse off than I was. I finished the bowl of broth, and found I had become frozen in a sitting position, the knife beginning to freeze my whole body. People were moving all around me.

I saw Arthur near the main door, talking to one of the wounded. He got up, and when he did, that handsome girl, Indec, got up with him and followed him about wherever he went, from warrior to warrior, as if she had become his personal aide. I was now feeling drowsy, so I sat still, breathing down the need to sleep, and looked up only when I heard a voice. Goddess, no, it was Medraut. Of course I was his target and he came and crouched down in front of me, and I saw a massive black and swollen right eye marring his angelic face. There was also a cut on his cheek, still weeping blood.

I said, "You look so handsome, brother."

He said, "Arthur did it. He did it because I left you alone on the field and didn't send anyone to go back to find you. That's true. I didn't. Truth is, I just got caught up in chasing down the bastard who put that knife in you, and then I ran into a band of Picts who took all my attention. Of course, if the Picts had found you, they would have killed you. Arthur would have killed me if anything had happened to you. He wouldn't hesitate to kill me, you know, for you. I know that. So instead, he flattened me, put me on my back."

He lowered his voice and whispered to me, close, "But you see, Fox, I love it when he hurts me. If he thinks this is punishment, he's wrong. It exhilarates me when he hurts me; pain like this is pleasure to me."

I growled at him, "You make me sick. You left me there to die, you bastard, you could have sent help. I don't want to hear what–what…just get out of my sight."

He moved even closer and said, "Na, I just lost all thought in the chase, I thought you were already dead, and what would Arthur have said then if I had not run down and killed those who had killed you? Think of that."

“I was wounded, you left me, he smacked you down and don’t think that’s the end of it. He won’t let this go with just a black-eye.”

“I know. He’s already warned me to expect something when we get back to Luguvalos, but you and I both know he’s no disciplinarian. What’s he going to do to me, aye? Whatever it is, as long as he does it, I’ll enjoy it.”

Saying this, he kissed my forehead and got up and walked away.

If only I was not broken, I would have gone for him right here and now. He left me raging with anger, and I started to have visions of Arthur and I getting him between us and carving out his black heart…but maybe he would enjoy that too.

Alone again, I was feeling truly drained, I was just about to fall on my back when both Arthur and Arial returned.

She said, “Are you feeling sleepy now, my sweetheart?”

“I cannot hold up any more; you have to take it out now or I’ll die.”

Arthur held me, put his arms around me as Arial took hold of the handle of the knife; everyone watched, everyone gone still and quiet as she pulled it upwards once and the agony drove through me far worse than the actual stabbing itself. I cried out, a cry from somewhere deep, like my guts were being dragged out on a hook. I struggled, and Arthur increased his hold on me, especially my left arm.

I slumped, weak in his arms. I saw the blade move past my eyes; saw it smeared red with my flesh and blood. Then I felt myself go down to the ground and turn over on my right side as Arial worked to wash and stop the wound with padding, winding a long bandage around my shoulder and chest. And there I lay in some kind of half dream, someone holding up my head to drink something warm, someone putting a cushion under my head and covering me with blankets. I slipped away into hot shivering dreams…

The pain during the night was immense. It felt like a lump of wood was being forced down my throat and into my chest and I knew I was dribbling like an idiot. I also knew I was trying to speak. In my dreams, I had lost Arthur somewhere on the battlefield and could not find him, knowing that I would find him dead. I heard myself calling for him. Someone answered me through the darkness, “He’s not here.”

“Why? Why isn’t he here?”

Arial. Her tender hands soothed my hot brow; she lifted me to drink.

“Not here?” I whispered again.

“No, he went with Princess Indec. King Garwy Hir’s daughter, Indec.”

“No, no…he—”

“Fox, do not deny him his pleasures, my sweetheart. He has not been with a woman since Rhonwen died, can you not let him go free?”

“No, he cannot do this…go get him back; it’s another trap, another trap.” But I was powerless of saying any more. I swallowed the drink Arial gave me in one, my hand trembling, my guts burning, and the agony in me…Oh goddess, the agony as I closed my eyes…

The noise of the other wounded and the light of dawn woke me, the pain a heavy ache, a deep soreness, and the bone in my shoulder felt as if it were rasping against rough stone. And I felt tired from a strange night of strange dreams; did Arial say something about Indec? That Arthur had gone with her? To me, it was another trap. Garwy Hir trying to find a husband for his daughter, another pregnancy, an alliance with the Pendragon for his power. And it was not long before he was back again, Arthur, always up before dawn and tending to his warriors.

Now to me.

“How was your night?” he asked me when he came in.

“Bad.”

“We’re going home today, when the carts arrive later this morning to carry you back. I cannot do any more here, but I’ve set up for a larger Pictish battle, they will come for me for revenge.”

“Shut-up about war,” I spat at him my anger.

“So, Arial told you about Princess Indec.”

“She did.”

“There was nothing in it; we both wanted the same thing at the same time, and we found it in each other.”

I gazed at him; “No, Silurian, it’s never so easy with you and women. One taste of you, and she will want you for all time, and don’t think Garwy won’t know about you ploughing his daughter. What does he want for his daughter? A marriage with the Pendragon? Nice alliance for him.” Arthur looked at me long and hard. I had hurt him, hurt his feelings. I went further. “And another thing…don’t, whatever you do, punish Medraut for what he

did to me when he left me on the field. He wants you to hurt him, so don't. Do not give him what he wants."

He answered, "I cannot do that. He broke the warriors' code and he did it in front of the troops."

He stood up, but before he left, he dropped something near me–the Pictish dagger from my shoulder. I struggled like a fool to sit up, to pick it up. What a magnificent thing it was. Whoever had stabbed this blade into me must surely now be regretting its loss, if the creature still lived. Medraut had probably killed the one who had done it. In my hand the knife sat long, seven inches long, with a waisted-blade; its handle was the slim body of a man, his head with two tiny red eyes. I had seen those eyes in my shoulder. The blade was now clean and polished.

A few hours after this, the carts arrived for the dead and wounded to be transported back to Luguvalos. I could not eat any breakfast, but found I could stand well enough; so well, I knew I was able to ride my horse home. I stood with Cai outside the roundhouse door, waiting for the troops to gather together and leave. Strong as a Roman warhorse himself, Cai was up on his wounded leg, though he told me he couldn't ride. I laughed at him.

As I stood in the early morning sun, I braved a look at the dead who were being loaded onto one of the carts in front of me. The worst thing about being a warrior–seeing our brothers die. Seeing their lives given up, lost and destroyed; seeing those left behind to grieve, sometimes dying of grief. To see those you loved or even those you hated, dying. It touched me deep. Two faces I saw that touched me deep. Glenn. And Llachlan.

So what if Glenn and his friends had once pounded me raw and broke my hand? I was beginning to like him, and now he was dead. And the old man too, Llachlan ap Noll, so brave to have stayed with us and not retire with the rest of the old guard.

I turned away, and Cai put a hand on my good shoulder; he watched me struggling to hold back my tears. He pulled me to him, and held my head against his shoulder. Cai, so strong, a good warrior, my friend. We had lost nine warriors and two horses. Ten wounded, including myself, and four seriously. It was always the same. And it sickened me even more when I realised we would soon have to do it all again; time and time again for the rest of our lives. For however long we lived. All the Selgovae were out to see us leave; they now owed us deep allegiance. We had fought for them,

died for them, and they would come to us when Arthur called their warriors to war.

Through the gathered villagers Arthur now came, leading his horse and mine; with him was the girl, the Princess Indec. And I could tell by the way she looked at him that I was right. She would not let him go so easily now that she had found him. King Garwy; he embraced Arthur hard, then gave him a gift of two solid gold wrist cuffs, heavily carved with animal designs. The tops of the bands were studded with jewels.

Garwy then made a short speech, "No amount of gold or silver can thank you and your warriors for what you did for us yesterday. I cannot thank you for lives lost. I can only thank you for those you defended. Call me, and I will come."

Arthur saluted him, pulled away from the old man's hands and called to us to mount. I could not get up on my horse without help, I had to mount from the side opposite to what I was used to.

Val helped me up, up by my right leg; swing my left leg over, and I was ready to ride, easy out of the gate in the palisade wall, my left arm bandaged from shoulder to chest, strapped to my chest.

I was getting used to using my right hand, though it still felt wrong. As we left, the Selgovae ran out with us, cheering, calling, running along with us.

Indec ran alongside Arthur's horse, saying to him, "Will you welcome me if I come to your city? To Luguvalos? Can I come? Will you be there?"

"I'll be there for a while yet, my lady," he told her. "But you cannot come alone; it's not safe to travel these roads without an escort."

"My brothers will escort me, if my father allows me to leave, just for a few days, please, Lord Arthur?"

And she kept on running after him, and he kept on smiling at her, with her lost in him already, I knew it, I saw him grip her reaching hand. He leant down from horseback and kissed her hand.

Cai called out to him, "No cocking in the ranks, Commander!"

Indec answered him, "With you, sir? Would it be allowable then?"

"His head is much bigger than his cock," Arthur told her. "Don't bother."

She laughed and fell back, letting him go and we continued on down the road, back to Luguvalos. On the way, I nearly fell off my horse in a

faint, because I felt so ill, and once back in the fort, Arial ordered me straight to bed.

Here she went tearing off my clothes with her strong hands, stripping me naked and pushing me under the covers.

I protested, “No! I’m all right now; just get me something to eat.”

“No to you, young sir.” She kissed my forehead. “This day in bed, promise me this much. Just sleep, and I need to check your wound. The Pendragon would have you rest.”

I fought with her; “The Pendragon needs me. I’m fine now, I’m just hungry.”

She took no notice of me and went storming off, slamming the door on me, and I fell back on the bed; only she had put me in the wrong one, she had put me in the smaller bed Arthur slept in, because he would not sleep in his father’s. But I was too tired to change and I slipped onto my right side. It was impossible to lie on my left with my wounded shoulder. I waited for something to eat.

Essylt; she came with my midday meal.

She said as she put the tray down on the table, “I’m glad you are back safely, but you are badly wounded. I suffer terrible fears when you ride to war. Why did Arthur hit my brother?”

I did not want to get talking to her, but when she saw me struggling to sit up, she came over and helped me; the touch of her soft cool hands on my hot skin made me shiver.

I told her, “Because your brother left me wounded on the field without sending help, that’s why. I could have been caught by the enemy and killed. Now Medraut’s in trouble, again. Pass me that cup.”

She stayed and helped me eat, sitting on a stool by my bedside and watching me. She said, “Medraut is special.”

I answered, “So you think he should have special treatment?”

“He needs understanding.”

“I cannot fathom him, but Arthur does. Isn’t that good enough for you?”

“I love my brother. He protects me from our father. He sacrificed himself to our father to save me.”

I thought about this, what she said. That Medraut did what he did with Lot in order to protect his sister from their father’s lustful demands. Was

this the terrible truth behind his actions?

But I did not want to hear it.

I said, “Are you trying to say that if it came down to a battle between Arthur and Medraut, you would back your brother?”

She shied away from me; “Not that. I just do not want war between them at all. I don’t want to see my brother hurt and I don’t want it to be Arthur doing the hurting. I love him. I love them both. It hurts to see them fight. They are both so beautiful, so alike in different ways. I don’t want things ugly between them. Can you stop it, Bedwyr, if it happens?”

“Me? Your brother is no saint, Essylt. There’s a touch of evil in him; there’s nothing like that in Arthur. I’m sorry, I cannot do anything. I want to sleep.”

Really, I wanted to get rid of her.

All I wanted was peace…

But there was no peace for me.

For whatever peace I had, shattered sometime after dark.

I had slept all day and into the late evening, knowing the cup of drink I had earlier was drugged. Both pain and noise woke me. I heard a crash of something hitting the floor, something falling from the table between our two beds.

I could only react slowly, and when I opened my eyes, I saw Arthur, standing naked before the table. I looked up and saw he was with a girl, the girl Indec. She was already here, and he was stripping her right in front of me, down to her naked flesh, where he manhandled her over the tabletop, swept aside the water jug, and ploughed into her so hard she cried out. He lifted her legs up and open, went banging her head off the wall with the power of his thrusts, and all I had to do was turn over and away, but I couldn’t. I could not lie on my left side.

I had to face them, and I cried out, “Arthur! Will you please do that over on your bed, not here in front of me!”

“Are you mad!” he answered. “I’m…not…stopping…now…” and he dived his tongue into her mouth as his cock dived into her cunt.

Then everything on the table started hitting the floor, and he picked her up, turned her, and laid her over the table and went into her from behind, pushing and thrusting deep as she cried and whimpered with each stroke he made. I could not bear it, and my head began spinning. After a

while, he picked her up and moved to drop her on the bed, only they did not get under the covers, they sat on top, and carried on in a wild ride together.

I put the bolster over my head; could not watch anymore, because I felt like weeping, because everything in me burned and throbbed and the pain in my shoulder began to grind. All I could hear was the two of them moaning, and her whimpering louder and louder for him to prick her harder. The pain in my shoulder was screaming, and I thought I would beg him to go and get me some more drugged wine, if and when he finished, but he wouldn't finish…

"Arthur," I said. "Can you hear me? Come here."

He made some kind of grunt. "What for? Do you need pricking too? No, just use your right hand…"

He laughed; he thought it was a great jest.

I said, "It hurts…I mean it really hurts now."

I heard him give a long deep moan, finally he was finished. A moment later he came over to me. He pulled the bolster off my head. He was still naked, flushed with sex and desire. His prick still half erect and swinging in my face.

He said, "Where's your pain? Are your balls aching?"

He laughed again, and I swore at him, "No, you bloody bastard! It's my shoulder, what do you think? I need something for the pain, it's like someone's hacking my arm off with a blunt knife, please!"

He touched me, touched my brow, ran a hand through my hair.

He said, "Fox, you are so hot, all right, I'll go."

This was what he did. But he went to the door naked, then came back again and put on his breeches, laughing at himself. When he finally went, I was left looking at a naked girl, her legs still splayed open, showing me her wet gash, breathing in some kind of randy heaven. I had to put the bolster back over my head, feeling in me what Arthur had felt, a fever. I was afraid; fever, infection, men died of such things.

When Arthur came back again, he brought Arial with him; she was staying with Essylt in her room, just down the corridor. And she took no notice of Indec. Together, she and Arthur helped me off with my bandages, seeing the wound all exposed, hot and swollen.

"I will have to drain this," Arial said. "And tomorrow, I will flush it through with a special solution; the bone is not broken like I first thought.

My sweet Fox, tis not as bad as it seems."

"How can it not be bad? I had a seven-inch knife in my shoulder. Now my shoulder is frozen; are you lying to me?"

"There is much internal damage, now sit still."

I endured it, as I had to. It was late by the time they were finished with me, but the drugged wine put me to sleep, and when morning came, it was naught but a repeat of the night before. Arthur and Indec, ploughing each other, both of them insatiable, and making a noise about it. It wouldn't have been so bad if he could only be quiet with it…I woke with a fever that bound me to my bed all the following day. I stayed bound for the next two weeks, and I got used to listening and watching Arthur and Indec crawling all over each other. Then learning to love-make.

I wanted to know when and where it would end, how it would end—like Rhonwen? Each day my wound was drained and cleaned, washed with Arial's 'special solution'. It stung and burned and I did a lot of yelling and raging in wild anger. I slept a lot—when the pain let me, when Arthur's endless rutting would let me.

One night, I was feeling better, was thinking of getting up and going into the hall for supper, but stayed where I was, thinking. It was near dark when Arthur came into the room, and this time, he was alone. No Indec. He came in and sat down on Uthyr's old bed; he had not even noticed in his desire for the girl that he had been sleeping in his father's bed.

A miserable look crossed his face, and I said, "What?"

He said, "She went home. She had to go home. Her brothers came and took her back."

"Now you are all lost and lonely again; hope you didn't make her pregnant."

Misery to pain. A pained look.

"We have an agreement; I told her I cannot marry again, not for a long while. I told her about Rhonwen. Indec understood, she said she only wanted me for my prick."

"My arse she did. She wants you, all of you."

"I know, I know, I know!" He jumped up and started pacing. He was still wearing his sword and he looked as if he wanted to use it. I watched him marching up and down.

I thought it funny and said, “If she is pregnant, will you marry her despite your agreement?”

“Not this time; if she is, I’ll support her, but I won’t marry again. I told you, not for a long time. I’m mad about Indec, but I don’t love her. I cannot afford to fall in love. Do you want to come to supper now or stay here? You look pale.” He came over to me, leant over me, saying, “You want to take a risk?” He held a hand out to me.

I took his hand and pulled him to me.

I told him, “I’m just not ready, Commander.”

He feigned concern; sat down then at my side. “Do you want to talk about it? I have experience.”

I said, “It’s not easy. I’ll tell you the real reason why I won’t go to supper…” And I threw back the covers of the bed; I was naked head to foot. “Arial took away all my clothes to wash them and she still hasn’t returned them. Do you want me to go in like this?”

“Why not? It’s a special night; we have to sing about those who died. I think it would be good for you to make an eulogy for Glenn; he was growing to like you. I’m sorry he died, sorry for Llachlan. To survive for all these years, then die in my army, my battles. And a naked warrior making an eulogy is just what we all need. A story full of cock and balls.”

I tried not to laugh, so I said, “Not my cock and balls. Just get me some clothes. I would do anything for you, brother, except stand naked in front of a hall full of people. That’s not fair.”

He said, “You know, Fox, to me you are worth your weight in gold.”

In the end, I made the eulogy, standing in some clothes I borrowed from Arthur. In the hall, in the night, under the low light of the lamps and the fire, no one moved or spoke, hushed, enthralled. I touched something somewhere, something unseen, something deep and somewhere hidden. Not even Medraut remained unmoved; I saw him looking at me. For a moment I touched on his look, held his gaze when I gave an account of how he had hunted down the Pict who had stabbed me and took away the power of my fighting arm. I publicly forgave him for leaving me on the field and gave the listeners a reason to love him again.

I remembered Essylt asking me, “Can you stop it?”

The fight between Arthur and Medraut. I had stopped it. Arthur could not touch the Snake now without looking bad in the eyes of those warriors

of his in the hall. Then a toast.

"To Medraut! To the son of Lot and nephew to King Uthyr! Cousin to Arthur the Pendragon!"

"No!" Medraut came to his feet, cup in hand. "Not to me, to Arthur, who took us into battle and destroyed those enemies. Outnumbered as we were. He took away those who would batter these walls and tear down this fort! Not me…"

He sat down again and everything turned around us, the warriors all moved in, all speaking at once, all loving Arthur as if he was a light in their darkest moments. We were up for most of the night, celebrating our lost brothers and the win on the battlefield. Everyone became everyone else in a kind of hot forge where metal was hammered into swords. We were being hammered into the Clan Bear.

Again Essylt tried to steal Arthur away, angry with him for bringing another woman into his heart. I saw her give him a mouthful of her anger, saw him put both hands on her face and hold her still before he kissed her. Deadly.

33: UTHYR PLEDGES

Sleep; even though Arthur was concerned about me, settled me back in our room later that same night, he was the one who paid without sleep. During the night he had a seizure. It took away what strength he had left. But he was still awake in the morning at dawn, and when I looked at him, I saw so much suffering in his eyes it scared me. So I took control. After I struggled into my clothes, left jacket sleeve empty as I still had my arm strapped to my chest, I went down to the hall to find Medraut. He too was up and lighting the fire in the hearth, for it was a cold morning with a heavy fog.

I told him, "I don't think Arthur will make it down for a while yet, he had a bad seizure during the night. Can you take charge for the day?"

"Of course, I'll send some breakfast for him. Looks like it's going to be a quiet day anyway. This fog will stay for most of the morning. It's often like this in these lands. And it won't hurt for the men to have a free day. Tell Arthur to rest, I'll do what needs to be done."

I nodded to him and turned, but he stopped me.

He said, “Thank you for what you said last night, about me. None of it was true, of course, but you turned that sword. He cannot discipline me now, can he?” He laughed. “And here I was looking forward to what he was going to do to me. You changed all that. Thank you.”

“Just make sure the breakfast is a good one,” and I went back to our room. The fog stayed heavy, and we went back to sleep for a while after eating breakfast. It was nearing mid-morning when Medraut came to disturb our rest. When he came into our room, he did not look happy. And Arthur sensed at once that something was wrong.

“Oh, no, what is it now?”

Medraut stood before him, his hand on his sword.

He was fully battled-dressed and this meant trouble.

“I’m not sure if you will like this news, cousin,” he said.

“It better not be Picts. I didn’t think they would come for revenge so soon.”

Medraut shook his head. “It’s not them, but riders have been seen coming this way…” he paused. “It’s Uthyr. He’s coming here, coming with about forty riders. Your father is on the warpath.”

Arthur sat up; “No, no, he cannot be so dim-witted. He cannot attack us, not with the numbers we have stationed here. He would be wiped out. He must be coming for another reason, probably still smarting about his lost coins.”

He got up; he pulled on his tunic and his plated Irish jacket, tied the headband around his head, laced on his boots and strapped on his sword; he was ready now for his father. They both turned to me and helped me dress. I winced, as my shoulder was still stabbing me like blunt knives, but they got me dressed, and the three of us marched down to the hall to wait for the arrival of Uthyr. By the main door waited Arthur’s shield-men, missing one brother, Glenn.

We went out onto the platform that led down a few steps to the outer courtyard, looking at the open gate through which Uthyr’s men would ride. Gareth was there by the gate, calling to us that he had seen the riders on a scouting trip.

Also at the gate was Lot, waiting for his brother, looking rigid with concern; did Uthyr still consider him a traitor?

Medraut said, “Arthur, I think you should wait inside. Take your position behind the head-table. I’ll greet him. Bedwyr, you go inside too.”

The Clan Bear was now beginning to gather around the main gate, ready to fight for our leader if Uthyr’s intentions were bad.

We did as Medraut said and went back inside the hall, with Arthur saying, “I wonder what he wants. What’s he up to? I’ll crush him like a bug if he wants to fool with me now.”

I said, “You told me you wanted him to come, he might just want to talk.”

“I wanted him to come as my father, not an opponent.” He paced up and down, looking worried.

“You don’t know that he’s coming as an opponent,” I told him. “He has to come with warriors on these roads; you know yourself how dangerous it is to ride out unescorted. Sit down!”

“Sit down? My father’s coming, how can I sit down?”

But he moved behind the table as he spoke; he sat down.

Then he got up again, saying, “My heart’s beating like a galloping horse, this is worse than waiting for Picts.”

I went to the door and looked out. Saw Uthyr riding in at the head of a large savage-looking war-host, all Gododdin, some of them even skin-branded like Picts. And Uthyr ignored everything around him, including his brother. He stopped and spoke to Medraut a moment, and Medraut turned and came running up the stairs and into the hall, calling, “Your father wants a private audience with you, Arthur, alone.”

“No,” Arthur refused. “Bedwyr stays. Or no audience. If he doesn’t like it he can just turn around and go home again.”

“He’s here now,” and Medraut moved aside as Uthyr came striding into the hall, and even though he was shorter than his son, he was still a fierce warrior. He had the presence of a powerful warlord.

A deposed warlord. I moved to stand next to Arthur, his guard.

Uthyr ignored me and looked only at his son. Neither of them spoke; they stared eye to eye. Medraut moved outside, closing the main hall doors and we were alone.

Still father and son did not speak.

At last Uthyr relented.

He said, “My son, I came to congratulate you on another fine victory. How many battles is it now that you have won in a row?”

Arthur seemed unwilling or cautious of Uthyr’s intent, though he answered, “Five.”

“When I was your age, I had only just killed my first enemy. As your father, I should be proud of such a son as you.”

I knew that everything Uthyr said was tearing out Arthur’s heart, yet he remained without emotion on his face. Like Medraut, he could blank emotion and hide it without compromise. A skill I never learnt.

“What’s this all about, Father?” Arthur asked him.

Uthyr hesitated; he looked away, down at the floor, then up again. He answered, “Something happened, and I reacted in a way I did not think I would. So I came to find out why. Can we sit? I’m getting too old to stand around like this.”

“You are not old. You are still strong, still with some power left. But sit if you must.”

Uthyr sat in one of his own carved chairs before the table. Arthur stood for a moment longer, then followed. I moved back by the wall; here I let them talk without adding anything of my own. It was not my place.

When Arthur sat, he said, “Do you want something to drink? I’ll have Medraut come with something. I’m sure he would like to join us.”

“No, not Medraut. Devious bastard.”

“Do not talk about him that way in front of me,” Arthur warned. “I will not stand for it. You can leave if you want to insult my cousin.”

“As you say,” and Uthyr bowed his head. “Now I will tell you what made me come here today. The other night someone came to my hall, I think you know him. Llwch ap Dain. I have him bound in my hall, bound because he thought he could come to me to take revenge on you. He believes you are responsible for the deaths of his brother and father and he wants you dead. He thought he could use me as his ally in having you killed. When he told me what he wanted me to do, I answered him that if he dared lay a hand on you, my son, I would kill him. What this arrogant brat rose in me were feelings for you. I won’t allow him to come near you, and if you want it, Arthur, I will have him put to death.”

Not many times in my life had I seen Arthur without words to answer. This time he was speechless, and he sat still, though I noticed a tremor in

his right hand.

Uthyr looked at me.

I stepped forward, explaining, “Llwch was expelled from our ranks for traitorous words, breaking his oaths and refusing orders. He believed he was being forced against his will by Arthur here to fight his own kinsmen. He wouldn’t listen to reason.”

“And now he wants revenge,” Uthyr said, “because in the battle against me that day you came, his father and brother were killed. Though, it was not you who killed them, son, but Medraut. Llwch, though, wants revenge on you.” He looked at Arthur hard.

Uthyr’s eyes were the same steely rich green as Medraut and Lot’s. Even Essylt had the same green; but Arthur’s eyes were ebony-black and he studied his father without a sideways glance.

Uthyr went on, “I told him I would kill him if he makes a move against you. I still have him, if you want him. What do you want to do with him, son?”

Hot and angry, Arthur came forward over the table, saying, “Why do you keep calling me son? Since when did you acknowledge me as your son? When I became Pendragon?”

Uthyr said, “I listened to Medraut telling me to acknowledge you, and do you know what I said to him? I said the sun rises from a strange direction. From the south. So it was growing in me even then. I came to acknowledge you as my son. I came to help you. I have alliances with the Dal Riada. I can introduce you to them and you will steal their minds away as you do to everyone you meet.”

Again Arthur did not reply; he looked pale.

He said, “I want you to send Llwch to me.”

“I will. Oh, and something more, wait here.”

Uthyr got up again and walked to the main doors and opened them. He called to one of his men. Outside, I caught a glimpse of our Clan standing on guard, then Uthyr’s man carrying in a large cloth sack. Uthyr took it and brought it over to the table.

He dropped it there and said, “Open it. For you.”

Arthur stood up and opened the sack and pulled out a beautiful ring-mail shirt with reinforced shoulder straps; a mail cavalry shirt. It sparked in the light, heavy with the weight of its hundreds of shining metal links. It

was fully lined with a leather under-shirt, beautifully made and rare as dragon-scale; it was dragon-scale.

As Arthur laid it out fully on the tabletop, touching the links, Uthyr told him, “It used to be mine, but it doesn’t fit me anymore. It can turn arrows, and the shoulder straps will turn a blade.”

He looked at me when he said this. He added, “It would have turned the knife that stabbed through your shirt, Bedwyr. Sad to say I don’t have one like it for you. If I did, I would give it to you. I sense in you a loyalty to my son that I never knew in my time.”

I nodded to him.

“It’s beautiful, thank you,” was all Arthur could say, and he said it like a boy, under his breath and not like the Commander of Armies.

Then, “It’s a cold day. Will you stay or go home? You are welcome to stay and eat with us tonight, your men with you.”

Uthyr made a smile. “I know you don’t have the provisions to feed my men, but I would like to stay. I’ll send my men home,” and he stalked off to the doors again to give his orders.

With his father out of earshot, Arthur said to me, “He’s setting me up for a fall, right? I’m scared; he’s the only one who can scare me.”

I told him, “I don’t think it’s a trick, and if it is, you will figure it out when you calm down. But I sense sincerity in him; I’m never wrong, am I?”

“No. Do me a favour, go and find Medraut. I want him to hear anything else Uthyr has to say.”

I saluted and went out at once to go and find the Snake. Found him out in the rear courtyard. And as we walked back to the hall, I gave him a quick history of what had happened, about Llwch turning up and threatening to plot Arthur’s death, about Uthyr introducing his son to the Dal Riada, saying all this quickly. Medraut understood it without question. He told me his own father had just taken off into the hills, back to his Clan Lothian, too afraid to stay in the same place at the same time as his brother.

And when we got back into the hall through the smaller side-door, we saw Arthur building up the fire in its embedded hearth. Uthyr sat in his chair and watched his son work, the wolfhounds stalking around and scratching, sitting at his feet.

But when Uthyr laid eyes on Medraut, he sat up straight.

“What is he doing here?” he said hard and mean.

“My witness,” Arthur answered. “He knows when you are lying or not. And he will tell me so.”

Medraut gave his uncle a hard glance before going to stand at the head of the table, saying nothing.

Uthyr sat still.

Arthur went back to the table, sat down, and started writing on parchment, taking no notice of anything around him.

“What are you doing now, son? Why not talk to me?”

“I’m writing orders and letters. I have an army to run.”

A tense silence followed, where all we could hear was the cracking of the wood in the fire, the sniffing dogs and the scripting stylus as Arthur wrote out a long page of Latin instructions.

He ignored his father.

A moment longer, Uthyr said, “I hear you are training infantry.”

Arthur never even looked up or stopped writing when he answered, “Most of the Gododdin don’t have horses, so they train as infantry which I can use with more effect against the Picts. I’m going to buy more horses when the coins you donated are made into ingots, so why don’t you just send me the rest of the coins.” He looked up then. “Because I know you have more stashed away in your hall, and I want them.”

Standing back against the wall as I was, I smiled to myself.

Uthyr looked pale, stumped, opened his mouth and laughed, “You took all I had, boy!”

Arthur laughed at him; “Why would you keep all you had in one place? One chest? That’s foolish. Foolish enough to keep nine hundred in one place. I know you have more. Do I have to come and get them like last time? And along with the rest of the coins, I want the information you said you have on Cynan Aurelius. Or was that a lie?”

Much to my surprise, Uthyr said it now, “He’s with the Caw Clan, or he was last time I heard. I can take you into their territories. Also to meet the Dal Riada.”

Arthur was already shaking his head, no.

“That’s not going to happen. First, if you want me to meet the Dal Riada, they have to come here–to me. And second, you my father, will go to the Caw Clan and bring Aurelius back here for me, if he’s still with them.”

Uthyr gave another harsh laugh and looked at me, “Is he always like this? So clever, so arrogant?”

I said, “Aye, this is him on a good day. On a bad day, he would tear out your heart.”

“I see.” He turned back to Arthur. “You want me to go and bring Cynan Aurelius here–from the Caw Clan?”

“Prove you want to be my father and not just full of words that you are. Make up for the years of pain you gave me. Prove it. Use what power you have left and work for me. Fight with me against the Picts. And when I leave here, if I know you are true, you can have charge of this fort again and be the power in the North on my behalf, because I’m not staying here. I am going back south to fight the Saxons.”

Arthur dropped his stylus and came to his feet; came out to face Uthyr directly. He looked at his father, eye to eye and said, “I’m not just going to fight the Saxons. I’m going to destroy them. And by the time I’m finished, I won’t just be Pendragon in the North, or just Magister Militum of British Armies, but something more. I am going to be Imperator. How does this sound for me, your son?”

Arthur shocked even me when he said these things, even Medraut. We looked at each other, me and the Snake, for neither of us had any feeling of what was going on in Arthur’s mind, just how far ahead of us he really was, years and years ahead. And we could feel his level of power scorching inside him as he stood burning the ground under him, just as the Gododdin believed he did.

I saw Uthyr’s hands shaking as he gripped the arms of his chair.

“Do it for me,” Arthur went on. “Don’t you want to be the father of the future Imperator? Don’t you want to go down in history and be spoken of for generations to come? Do it for me, and you will have all this and more. Be loyal to me. Go to the Caw Clan and find Cynan Aurelius.”

“And while I’m gone, you will take the rest of my coins,” Uthyr finished.

“So what?” Arthur replied. “You will benefit from that. I’ll make sure of it. I can give you horses, fine cavalry mounts. What are a few coins when you can have so much more?”

“I’ll do what you want, son, though you must promise to give back this fort into my charge.”

“Only if you fight with me against the Picts. I know you cannot promise me Aurelius. But fight with me against the Picts and then, stay tonight and tomorrow you can send me Llwch ap Dain. And to save me a journey, send the coins as well.”

The mood broke when the side-door opened and Essylt came in with a small group of young women with her; they were carrying a large iron pot. Lunch. We stopped; fell silent as Arthur went over and took the pot out of their hands and carried it to the fire and hooked it onto the bar, and there it swung over the flames. He knelt to build up the fire and Essylt stood looking at him; looked then at Uthyr.

The man came to his feet and went to her.

They embraced and Uthyr said, “How good to see you, my lovely.” He kissed her forehead.

It was clear now they regarded each other with love, uncle to niece. And Arthur could not hide his feelings when he saw his father embracing the girl, his cousin. In all his life, I doubted if Uthyr had ever embraced his son like this, as close family relationships was something Arthur had been excluded from for most of his life.

For a moment I turned away and looked at the young women who had come in with Essylt; three of them, probably daughters of the warriors stationed hereabouts. Only one caught my interest, a redhead, very pretty, but far too skinny for me, yet I looked at her and she looked at me. Medraut opened the doors.

The attending warriors came filing in for their midday meal; some of them hesitated when they saw Uthyr standing there. Seems to me they were not expecting to share a meal with their old Pendragon, but the new one gave them permission to carry on. I went and sat at the table, and surprise, the redhead came over and put a bowl of food before me, then stood looking at me with a small smile.

I returned her smile.

Arial also came in.

Our meal was quiet; everyone watching Arthur and his father. It was tense, and so when Arial got up to leave after lunch, I went with her to the infirmary to have my wound redressed and drained. And when she had me settled, she took off the bandages, sat behind me and started cleaning the wound.

She pushed it with her fingers and stabbed me with pain and I cried aloud, “Na, that hurts! Bloody hell-fire, that hurts!”

“I have to drain it, sit still. I can see, here, the exit wound is healing better than the entry wound. Oh, Fox, this is doing better than you think. The pain must be coming from deep inside your shoulder.”

She took hold of my wrist and elbow and tried to straighten my arm and when she did, she killed me. The pain was tremendous and I dropped forward and cried out, but she kept on trying to move my shoulder, but the intensity of pain was beyond my ability to cope and I had to beg her to stop. “Arial, please, stop. Stop! It hurts, no…”

She went very quiet and I did not like this any better.

“What’s wrong?”

“I think you have worse internal injury than I first thought. Soon as the wounds heal, you must exercise this shoulder, or else you might lose its use altogether, oh, poor boy,” and she pulled me into a hug, kissed my cheek and stroked my chest.

I said, low and dry, “Are you saying…I could lose the use of my arm? Don’t tell me that, this is my fighting arm!”

She kissed me again; “Do not fret, my sweetheart, you must exercise as much as you can through the pain, or it will heal locked in one position. Movement. There now,” and she leant me forward to dress the wounds with fresh salve-smeared bandages. “I suggest you go and sleep for the afternoon, you are too thin. Why don’t you have Arthur supply you with extra food? He will do this for you. You must, you are too thin to fight and heal well.”

By the way she talked, I was sure she had the fancies for me. And hearing her say I was too thin made it all worse and I felt a black sorrow touch me. In pain and dread, I wondered, what if I never regained the use of my arm? What would I be to the army then? What use would I be to anyone? But I forced these mad notions out of my head.

When the bandages were wrapped, Arial gave me a bottle of morphia tincture for my pain. I left then to spend the rest of the day as Arial had told me, I slept…

When next I woke, it was night-time again and my mouth was dry and everything was dark. Someone was moving around, lighting the lamp. Arthur.

He looked at me when the light came up. “Come into to the hall. Arial said you are not getting enough to eat, so I’m going to make sure you do. I want you to hear what happens tonight too. How do you feel?”

“All right. Just thirsty. What’s going on?”

“My father is still here and I want something from him, and Arial gave me the scares when she told me about your arm. I’m not letting this happen to you.”

“You probably won’t get a say in the matter,” I told him as I got up. He helped me pull on my shirt, put on my belt for me, and I followed him down to the hall and he flamed like he did before going into battle. Everyone was present as we entered. Up on the wall was the Red Dragon banner, and under it, Arthur’s Roman bear-shield. Around us the entire Clan Bear, all of Medraut’s Gododdin side and most of the higher-ranking members of our army. All of the women were present too, including the redhead from earlier.

When we two came in, everyone stood, last of all Uthyr.

I followed Arthur to take our places at the head-table, and everyone remained still, quiet. Arthur held them in silence, staring at his father; the man began to look uncomfortable. He took in a deep breath and stared back at his son. The hall, this place where Uthyr had once reigned as Pendragon was now no longer his, and Arthur kept him bound till one of the women made a small sigh.

Arthur released us then to get on with our supper, everyone to their meals and their drink and I had my own serving maid, the redhead again. I had so much food now I knew I could never eat it all: venison, and roast pig, poultry, thick stew in a delicious gravy, rye-bread and cheese and dates in honey, mead and ale, and the redhead kept giving me more.

“Who is that girl?” I said to Arthur, trying to draw his attention away from staring at his father.

“That’s Arna,” he said, still staring at his father. “Daughter of one of the retainers here. She fancies you. She’s a friend of Essylt’s; lives in the village outside the fort. Pure Gododdin, just like you.”

“Fancies me, aye?”

“She does, but don’t ask me why.”

“Thanks, that makes me feel so much better.”

He looked at me. “Don’t you want a beautiful girl sitting on your prick? You won’t have to do anything. Just lie still on your back and she will do all the work for you.”

I did not answer him.

I thought about what he said without interest.

I felt in too much pain to think about girls sitting on my prick, too much confusion, too many things inside me that were making me feel rebellious. I let it go and Arthur went back to staring at his father. Moments passed like the brewing of a coming storm.

And I was more interested in Arthur and the way he hid a burning fire inside him, burning in his eyes, more interested in him than the skinny redhead, Arna; she who watched me watching him. I had a feeling that Arthur was going to attack his father.

I could see his hand gripping hard around the base of his mug. A burning passion came over him and he suddenly stood up and everyone fell silent. I swallowed the last of my ale and my heart jumped faster. And when Arthur spoke, it was to Uthyr and no one else; simple, direct and controlling.

“Every man here is mine,” Arthur said, “pledged in allegiance, pledged under the Dragon through war and battle, sworn to me as Supreme Commander, sworn to me as Pendragon, every man here. All united as one, as mine. Now I will tell all of you, as my witnesses, that Lord Uthyr, my father, came here today to recognise me as his son. And he has done so. But he has not recognised me as Pendragon and his Overlord. He has made no oaths to me and yet seeks for me to give him back this fort.”

He paused; Uthyr’s face turned white and Arthur went on, “Is there any man alive here who would give such high favours to someone who gives no pledges in war to his lord? Who thinks he can have what he wants without a word of loyalty or acknowledgement, not to a son, but to his lord? Should I grant such a privilege without pledges in return–without acknowledgement?”

A low murmuring went around the hall, as everyone knew that oaths must be sworn. For Arthur’s attack was designed to force Uthyr to have him acknowledge him in public, not just as a son, but also as his Pendragon, his Overlord. Arthur stood still, watching and waiting for Uthyr to react, forced

to react or else appear a fool in front of all the gathered ranking officers, the Gododdin, who themselves had accepted this Silurian as their overall leader.

Through the silence Uthyr came to his feet.

He made a reply, “You see, my people, the strength that runs in my veins now runs in my son. What an offspring! Is he not mine? Is he not the son I rejected, come back to me now in his power to take what is duly his?”

He paused, and the gathered men cried out their agreement, as Arthur stood deadly still and watched his father without relent. And without relent, I could feel the pain that he struggled to control. I sat watching him, saw the fire burning in his eyes; saw the violent passion and the beauty in this dire struggle of his between love and hate, all there on his face.

“I did not know what I gave away—” Uthyr tried to go on, but Arthur stopped him, “You did not know what you abused. Do you want to know me now? Uthyr, you can talk about the strength that runs in your veins, but what I am, you have no answer for. So Father, what more do you have to say to me?”

Uthyr bowed his head to his son; “I have to say, it is true. I did abuse you. I did reject you. I treated you with contempt and blamed you for taking your mother from me, the only woman I ever truly loved. And for all this, you are so like her; her eyes and her hair and her magic…so I say, I acknowledge you, Arthur, and no other as Pendragon. I pledge, my son, to you in allegiance.”

So Uthyr made his salute and when his words were said, everyone in the hall came to their feet and cheered approval, shattering cheers, and through it all Arthur stood, outwardly unmoved, inwardly tortured.

He answered his father, “I accept your pledge of allegiance and vow to support and protect you under my charge as Pendragon. All I have is yours in my power.” He saluted and sat down again.

It was over, and slowly everyone began again as before, eating, drinking, and singing. The redhead was back at my side. Medraut sat staring at Arthur with a firm gaze. After a moment, a smile formed on his lips. He put a hand on his Arthur’s shoulder and squeezed; reassurance. Down the length of the table, our Clan sat and drank and were happy enough that Uthyr had pledged to our leader.

For hours we sat and drank, though this time I vowed not to get drunk. I had a feeling I needed to stay sober. Men began to get up and leave

for their beds and the hall emptied. Arthur had gone to talk to Essylt, joined by Medraut, while I stayed where I was, trying to avoid taking eyes with Arna. I found her too skinny, but her lips were very kissable. Still, I was sure she was husband-hunting and I had no intention of letting it be me that she snared.

It was getting late and Uthyr was still up, still sitting in his seat and drinking like a horse at water. No one spoke to him; he was watching his son with an intense gaze.

He must have sensed me watching him, because he turned to me now and came over; sat in front of me and said loud enough for everyone left to hear, "Are you suspicious of me, Bedwyr? You watch me hard, boy. Do you think I have designs on my son, somehow to wrest power back from him? How can I do that?"

I answered him, "You cannot. And aye, I am suspicious. I'm suspicious of everyone till they prove themselves loyal. Even then I have doubts. And I don't hide my suspicious nature, my lord."

"Then let me try and lift your suspicions. You wonder why I came here like this…it was not just the threats of that rat, Llwch. It was that day you came to take my coins." He turned to face his son.

Looking at Arthur, he said, "When you came that day, it was the first time I had seen you up close for a long time, without your helmet hiding your face, I will tell you what I saw in you. I saw your mother."

Arthur got up and came over to join us; he sat down at his father's side and stared at him.

Here Uthyr told his secrets, "I saw your mother in you, for you are so like her you take my breath away, and my heart with it. Her eyes are looking at me right now."

He reached out a hand and Arthur pulled back.

Uthyr came forward again and took up a strand of his son's hair, said, "Same raven black hair, hers was long, down her back in a wild mane. When I saw you that day, you near destroyed me. I saw Igrain alive before me in her youth, though in the form of a male. When I first met her, she was the age you are now, riding horses bare-backed, her wild black hair free as she galloped the hills…I loved her at once. But she struggled on with the last of her people, with a brother and older sister not unlike you. You are all

theirs, Arthur. You are Silurian. And I loved those people. So why should I not love you?"

"When you think of a reason, let me know," Arthur said and stood up. He turned away, went towards the side-door that led down to our private rooms. I got up and followed him. I caught him in the corridor and he was breathing heavily.

He said to me, "His cruelty never abates, does it? Everything he says to me is designed to hurt; talking to me about my mother is the cruellest of all. Does he really see her in me, or does he do this to kill me inside? Even the way he says my name…what a bastard he is."

I did not answer. I had no answer, so I took his arm and pulled him down to our room and pushed open the door with my foot. One-armed, I led him to his bed and dropped him down; here he sat still, hanging his head, head into his hands before falling back, staring up at the ceiling. I joined him, lying beside him.

He whispered, "How did you go with Arna?"

"She's husband-hunting. I'm not interested."

"Come on, you need a girl. Time to start putting your cock to cunt."

"No."

He sat up and looked at me, started undressing for sleep, casting off his clothes as if they were too heavy for him.

When he was down to nothing, he said to me, looking at me in the darkness, "Do something for me, Fox, promise me this…never ever leave, never ever die; don't get sick, don't leave and don't die. Promise me these things. Because if you leave me ever again…" He stopped himself. He put out the lamps, and we went to sleep, side by side…

34: MEDRAUT, BEAUTIFUL ASSASSIN

I joined with Arthur the next morn, down at the training ground, training infantry in Roman style front-line wedges.

He was off his horse and right in the thick of the infantry. There was one warrior in particular who had taken his attention, and when I rode up to join him, he was talking to this warrior now, pulling him out of line and putting him somewhere else. The warrior was young, and he looked at Arthur with a familiar reaction, a disarmed sense of awe that made me laugh to see it.

All around the field it was alive with training warriors, all our Clan were out, and it was freezing, stone-cold freezing. The kind of cold that was painful. A strong wind had come up during the night and the ground was frosted white, the hills looking like they were covered with a thin layer of snow. The return of winter in spring.

I sat on my horse, watching, feeling the icy blast chilling me. And when Arthur had his warrior in a new position, he turned aside and saw me. He came walking over to me and said, "That's Taredd, he's a left-hander like you. All of you left-handers are troublemakers. Why is that?"

I gave him a Medraut-like snarl for my answer.

And he said, "What's happened to your arm?" For he had seen my left-hand, loose now from the bandages.

I told him, "I went to see Arial and she took the strapping off, put my arm in a sling. I'm supposed to try and move my shoulder somehow, a few times a day till it's better. But it hurts too much. I could not even get up on my horse this morning without help. That's embarrassing, I can tell you now."

"No chance then of you getting down with the javelin throwers?"

"I can, if I throw right-handed."

He smiled. "I like that idea. Do you think you could take Taredd with you, and train him in right-handed fighting?"

"Na, you cannot force him to fight that way. It's more dangerous than not. And he's too young to be forced into something not natural to him. How old is he anyway?"

"Fifteen, and he is too young." He looked back at Taredd; then back at me. "All right, I'll take your advice. But where he is now he's safe, deep in the centre over there. But once he's learned the way of this means of fighting, I'll move him somewhere else. Do you know he fought with me all morning over it? I did that thing I did with you, you remember? Fighting with swords in his right hand. He got angry at me!"

I could tell by his voice, the smile on his face that he was enjoying this boy. Taredd's independent spirit of defiance made him laugh and he turned to look at the boy yet again.

But I changed the subject. It was just too cold to sit out in the wind and I said, "Where's Medraut?" for I had noticed his absence all morning; he was not even in the hall for breakfast.

“He escorted Uthyr back to Camboglanna,” Arthur told me.

“To bring back Llwch. What in hell-fire are you going to do with him?” As I said this, Arthur turned aside and went over to his horse. I followed, waiting for a reply.

He mounted, and moved to me, saying, “Try and exercise your shoulder, but do the javelin throwing right-handed. I know you can do it. If there’s anything I really want you to do, it’s work your right hand. I have to go down to Maia now, see you later, all right?”

“You never answered my question!” I called out after him as he turned and rode back to the infantry, where I saw him call to the new boy, Taredd. He pulled the boy out of training and put down a hand and hauled Taredd up behind him, gathered a small troop, including Val and Gareth and took them away towards the coast road. As I watched him ride away, I thought, Arthur, what are you going to do with Llwch?

I let my question go as I rode over to the javelin field, where it was even colder, because it was high and open and took the full force of the northern winds. Here, one of the Gododdin warriors told me it would snow by late afternoon, said he could tell by the sky, and it often turned back to winter in these lands at this time of year.

Still I did what Arthur believed I should. But I could only manage three throws before I cramped with pain. Even with a right-handed throwing action, the pain went across into my left shoulder, but somehow I still managed to surprise myself with how well those three throws launched. I couldn’t throw as far of course, or with such accuracy, but I knew if I could do this as often as possible, I would eventually hit the target square. In the end though, I walked my horse back to the fort, for it was just too humiliating to ask someone to help me up on its back.

Once home, I spent the rest of the day in the hall, trying to avoid the attentions of Arna, my redhead; she sat with Essylt and the other women, working on another new Dragon banner. While I mooned about, an errand-rider came with letters for Arthur. One of them I recognised was from my father, his name and seal on the slate. I could not wait for Arthur to come back and read them, and as I was thinking this, it started to snow, just as the Gododdin warrior had forecast.

Now the hall began to fill with everyone coming in from the weather. An old servant came in with a boy, carrying a basket of wood and peat for

the fire between them. Arial came, and I spent some time trying to teach her how to play Tali, four-sided dice, watched over by Arna. I gave this girl a stare. I think I must have scared her off with my look, as she got up and went back to her embroidery.

I went back to teaching Arial how to play dice, and not long after, Medraut came striding in through the side door, looking hard as steel, frozen like the weather towards everything around him. The entire mood of the hall changed when he came in. It darkened outside. Snow fell in fat flakes, though the wind had dropped, and through the darkness, Medraut held us enthralled. He did not even acknowledge his sister's greetings when he went and stood before the fire to warm. I sat looking at him. After a moment he gave me a glance, where I noticed something in his eyes.

I got up from the dice game and went over to him and said, "Well, where's Llwch? Were you not supposed to be bringing him here? Or have you got him locked up somewhere?"

His answer was another glance and my blood ran cold; something sinister about him. He seemed high, in the way he did during battle.

"Mind your own business," he told me. Then said, "Where's Arthur?"

"He went down to Maia with a small troop, should be back soon if this weather keeps up."

"It will."

"What's happened?" I whispered to him. "You know you cannot keep it from me. You are the one who wants to share everything, so come on, share it with me."

"All right," he turned, moved me closer to the fire, lowered his voice and told me, "I killed him."

He breathed hard when he said this, gave a sigh or something that sounded like a sigh of pleasure. I chilled cold again, looked deep into his steel-green eyes.

"You killed him, you mean Llwch? You better explain this."

"His body is outside," he answered, "wrapped up in his cloak, outside. I killed him, because I know Arthur cannot kill in cold-blood. So I did it for him. When Uthyr freed Llwch, he started to threaten us again, he said he was going to kill Arthur outright and nothing we could do would stop him. So we strung him up and dropped him, then I cut his throat. He would have been executed anyway for threatening Arthur's life as a traitor. I

just did it all before it got to the point of some foolish one on one challenge."

He gave me a long cold look, adding, "That's what would have happened. Llwch would have come here and challenged Arthur to single combat, where Llwch would have been killed. So I got rid of him even before it came to such a ridiculous point. It's over. But I brought his body back here as proof of his death. I don't want anyone to think that Uthyr and I had set him free to come back at Arthur for some assassination attempt another day."

I listened to all this with my heart pounding blood in my head. I knew just by looking at him that he had enjoyed what he did. Dark, beautiful, a killer.

He smiled at me, saying, "I've saved our precious Pendragon from a lot of personal misery, to kill in cold-blood. Think of that and wipe the horror off your face. You are living in my world now."

"You think I don't know that? What concerns me, Snake, is you enjoyed killing Llwch, you enjoyed it, didn't you?"

"I don't do these things just for my own pleasure. I do it for Arthur. You might be the one he loves the most, but I'm the one who helps him the most. You cannot do it. Not you, you are aloof and hard, but you are no killer. So it's good that I enjoy it. I've told you this before."

Oh sweet goddess, Medraut's sick logic was a true logic, and I saw now a twisted form of self-sacrifice in his behaviour. He was willing to attract a dark and sinister reputation to himself, rather than his cousin. Medraut willingly pulled the darkness over himself to keep Arthur from falling into tyranny in his leadership.

The Snake; he astonished me, he fascinated me, sometimes he sickened me, but I was beginning to love him in some strange and unknown way that needed deep understanding to do. I was beginning to fathom him. I gripped his wrist, nodded unsaid agreement.

I would support him and I asked, "What are you going to tell Arthur? Are you going to tell the truth or…what?"

"I'll tell him the truth. And no one else here needs to know what really happened. It doesn't concern them. All right, I have to go now and see what the cooks are doing. I'm starving, haven't eaten all day," and he moved off, seeking for a good supper for our night's meal. Only Arthur did

not come home to join us. There fell a dark mood in the hall, so tense, that when supper came, I could not eat what the redhead put before me. She put a hand on my good shoulder and said, “I’m sure he’s safe. It’s the weather that holds men back from coming home. I know. It happens so often here, they go out for a hunt and the weather changes and they don’t come home till morning.”

I looked at her, grateful now for her words. She knew the land here and its wild behaviour well; Arna was not worried. Medraut joined me after supper and we talked long into the night, waiting up for Arthur, but he did not return. And nearing midnight, we gave up and went to our cots.

35: OLD FEARGHUS HIMSELF

The following day was much the same; it was still freezing cold, the sky frosted with a weak pale sun trying to melt the thin layer of snow. I went again to see Arial and have my arm pulled and bent, my wounds dressed. Here she told me everything was at last beginning to heal, though my shoulder itself was near immovable, and painful, sometimes so painful it made me feel physically ill. Doses of her morphia potion seemed to help and after, I went out again to try and launch a few right-handed javelins.

This time I managed ten throws before the wind came up again on the field, lashing my hair into my eyes. So I packed everything away and went back to the fireside, all the time trying to pretend I was not sick with worry. No sign of Arthur coming home.

And for a while, I watched Arna and Essylt working on their embroidery. The banner was now almost finished and it was beautiful, so impressive the sight of it made my heart beat faster.

I could see it flying over us in my mind’s eye, as we advanced into battle. It was a standard-bearer sized banner, one that would go with us wherever we went. The rich red dye of the thread shone in the light coming in through the eastern window.

In the sunlight I could see fine runs of gold in the tapestry. It amazed me how well the girls did this work. I had never bothered before with women’s things, but what they were doing now was exceptional. The female equivalent, I supposed, of good sword-making or shield construction, a high standard of craft. And the girls were delighted I stood to watch them.

Arna kept looking up from her work, smiling at me, and I said to her, “Your hair is almost the same red colour as the dragon.”

She blushed and told me, “Everyone is envious of my hair,” and she looked at Essylt and laughed.

Essylt replied, “I don’t want your hair! And see now? See how he’s starting to talk to you? It takes an awful lot of effort to get close to our Fox.”

Essylt’s eyes were on me when she said this. I was right; these two girls were hatching a plot between them to snare me as a husband for Arna. I would have none of that, and so I moved away. I went and picked up my spear, went outside to go and visit Cai. And by the time I got back to the hall again in the late afternoon, it was snowing even heavier than before. And when I went inside, everyone was already there, including the Snake.

I was back only moments when the main doors burst open, and there he was. Relief flooded me. He came in with the wind, shaking snow off his cloak, and everyone in the hall stood up and the women curtsied. Arthur returned their bows and came over to join Medraut and me, bringing his troop in with him, including the new boy, Taredd: another raw recruit for the Clan Bear.

“Where in all bloody hell-fire have you been?” I said to Arthur as he came over and stripped off his wet cloak and threw it down in a corner. Under it, I saw he was wearing the shining mail shirt his father had given him.

“Out causing mayhem, what do you think?” he breathed fire at me. He started his usual stalking up and down. Telling us everything without stopping to breathe, “I went down to Maia, then I went up the road to visit Lord Garwy Hir. I wanted to see how he was getting on after the battle and to make sure he was safe and no Pictish reprisals. But when we got there the whole village was out and up and carrying on and Garwy took me inside his house, and you know what?” He turned to us. He urged, “Come on, guess.”

“You got ten maids pregnant all before mid-night,” I said.

“No, not right then, I did that later. But what my father said, all that bluff about taking me to meet the Dal Riada—well, who was there in Garwy’s house other than twelve Dal Riada, including old Fearghus himself. Garwy was doing a dance, because he said he wanted me to come, and just like last time, I did. He thinks it’s me. He thinks I read minds. But

I've met the Dal Riadans now. Couldn't speak to them, of course, so we had a priest to interpret. They didn't know what to make of me and my troop; they're not used to clean-shaven British soldiers. They think we're a different breed altogether, and old Fearghus said he would give me one of his warriors as a sign of goodwill, if I would support his efforts to build a peaceful settlement up north somewhere. Fearghus thinks I'm High King of Britain and so he gave me this one here," and he turned then to the troop waiting behind him, where I had seen the stranger amongst them.

The stranger stepped forward when Arthur beckoned to him, he said, "This is Royri Angen. He doesn't speak British, so we have to teach him. More importantly, we have to teach him how to take a bath, aye, Royri? Learn all about soap."

The newcomer, Royri, stared at Arthur, frowned, but stood up tall and proud. He had a round face and small round eyes, a reddish scrag of beard growing out of very white skin, his hair blonde, pulled back in a hard braid. He wore no armour, had no sword, only a shield and a spear. His cloak was roughly made, though trimmed heavily in fur. And he stared around, obviously stunned in some part of himself.

So far from home, he could see how different we were. Our armour, our swords, our weapons, the fine fittings in the hall, Roman most of it. Ours must have been a world he could never have foreseen existed. He looked young too, around sixteen, staring his round eyes at a raven-haired eighteen-year-old he thought was the High King of Britain. Royri Angen was in fact a hostage to us, and as a hostage, he would be afforded all the respect and honourable treatment to his status. No harm could ever come to a hostage, or else we would appear as savages, without honour and untrustworthy. So we welcomed him into our ranks.

Arthur said, "Where's the food? Some ale for Royri?"

He looked at a servant, who ran off towards the kitchens.

He turned now on Medraut, "And where's Llwch?"

Medraut stood up, grabbed Arthur's arm and said, "Don't talk about this right now. Trust me. Later. I'll tell you later, just don't talk about it out loud right now. We will eat and drink and get these warriors bedded down, this is for us alone."

Arthur looked at me, and I nodded, yes. Though the look Arthur gave the Snake at that moment chilled me; he knew. Arthur was too clever not to

guess right away what Medraut had done. He moved away to re-join his troop, when later on, when supper was ready, we ate and drank in our usual grand style.

It turned out a brilliant night. Arthur and Val took Royri around the hall, trying to teach him British words for the objects they put in his hands. Val always was a natural interpreter, and by the end of the night, he could speak more Gael than Royri could speak ours. But Arthur threw everyone out before the watch could call midnight, and after the Clan had all cleared away to their own cots, he turned to Medraut, sat down opposite him and they stared at each other in the way they did, Arthur saying, "You killed him."

Medraut shrugged. "I have his body outside if you want to make sure."

We got up, and after Medraut took a lamp from the wall, he led us down the side-door corridor and out into the back courtyard. Over by the well stood a covered cart. He went and pulled off the cover; under it was a body wrapped up in cloths, face hidden. Frozen stiff. Medraut pulled the cover from the body's face, it was Llwch. We stood staring down at him for a moment, watching Arthur studying Llwch's frozen features. He pulled back the covers more; there we saw gashes across his neck, puckered and dried, ice-like particles of blood.

"He would have died either way," Medraut whispered to Arthur. "You know that. Only you would have killed him instead of me. What's the difference? He threatened to kill you, would have challenged you to single combat and you would have killed him yourself."

Arthur stood still, watching his cousin's face.

He seemed to have fallen into some kind of pain when he answered, "Medraut, you have become a murderer. You are not just a warrior fighting for his people anymore; you have gone one step further. You are going to kill for me over and over again. And what does this make me to protect you?"

"You will do what you have to do, and one day, Arthur, you will do the same."

We stood in silence, feeling the deathly cold, staring at Llwch's lonely and frozen body.

“Tomorrow,” Arthur said, “bury him in the best way you can; give him some kind of honour at least.”

Icy wind whipped against us. Nothing more was said, till Arthur told us, “Last night, when I was with Indec, she told me she’s contracted to marry a man from another northern village. She’s going into the Caw Clan. I couldn’t believe it when she told me, the Caw Clan. And now I cannot see her anymore; she’s broken, and doing this for her father, to keep the Caws sweet. Alliance by marriage.”

“This is a good thing, Arthur,” I answered him. “Through Indec you can keep a track on the Caws and what they’re doing. She might even be able to lead us to Cynan Aurelius.”

“That’s true,” he said.

But Medraut turned on him, saying hot and fast, “And what about me? I killed for you; can you not even thank me?”

Arthur said, “I cannot thank you for being a murderer. Llwch was mine to deal with. Medraut—”

But Medraut rounded on him, pointing into his face. “No, do not do this to me, call me a murderer. I am no such thing. You told me long ago that you break barriers. Don’t put me behind a barrier. Free me to be myself, your protector and brother-in-arms. You are my cousin and a holder of great power. You should use it to free us all.”

Arthur took hold of him and said, “You ask too much of me.”

“No,” Medraut fought back. “There’s nothing you cannot do. I put my life in your hands because I know you can do anything, you can sweep across this land and win and win again, and keep on winning because you are that special. I kill for you because you are special, and I don’t ask too much of you. I don’t ask enough!” He stopped, breathing down his madness. He said, lower, “I will kill anyone you tell me to.”

But Arthur stepped back from him. He said, “I’m sorry, Medraut, but I cannot free you.” He turned and walked away, going back into the hall. We followed him inside; here he told Medraut to go and cool down, get some sleep. And when he had gone, Arthur and I went back to our own room. Shut inside, I said to him, “He’s insane, or something else I don’t know about. He’s been rushing high ever since he did it, killed Llwch.”

As I watched Arthur stripping down for sleep, he answered me, “It was wrong what he did; the challenge was mine.”

“Llwch had no rights to challenge you. He was expelled and had no rights to challenge you or anyone else for that matter.”

“I know, I know what Medraut saved me from. But what he did was not an execution, but murder. He’s always going to do this, he’s tasted it now, and he tells me I can do anything. What if he’s right?”

He pulled a cover off his bed, wrapped himself up in it and sat down on the floor, leaning back against the bed; I went and sat down next to him. I answered, “If Medraut is mad, he’s saying the truth in his madness. He knows he’s in the presence of someone extraordinary, someone who’s going to free us, even though you said you cannot. You can free us.”

He turned and looked at me; “Are you saying I should deliberately manipulate people because I can? I’m not going to do that, Fox. I don’t want to do that. Now I cannot sleep.”

I said, “Listen to me, and see what I see in you. You grow more special every day. You go away one day, and come back the next having walked in on the very thing you need the most, and you come back different each time. You just cannot come back without having freed something.”

He gave no response. He sat looking at me, the spark of life burning in his black eyes, so dark I could almost see myself reflected. If only I could get close enough to him, I would see into his soul and learn how his mind worked, he would tell me how he thinks and how he dreams.

He answered, “I just want to carry on the work Ambrosius did so well. To defend Britain from her invaders. I cannot take you to another place.”

“But you already have. And you will carry on doing it till the day you say you will die in my arms.”

“You and Medraut, both of you. I need you both, and he worries me… what might happen to him, and how far he will go for me.”

We sat quietly for a moment, then I remembered something, grateful to myself for the change in our mood. I got up and went over to the chest and pulled out the letters that had come for him.

I gave them to him and got into bed; it was too bloody cold to keep sitting on the floor. “Read them to me,” I said, getting comfortable under the covers. He got up too and took a lamp down and put it next to his bed, got in and broke the seals. There he read under the lamplight, I waited, impatient.

He said, “All right, this one’s from your father; it just says the coins are now melted into ingots and stashed away in Dinas Emrys, ready for when I need them. He heard about the battle against the Picts. He says, please tell Bedwyr to stay out of the way of Pictish knives, and please get well soon—so he’s heard you were wounded.” He looked at me, repeated, “Get well soon!”

I was falling asleep. Closing my eyes, I heard him say, “The other letter is from Blandon, remember? He confirms what Uthyr said about Aurelius being holed up with the Caw Clan, though he adds there’s no report, as he writes, of Cynan still being there. Fox, are you listening?”

“No, I’m sleeping. You kept me up all last night, bothering myself about why you didn’t come home. I’m not letting you bother me again,” and so I let him sit where he was and watch me sleep…

36: ARTHUR EATS SPIDERS

I woke in pain the next morn, and Arthur sent me to see Arial.

My shoulder was killing me, the wound burning and driving me mad. I had thought it was beginning to heal, but now, I was feeling ill again. He told me to go and see Arial.

I did as I was told and went out to find my beautiful lady doctor, down in the village, down where the wounded from our last battle were housed in a long wooden hut, close to the fort gate. I knew she would be there, as Cai was too, his wounded leg healing much slower than it should, and like my shoulder, we were both still suffering. Only he made twice as much noise about it as any other warrior.

When I went inside, I found him sleeping on a pallet, all pale and sweating. Not a good thing for me to see so early in the morning. I sat down on the spare cot at his side and stared at him. Sleeping like a drunk. Arial came in, saw me and came over to give me my daily torture treatment. Off came my gear, the bandages, and as I sat staring at Cai sleeping, she pulled my arm back and forth and up and down and every movement was desperately painful. I told her to stop. She blamed me for being lazy and not exercising my shoulder. I told her it wouldn’t move and when it did, it was agony.

She said, “Then you must think of less painful exercises,” and got up to go and see to someone else, leaving me sitting all hunched up, grinding

my teeth with pain.

Cai opened an eye and saw me sitting on the pallet next to him, he smiled. “Well, look who it is. The Fox. Looks like Arial’s twisted you into a knot.”

“No, just frozen me.”

It was true.

Whatever she had done, it had locked me in one position, the pain in my shoulder going down my back. I sat where I was, slowly trying to un-bend myself. In truth, I stayed with Cai all morning, trying to un-bend, then resting, sleeping, talking, till I knew lunch would be ready up in the hall. But as I got up to leave, I fell back down again, unable to walk. Arial came and almost strapped me down on the pallet next to Cai, and he laughed at me. Here I had lunch with the other wounded, and later, Arthur came to see me.

He sat on a chair between me and Cai and told us, “Good news, lads, the Picts have been sighted on the move, though still far to the north. They are on the warpath, Gareth’s scouts tell me. But they won’t make it here for another five days. So from this moment on, we are all to be battle-ready. I’m not letting them get close enough to attack the fort.”

Hearing him say this, I got goose-flesh; battle looming and I could hardly move my fighting arm.

I groaned and told him, “I cannot even lift a sword!”

“Another battle you will have to miss,” he said. “I want to evacuate you to—”

“Oh, no! No Arthur, I won’t let you send me away. Do not even speak such a thing. Cai, you never heard him say that, did you?”

“No, I didn’t hear a thing,” he agreed with me.

Arthur swore at me, “How in all bloody hell-fire do you think you are going to fight like the way you are now?”

I locked on to him, though keeping my voice low, “If you think for a moment you can order me to leave, you are fooling yourself. I’m staying and I’m fighting. I’m there, on the front-line with the javelin throwers. You cannot shift me, I won’t leave. I’m throwing on the front-line.”

“No you are not! I won’t even let you over the Wall.”

I grew even wilder at him; “I told you, I’m throwing on the front-line, with the javelin throwers. You cannot stop me, I won’t let you. I’m the best

thrower you have and I will not let you strip me of my place. I'm the one you can never order around."

I turned to get up and show him just how well I really was, but my shoulder hurt like hell-fire with hot prongs, and so I sat back down again, smarting. All the time Arthur just sat staring at me. Though he turned to Cai and said, "You didn't hear him say any of that, did you?"

Cai answered, "I never hear anything you two say to each other."

Here Arthur and I sat in stalemate. He was still boring into me with his black-eyed stare. He got up and said, "We will discuss this later, when you are not looking so pale. Go to sleep, both of you," and he turned and marched out of the hut, leaving me and Cai to fester in our bandages. I never went back to my room in the fort. I stayed all night in the hut, trying to sleep while listening to Cai snoring like a shagged bull. I woke early though to a voice coming from a distance.

The voice said, "All men who are now able to fight and train are to leave the hut and return to duties! Now! All warriors are to be battle-ready, all camps on battle alert! No man is to leave camp for any reason! Orders of the Supreme Commander!"

Medraut. It was his voice without doubt.

When I opened my eyes it was still dark, though dawn fast approached. I caught a glimpse of the Snake standing in the open doorway. Light from the lamp fell on his hair and he looked like the son of an angel with dawn at his back and he glanced at me, unemotional. He stood for a moment and watched as some women came in with breakfast. One of the girls was Arna.

And Medraut watched as she set a small table between me and Cai. He watched the bowls of breakfast being laid; he watched me sit up and shake the sleep out of my head. The pain in my shoulder was a dull and persistent throbbing, and I yawned, looked at Medraut, and goddess above, I could not read his look.

But what I did do was blow a kiss at him. He snarled his usual snarl at me, then turned and went out through the open door. The sun was coming up, and the sweet cold morning air came in. But it was good because it helped me wake, helped me see the glorious dawn rising over the land. It looked like the coming of a beautiful day. I ate my bowl of hot porridge with Cai still dead asleep, the lazy bastard.

When all this was done, Arna cleared the bowls away and I looked at her. Was this girl following me around? She came and put a bowl of warm water on the table; there was also a razor and she asked me if I wanted her to help me shave. I looked at her. I had never seen her with her hair down before. She always wore a tight braid, hair pulled back, but now her hair was free and down and I swear it improved her looks tenfold. I nodded, yes. My back was hurting, I knew it was from my shoulder, nipping at my spine, so I stayed still and she came and sat before me, using the razor to smarten me up. Morning sunlight fell on her hair, a deep flaming red, all wavy around her small face.

She used the razor very carefully and gently and I said, "You don't have to be so careful."

She smiled, concentrating on her work. Here I looked into her eyes. Blue eyes, red hair. Small hands on my chin. Concentration took full hold of her and she pulled faces as I felt her taking the blade down the side of my cheek, down under my chin. When she had almost finished, she put the blade down and started giggling. And she kept on giggling, a hand over her mouth.

I thought she was giggling at me, and I said, "All right, I know I'm not so beautiful in the morning."

Arna giggled till it became a fit of it.

She tried to stop herself and said, "No, it's not you; this morning, Essylt went off to visit her father and she told me to take breakfast to the Pendragon in his room."

"I can see why that's funny."

She looked right into my eyes and said, "No, you see, when I went in, I put the bowl on the table and Arthur looked at it and said, where are the spiders?"

She howled with laughter, and the more she laughed the more I liked her. Her lips were more than kissable, and I did not care how thin she was, for all I saw was a girl, giggling at something foolish Arthur had said to her.

She could not stop laughing, now telling me, "He said, where are the spiders? I like them sprinkled on top. He said it so funny! But looking at me seriously. His eyes are so dark, Bedwyr, don't you think? So beautiful. Of course, he doesn't really eat spiders with his porridge, does he?"

I nodded hard at her; “Aye, he does, I’ve seen him eat them. He pulls their legs off first though. You mean you didn’t give him any? All Silurians eat spiders. That’s why there are no spiders in Siluria—they have all been eaten.”

She looked shocked at me. “Bedwyr! He was playing with me. He reminds me of my baby brother, saying childish things.”

“Of course he would, girl, Arthur has the mind of an eight-year-old. We only let him be Pendragon to stop him throwing tantrums. So next time, right, you know what you have to do. Just drop a few into his porridge tomorrow morning, see if he eats them or not.”

Her laughter stopped. “Oh, I could never do such a thing. He is the Pendragon. I just couldn’t. It would be—”

“It would be a great prank, that’s what it would be. I’ll help you find some; there are hundreds of those big black ones under the fort. He’ll love them. He lets them drop into his open mouth by their webs.”

She put her hand over her mouth, as if to hold back a gag. “I don’t believe he eats spiders. He was only jesting. You wouldn’t really ask me to do that, would you?”

“I would.”

Now she had melted me enough to want to kiss her, but my mouth felt like a horse had dropped its arse in it, so I didn’t.

I said, “Shave this bit,” and I pointed to a mark above my upper lip. She took up the razor and finished her job, and when done, she stood up and curtsied. I turned slowly, trying not to wrench my shoulder. Arthur was standing behind me. I noticed his smile and Arna tried not to giggle. He came and sat next to me and said, “So what’s the truth about your shoulder?”

“Nothing, just a bit stiff.”

“Like my prick in the morning?”

“Aye, but it doesn’t feel that good. A stiff prick feels good, my shoulder does not.”

Arial came over and stood before us.

The look on her face was not very encouraging. The beauty of the morning broke through the still open door as she lifted me to my feet and slipped the sling off my arm, showing the extent of the bandaging.

She turned me to show Arthur what she wanted to say.

The beauty of the lifting sun touched my eyes as I faced the door and I heard her say, “This wound, inside, may never heal. I fear your shoulder, Bedwyr, will never heal.”

She suddenly broke my heart, and I could feel her hands kneading down my upper arm, and Arthur stood at my side. I could feel him, could feel only him; he came closer and looked into my eyes. He took me away. Took me into the rare beauty of his eyes.

And I heard Arial tell him, “He will bear now a permanent injury to his arm.”

No one else was there before me but Arthur. And, oh, goddess of love, I dropped, the life sucked out of me, dropped onto the pallet and sat, breathing hard. Arthur touched my wounded shoulder and I could feel the heat of him warming me.

“Arthur, what did she say?” I begged him.

But he pulled me up again, stood me up on my feet. Here I knew I was in some kind of shock. Permanently injured. My fighting arm? He pulled me in against him. And I went, feeling broken inside as all those around me slipped out of view when I felt his hand on my shoulder, the way I felt the strength in him, in his body. Cold death swept through me, and Arthur, his heat burned the cold away, a battle of forces.

I felt his skin, felt the strength of his body.

He said to Arial, “You cannot know that for certain. Nothing’s certain in this world. Probabilities. No certainty. We will make it work, Fox, I’ll make your arm work, brother. Come with me now, don’t stay here, come back with me and I’ll teach you to be right-handed while your left heals. You will use it again, you will.”

So I looked at him; he came moving through the light of morning, where the sun shone through the door, haloed, and I could not say where I was any more, but Arthur had broken through the horror inside me. Raven-dark and so beautiful he could knock the breath out of my body just by looking at me. Dawning sunlight flooded over the blackness of his hair and I knew now that I was in love with him. A love that nothing could change. Not the things broken in me, not the loss of my power, not the hard years to come. It was my life he liberated, my life, and no matter what he would try to say to me from now on to protect me, I would stay and fight. I would stay and fight for him.

37: THE FOX and the BEAR BEFORE BATTLE

That night I sat on my chair at the head-table, the Silurian's Table they called it, and tried to manage the pain in my shoulder.

The hall was full of people, mostly warriors, all of our unit leaders, the head scouts, all the captains from Maglona and Maia, all of them come to work with Arthur on fuelling the army for war. Uthyr had gone days before to the Dal Riada with his brother Lot, hoping to bring back reinforcements for the coming battle. Essylt had returned and stood with Arna near the fire.

On the table near me was another large chest of coins. Uthyr had fulfilled his orders and brought in the rest of the hidden gold. Also stacked against the wall were chests of produce, brought in as insurance against Pictish raids. We had been stacking these crates most of the day. A lot of the civilians had been moving out as well, heading south to safety as a precaution, though Arthur had no intention of allowing the Pictish war-host to come close enough to threaten civilians.

As I sat still in my chair, holding down the grinding agony in my shoulder and arm, I watched the groups in front of me, those standing close to the fire, Arthur and Medraut, with a hundred of King Garwy's men. Thirty more were camped just outside the fort, ready to go with us over the Wall. All around the fort, our army was alert to move out when the order came, all-ready, because these were the last days before Arthur took us into battle. I watched all of this in pain and exhaustion, though I had eaten as much supper that night as I could.

And I watched the Silurian controlling everything around him. Everything like a hot fire in the hall. I saw the new boy, Taredd, turning to look at me every now and again, saw my left arm bound to my chest. Then the Dal Riadan, Royri Angen, desperately trying to grasp the speech around him, but knowing well enough a war was coming. The noise was high, but I heard Arthur say to Medraut, "Can I really trust him? Does he really back me?"

Meaning his father.

Medraut studied him, gave a long serious look, saying, "Aye, you can trust him. He will do what you want him to do. Trust him, Arthur. Sweet, everlasting trust."

And he smiled his smile and I thought, trust Uthyr? A man would be mad even to think it. I sat and listened through a near overwhelming tiredness; I struggled to keep my eyes open. Someone came out of the crowd to join me. Arthur; he dared put a hand down on my wounded shoulder, his touch soothed me.

He said, “You have to come back and room with me because there’s nowhere else for you to sleep tonight. The place is too full to find you a comfortable bed outside of here; the hut is full now too.” He sat on the edge of the table and studied me. “You have got no time to train right-handed.”

I knew what he was thinking. He was dying to have me evacuated, just to keep me from being killed. Going into battle with only one arm? It was tearing him apart.

I answered his look, “I’m still going. Still fighting. I don’t care if I die. I’ve never cared.”

“Then you don’t care if you leave me? Death will do that, take you away from me.”

I could not answer, and I let my head fall to the side, against the high back of the chair and I wanted to sleep. But it was true; I did not want to leave him, and everything around me rushed away into the distance, where I felt myself fighting the tears in my eyes and my throat locking tight.

Die. Death.

The end of all things.

No more Arthur.

What a killing stroke. I opened my eyes and thought I would die with the pain and the waste of my arm.

But everything stopped and stilled and the hall doors came wide open and a guard came running in, crying, “Arthur! A large troop of warriors has been sighted coming up the south road!”

Everyone in the hall at once turned to move, but Arthur called, “Stand where you are!” And they stopped, though some of them like Uki and Cai wanted to leave right now.

Arthur went to join them, and I saw them all leave together out the main door. I came to my feet, feeling weak, though seeking for my sword. Our spears were lined against the wall and everyone still inside went to gather them up, took up their shields as I heard from outside the cry of horses being mounted. I took the boy Taredd with me and we ran for the

doors, where I saw in the darkness that the gates were wide open. Torches burned above the gate-head, and as we came down into the outer courtyard, crowded with warriors, all talking at once, I heard a distance horn blast.

A moment later, Arthur and Cai rode up; they had my horse with them and Arthur said, “Come with me! Taredd, go and join with Uki and stay close to him.”

Medraut came over and he helped me up on my horse.

We turned together and rode to the gates, but just as we reached them, we saw a scout coming fast towards us; it was Drustan.

He called, “No! They are not enemy!” He pulled in at Arthur’s side and said, “They are not enemy, Commander, tis Lord Darfod. I met him on the road up from Maglona and he told me to ride in and warn you he’s coming. And coming with a force of a hundred Armoricans. Can you believe it? Armoricans!”

Arthur turned and looked at me, shocked.

He said in a warning voice, “Armoricans, curse them all, are they coming to take back my sword? I won’t let them have it.” He grabbed at his sword and laughed before heeling his horse out of the main gate, taking the road south. The Clan Bear followed him and we rode for one league before we even sighted them, so many we could not see the end of them in the darkness. Out of the mass, a group of about twenty riders came after us; we almost rode into each other, but stopped a good horse-distance between our two sides.

Spears came down and a warrior rode out, called aloud, “Halt before the forces of Rhidwn!”

Arthur rode out alone, stopped before the warriors and answered, “You are in the land of Rheged. Armorica is a long way from here, man. Though we will halt before you. State your purpose in our lands.”

“We come to fight for the Silurian. To aid our brothers in times of need.” The speaker looked around him. “We may have left the shores of these lands, but these lands are still our true home.”

“Then welcome home!” Arthur told him.

“I thank you,” the man said. “Now if you would lead us out of the darkness, we would be pleased to find the Silurian and make our pledges before him. We have travelled far today.”

Arthur heeled to the man's side and stopped, looked at him closely. They sat studying each other, everyone watching as Arthur drew out his Armorican sword. "Do you want to take it back now? Or do I get to keep it? I won it. Won it in battle. This is the very sword I won from the Jutish King Goodricke, who stole it from our lands. It is mine."

All of the Armoricans gathered around him, and I moved in closer, bringing our Clan with me.

Everyone talked fast, staring at the sword, someone calling out to the others behind them, "We've found him! This is the one!"

This was when I saw Lord Darfod move forward. He had been sitting back to watch; he rode up to join us again after so long away. He and Arthur embraced before turning to lead the ride home again.

We now had a hundred Armorican warriors to fight with us, seemingly having appeared out of the night, out of nowhere to reinforce us. So the fort of Luguvalos was even more crowded than before. And I swear, when I saw the look on Medraut's face as he stood aside to watch the Armoricans make pledges to Arthur, it was priceless to see. Priceless and deadly serious. A light of passion fired up in his green eyes. He seemed to stand taller, but his look, somewhere between unbearable pride and a sudden and appalled sense of being outstripped showed on his face. And Arthur himself, standing before them with the sword they all wanted to see in his hand, held point down. He stood under the Red Dragon. The Clan Bear stood as his guards.

And as each warrior of the Armoricans came forward to be introduced by Lord Darfod to Arthur, I took note of their faces and actions. The way they looked at us, and I began to feel high, elevated, and powerful even with a crippled shoulder. These newcomers were all bowing their heads to my friend, my brother.

This alone made me feel high. And as they pledged, the Armoricans stood back again and watched us, especially Medraut and I, as we stood on Arthur's left and right. Here we met their leader, Prince Awstin Rhidwn, son of the High King of Armorica, and he gave Arthur a look that went long and deep, and at once I did not trust him. Maybe his look of lust was really admiration, for how could I know?

But right before me now, I saw a man of around twenty-four years old. Long dark brown hair, deep-set blue eyes, trimmed moustache, and

wearing a gold torc around his neck.

Through my concentration, I heard Darfod say to him, “And this is Medraut ap Lot, nephew to Lord Uthyr, cousin to Arthur the Silurian. And here, Prince Bedwyr ap Pedrawg of Dogfeiling, the Fox, foster-brother to Arthur.”

Awstin turned then to look at me; he bowed his head and I returned the greeting. He said, “You are all here that I heard Lord Darfod tell of, how could I not come to join you and add my name to yours? To the name of Arthur the killer of King Goodricke. My message from our High King is this, the sword you won from Goodricke does come from Armorica.” He paused, then added, “The sword you won is yours to keep for all time. The Sword from across the Water is forever yours.”

And hearing Awstin say this, I was not sure if we all should be pleased or indignant, for who were these Armoricans to tell Arthur he could keep his own sword? Though Arthur bowed his head to Awstin in acknowledgement and the meeting was over. I left the gathering early, and went to sleep in our chamber, alone and aching…

...and woke nearing dawn, though it was still pitch dark outside through the window. A soft glow came from the lamp on the table between us, and I saw Arthur sitting on the edge of his bed, staring at nothing. He must have woken sometime before me, lit the lamp and pulled on his breeches. He was sitting and studying the night, deep, deep in thought. I could not be sure if he was aware of me watching him or not, but he kept on staring into nothing, then broke out of it with a breath. He got up and went to the table where he stood looking down into the glowing heart of the lamplight. He stood for a moment, and then ran a hand through his hair.

This was when I noticed the tremor in his right hand, and I got out of bed, stood next to him, hearing how hard he was breathing.

“What wrong?” I asked him.

He turned to look at me, looked close and said, “I’m scared. Really scared.”

I gave a groan of relief. “I thought you were going to have a falling-seizure. Scared of what?”

“You think I’m fearless? I’m not. Can I do this? What I have to do, to take all these warriors and move them to victory? I’m scared, Bedwyr, scared…so much pressure in my head, so much weight.”

“Remember when you said it’s darkest before the dawn? Look, it’s dark outside, the sun hasn’t come up yet, this makes you feel bad. You can do it. You can lead us. And you will win.”

“But everything’s fighting inside me even now.”

He turned away and began pacing, but I stopped him.

“Listen,” I warned, “it’s dark now. Wait for the sun to rise. Come on, we better get dressed, you have an army to muster.”

Now it was me helping him; helping him to stop pacing and laughing at him because he began pretending he couldn’t breathe, holding his breath, his hands trembling. Dawn began to show through the window, a touch of light.

He turned to face it, and this was when he changed. His hands stopped shaking and he pulled on his under-shirt, then the long-sleeved leather tunic, on with the heavy shining mail-shirt that came from his father. The breeches he wore were lamellar-plated to the knee, plated wrist-guards almost to the elbow. He tied his boots and buckled on his sword, and turned to face me. The fire was up in him again and burning. He looked at me, pulled me to him and held me close, saying, “If I take you to war, and you fight for me and you die, will you forgive me?”

Dawn light began flooding the sky, a beautiful dawn.

Steel and mail and leather, he had the lean hard body of a young warrior. The gold torc shone around his neck, the bear-shield on the wall, his polished helmet sitting on a chest at the foot of his bed.

He pulled away and put on his helmet, stood before me fully armoured and looking like some divine guard, strong as the mountains of home. A streak of red morning cloud showed beyond the window and over the horizon, out into the north where we would go to face the biggest army we had ever seen. Arthur would have to fight and win against it, keeping me alive as he did, and when I realised this, our aloneness, I grabbed hold of him, harder than steel itself.

“Maybe I will live forever,” I whispered to him. “Just like you want me to. So there’s nothing wrong in you to forgive, nothing you could ever do to me that would leave me thinking this way. I would rather defy storms and monsters from all the world’s blackest realms than have any part of you gone from me, to have me forgive you? Now you can help me dress,

because I don't know how I'm going to ride or carry a shield without an arm to do it."

He freed me from his embrace. And when I looked at him, he helped me put on my own armour, my knee-length lamellar body armour, helped me lace my riding boots and stood me up, put my helmet on my head and smiled at me in the dawn, tied the cheek-guards down and knocked on the top of my helmet, seeing if anyone was home and laughed.

When we were both fully battled-dressed and armed, he turned me to march with him down to the hall where our warriors had slept the night. And when we walked in, over a hundred men came to their feet to salute us; all of them now dressed for battle and ready to ride. We left the hall through the open main doors, where outside, early morning rays of light gave sight to the gathering warriors beyond. Standing at the open door as I approached was Arna. I was meant to walk out side by side with Arthur as his lieutenant, but she looked at me with such pain and longing, I stopped. Just for a moment. I saw tears in her eyes; stood looking into her eyes before pulling her to me, my one good arm around her waist, and kissed her lightly, then deeper.

Her slim hand caressed my face, and she tried to say something to me, "I think I love you…"

And this was what she said to me when I pulled away to follow my brothers to war…

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Here ENDS part One

Part TWO: THE KING OF BATTLES

38: THE MILES

FOR the first time in our lives, I saw Arthur lift the newly embroidered Dragon Banner high overhead, where it picked up the morning wind and spread out its red wings and flew its tail long behind us. Red dawn on our shields, mine strapped to my back as my arm was strapped to my chest. On either side and behind stretched our army, two hundred mounted warriors and two hundred and fifty marching infantry moving in a mass northward deeper into Britannia Secunda with controlled and ordered

purpose. Clan banners flamed with light, the Dumnonians, the Durotriges, the Cornovii, the Dobunni, the Gododdin, the Selgovae, and the Bretons.

And one lone Silurian.

I rode on Arthur's left, one-handed, my sword on my left hip. Medraut, on the right, rode on a black horse, while behind him, his Gododdin Guard rode mounted and grim. The Bretons carried war-drums, which they pounded to set the mark for the infantry to march and they held their clan banners high. We rode over the hills in a mass, and again for the first time in our lives we rode to war as warriors under the Red Dragon. Arthur Pendragon they called him throughout these northern lands; north before turning northeast, deeper and deeper into the high lands, riding beyond Garwy Hir's village, and his people came out to see us go, unit after unit stamping down the ground under us and passing in long columns of armed and mounted warriors.

Despite the pain in my shoulder and arm, I felt the power of the day, the ride, the march, the hot morning sun on the shield at my back. The smell of leather, steel and horse. Invincible. And the way Arthur held up the banner, long and high before passing it to Gareth, his chosen standard-bearer, he would have us all burn like an irresistible fire. Cai rode behind me, his wounded leg now able to bend, or else he forced it to bend so as not to be left behind; if I was allowed to go, then so would he and he kept close at my back. Also with us were carts and pack animals, though not too many as to slow down our ride, just enough to carry feed for men and horses, spare weapons and the javelins that the infantry would use, that I would use.

And as we left the line of the Wall far behind us, I began to wonder what Arthur was going to do with me after all the javelins were cast. I wondered what he was going to do about anything and I laughed to myself, looked at him as he rode close at my side. The way ahead was clear, the air cold and biting yet exhilarating, and the pull to victory and war was strong. Arthur had stationed the Bretons on our left flank, and they rode in white cloaks, all members of the White Boar Clan of Alwyn Bor, Awstin Rhidwn's uncle. The Bretons rode in good order, upright and disciplined.

But there were a few missing from our ranks. Uthyr and Lot had gone with Royri Angen to petition for aid from Fearghus Mor Mac Eirc of the Dal Riada, and this meant trusting Uthyr to give the petition without false threats or promises. Again Arthur took the biggest risks. It was a now-or-

never petition, designed to test the merit of the Dal Riada as well as Uthyr. So we kept to our course and by late morning, clouds began moving in from the west.

Wind blew cold against us and flapped the banners; the sun went in and dark shadows fell across the hills. Valleys into deep shadows, the forest on our right brooding and dark.

As we rode onward, Arthur saw something I did not and he heeled out fast on his horse, turned in an arc before the first unit of infantry and stopped them; here I watched him ride up and back before them. The unit then wheeled in closer to the centre of the march and stayed where they were. Still before the infantry, he made a hand signal back to us and Medraut turned in his saddle, gave an order. A few horses behind was the trumpeteer who held the war-horn. The man blew the horn, a terrible high wail and the entire army slowly came to a halt. We waited, still mounted, as Arthur rode back to join us; he stopped close to Medraut and sat still, staring across the land. He said nothing.

Over on our right, in the east, was a forest. A series of high hills to the west rose on our left while directly ahead, also on our right, but further beyond the last of the trees were two hills with a deep wide opening between them. Beyond the eastern forest was a lake, while behind us lifted a high long running ridge of land.

Arthur turned and said, “No more marching today. I want every unit in close order on this field.” He looked at Medraut, and Medraut nodded, moved out to give the order to stand. If there was one amongst us who obeyed orders instantly and without question, it was the Snake, a first-class soldier always.

Arthur moved over to me, told me, “See that first centre unit of infantry? That’s central position. It’s where you will be throwing when the javelins come in. Do you still want to do this?”

“I do. What have you seen?”

“A good place for a battle. And one I can win.” A smile crossed his lips as he turned side-on to his army and watched the men stake out their territories, where once they were stationed in their positions, he would gather the unit captains and give them his plan of battle. The wind grew colder and I shivered, pulled my cloak tight around my shoulders, for my arm was aching from shoulder to wrist and I flexed my fingers.

Everything hurt.

Arthur saw me wince and said, “We are not going any further today, or tomorrow. If the Picts stay on this course, they won’t reach us until the day after tomorrow. By then I’ll know everything I need to know about the land around here. I’ll get a fire going for you, over there under the trees and out of the wind.”

How grateful was I to hear this? I think I must have given him one of my defiant looks because he laughed at me, then he was gone, and Cai led me down with his unit to stake out a territory and build a fire. We camped on the outer reaches of the forest; at our backs was the high ridge of land and in the east, the lake, where some of the men had already gone down to fish. Cai sent all the subordinate warriors into the woods to find fuel to burn. I looked up, the sky was closing over, heavy and grey and I prayed to the goddess of war it wouldn’t rain on us. My shoulder was killing me, and rain would make it worse.

Away on my left where the main body of the army was staking out their camps, I saw Arthur talking to Awstin Rhidwn. Arthur pointed towards the high hills in the west, then over to the gap between the two smaller hills. As I watched, I felt again a sense of uselessness rising inside me. Crippled, I could not even carry much in the way of wood out of the forest to light the fire. I decided to ride over and join Arthur anyway, was just about to turn for my horse when he pulled away from Awstin and came trotting over to me.

He reined in before me, told me, “I’m riding over to those hills with the Bretons, the scouts are going out now, but I’m riding up with Awstin. I’m taking Cai, so this means I’m leaving you in charge of his unit.”

“I was planning on going with you, thanks.”

We studied each other a moment, and he said, “You know, Fox, I’ve long admired your devastating good looks, but you haven’t seen yourself. You look like you are going to die right now. I don’t even know why I’m putting you in charge of Cai’s men. You are walking wounded and you look it. Stay here and build a fire. And don’t go down and start throwing javelins around either. Tegid will be over soon with something to fatten you up with.”

“You have just driven a knife through my guts, telling me I have to stay behind.”

“One more wound won’t hurt you. I’ll leave you Uki Wolf-leg. Use him for all the dirty work. If he can put up with Medraut, then you will be a dream to him. See you later.”

“I’ll make Uki’s life a misery!” I called after him as he turned and rode back to join Awstin. I watched him gathering the Bretons and riding with them up into the western hills, into a dark gathering of shadows on the hillside. A swift cold shiver went through me. Damn his bones for leaving me behind, but inside I knew Arthur was right, of course I could not see myself. I knew I felt bad and so would look it. I turned to go and find out what the bloody mess the men were doing with the fire-making.

I made sure they did it right and when the fires were up and burning, I had Uki picket the horses in battle-ready stance; then spears were impaled into the ground around our camp-site, all upright and ready to take in hand in case of attack; here I placed guards up on the rise behind us, a good place to stand lookout. It was not yet fully dark, though it felt cold as night under the trees. The heavy clouds had blown away on the western wind to leave open a star-packed clear sky. It was freezing and I stood close to the fire, watching Tegid spooning out stew to the men.

Of course he had been given orders to make sure I had a large helping, and I saw Tegid sneak a glance at Uki, to make sure he was not watching or else Uki would want an even larger helping than mine. I had not seen Tegid for a while and noticed he had chopped all his hair off, and it was short and spiked and he looked half mad in the firelight. So there I stood, one bowl, one spoon and one hand. I had to put the bowl down on the ground to eat, and I sat with my shoulder to the fire’s heat. I ate slowly, feeling the cold wind at my back and listening to the noise of the army around me.

Men walked by me and I wondered if those same warriors would be alive and living to return home after this coming battle, or would they be dead, dying, rotting into the ground under our feet. How long would we last? How long could I last with only one hand to fight with? Maybe I was the one who was dying as I forced myself to eat the too-large helping of camp food.

I failed in this and so gave my bowl of half-eaten food back to Tegid. He gave me a hurt look, but I ignored him and went to get my gear for sleep, the bearskin I still had, my blanket, all packed on my horse, and as I

came back to the fire, with the sun having just gone down, I spied a line of horsemen riding along the ridge-top of the western hills, shadowed against the twilight sky. They came in a long line, black against the sky.

They wheeled down off the hilltop and disappeared into a depression in the hillside before reappearing on their winding course back to camp. The riders came into camp, and the Bretons split off to their own ground, and Arthur, Medraut and Cai rode towards me, as if they were going to ride me down. Arthur brought his horse right to my side and leapt off her back and down, tore off his helmet and threw it over by the fireside.

He was out of breath and said to me, "Tomorrow…scouts were wrong, tomorrow, only a few hours after dawn…if they keep on coming like they are now." He stopped to breathe; me standing still with the bearskin in my arm, he said, "Better to get it over and done with, aye?" He stalked away and came back again, still breathing hard. Looking at me, he finished what he was trying to tell me. "Eight hundred of them."

"Is that all?" I laughed.

Cai said, "We have never fought anything this big before. It's going to be a slaughter…of us!"

Arthur answered him, "If you want to say things like that, go and do it from the bottom of the lake over there!"

Uki came over. "Did you say eight hundred?" he asked.

Arthur said, "Aye, this is the biggest test we have ever faced and we are not going to be the ones slaughtered."

All the time Medraut stood still, pale, watching Arthur with near terror in his eyes; terror tempered with something else—the blood lust of killing.

Arthur was then up on his horse again, turning her head and saying, "Unit captains follow me. Bedwyr stay here. Uki, do you remember all of the things I told you before we left?"

"Everything, Commander."

"I'm trusting you," and he turned Epona towards the centre of the camp, followed by Cai and Medraut, picking up other unit captains as they went. I still had not moved, still stood with the bearskin cradled in my right arm. Eight hundred murderous Pictish warriors on the march towards us right now. I was going to have to stand in the face of them and throw sticks at them. It might as well be sticks.

And Uki standing there, watching me. We looked at each other.

He said, “Well, this is what we came for. This is what we do. Who we are. And without this, what are we?”

Uki’s words were true, but it did not stop the fear that had left me only moments before, and here it was, back again.

I dropped the bearskin down by the fireside and fell on it, depleted, the pain in my shoulder increasing to a grinding agony. I almost cried out, but turned my shoulder to the fire where the heat began to soothe some of the ache. Behind me I could hear voices, horses neighing, the word of the coming Pictish force, spreading through the camp and keeping men from getting any sleep.

We tried to rest, but I could not lie down, so I sat for a long time with my shoulder to the fire where it was more comfortable. A strange quiet came over the camp, over the men, though the wind rushed through the treetops and everything seemed weird, weird with coming death and change. Everything weird because I was dreaming while sitting, occasionally opening my eyes to see a guard marching by or putting more wood on the fire.

Trees rushed with wind and I heard a footfall behind me.

Arthur; he came and crouched at my side and said, “Why don’t you sleep lying down?”

“Hurts my shoulder…”

He sat and pulled me against him, and when he spoke I noticed his voice was hoarse from all the talking he had been doing. “If those warriors of mine don’t know what they have to do by now, I’m taking early retirement.” He pulled me a little closer. “The night before a battle when all you love might be gone in the morning; do you think it matters if anyone sees me holding you like this? Death just doesn’t take away life; it wipes away all things, falsehoods and appearances. So throw your javelins and when that’s done, get out fast. Uki will be there, join his unit when all the javelins are cast, he will have your horse ready for you. And stay with him the whole time, don’t try to come looking for me, because I won’t be in one place, but everywhere at once. If things start looking bad for us, I won’t risk lives just to save face. Just bloody run away, Fox, and do it for me if not yourself.”

He laughed and I laughed.

The night before a battle, when all you love might be gone in the morning…I pulled upright and turned to look at him.

I said, “Is it time to die? Is this what you’re saying? Are we dying tomorrow?”

It was life and death and could be the end of the world for us.

He never answered my questions; he only pulled me back into his arms, tight around me…

...now I was dreaming, lying on the bearskin by the deadened fire and Arthur was gone.

When I woke, it was in the half-light of dawn, I heard noises that I recognised at once, horses. A mass of horses walking by me and into the forest, passing like shadows and disappearing into the grey gloom under the trees. I jumped to my feet, watching them go, half a detachment of Bretons, their white cloaks making them look like spirits of horsemen.

Arthur was already putting his forces into position, where we would wait for the Picts to come to us. The enemy would reach us within an hour of sunrise, just time enough for me to snatch breakfast and fool with the men, all of us pretending we were not terrified.

Over on my left, by the main field of action, I saw Arthur sitting on his white horse, Medraut next to him, with Cai and Val.

Gareth would already be gone into the north, spying out enemy movements. And even though there was movement, everything felt still and calm. Mist rising from the lake; Tegid lighting the fire, heating breakfast, men gathering, the dawn before a battle. I could not eat. The very thought of food made me ill, so I turned for my horse, this time finding a rise of land so I could get up on his back without help.

I heeled to ride over and join the Supreme Commander, and when I pulled in at his side, he said to me, “See those hills over there?” He pointed north-west. “If I trust to my father, he will bring the Dal Riada down on the Pictish rear. And if he doesn’t come, I’ll do it myself. You know what you have to do?”

“Throw my sticks then run away. The plan is brilliant.”

“I want you to give the order to start the javelin attack; you have a perfect sense of distance and how to bridge it.”

“I can do that.”

We sat in silence, not speaking, as somehow, it hurt to speak. The sun rose at our backs and cast out long shadows towards the green hills, and even though it was morning-cold, the air around me felt hot like a midsummer day. I watched the foot-soldiers, those I would join later, move into position, gathering their javelins.

I swallowed a lump of fear, felt I could touch the silence, felt the sun rising, wondering if it really was the last day of my life. I did not want to die. I had long been fooling myself when I said I did not care if I died. I cared so much it sat like a stone in my guts. Around us the army were amassing in tight ranks and formations, in the way Arthur had trained them, using a long battle-front formed into arrow-headed wedges with locked shields through which the men would thrust with their swords after all the javelins were cast.

Now, with the rising of the sun, light ran up the hillsides, where on top of the highest hill, I could see a lookout standing to watch for the arrival of the enemy; the scouts would give the warning.

We sat still on our horses and Arthur said, “I hope those battle lines hold their ground, they mustn’t move, not till I order them to move.”

He looked around again at the field. Archers were posted on the wings of the infantry, though the left wing archers stood on higher ground, a perfect place for firing deep into the charging Picts. And again flanking the archers were our mounted warriors of the Clan Bear, and me, watching those men move to their lines showed just how exposed the cavalry would be. Behind us stood the Selgovae reinforcements, who were ordered to protect the road back south, and were our rear-guard.

Medraut and Val were silent, watching intently, as Arthur said to Cai, “Move your unit into position, get them ready now.”

Cai nodded, moved out and grasped Arthur’s hand, saluted him, then moved away to gather his men and place them in position; they would fight on our left flank and take the higher ground for repeated downhill charges. Very little remained to do, other than to wait. And wait longer. Side by side.

I turned to Arthur, studied his face, his power of concentration.

I said to him, “You are doing your best work here. How do you feel now?”

“Sick with fear. I cannot cover all the positions I want; we don’t have enough forces and there’s a weak link close to us now…dangerous, and I

cannot cover it."

"You cannot be everywhere, cannot cover everything. You are doing your best. Let it go. If we lose, we tried."

He looked at me, close and deep and the power in his dark eyes, the power to melt and burn.

He told me, "Stay alive, that's what I'm ordering you to do. Now and forever, stay alive."

"And if you die? Will you wait for me to find you? Don't die without me. So you stay alive."

"Is this us arguing at the end of time?" he asked me.

At the end of time, I told him, "If I die, take my body home."

"I will, but what will you do with me if I die? Where will you bury me?"

"Where you were born, Siluria."

He looked away, out at the gathering and restless army, thinking, whispering under his breath, "Siluria."

A moment later Uki Wolf-leg rode over to join at my left side.

As we sat, we heard that sound, the awesome and chilling sound of the Pictish war-cry. The scout away on the hilltop turned and flashed his bronze shield into the still rising sun; they were coming!

"Medraut," Arthur ordered him, "move into position, and you Val. Bedwyr, it's time. I'll ride over with you now."

I swallowed terror and heeled my horse forward, riding over to join the infantry where I would hurl my javelins into the enemy with only one working hand. At the ranks, I jumped off my horse and handed the reins to Uki, all the time numb with fear, where I turned into my position and saw the javelins piled ready; the men around me were fully armed, spears and shields and when the javelins were all cast, they would pull their swords and advance. I stood on trembling legs with Arthur right in front of me on his horse, watching.

He called, "Be ready for victory! Not defeat!" He rode down the lines, calling, "Never give up your lines and ranks! Do not let them break you and do not fear them; they are the ones who will die, because today you will have victory! Hold your ranks and victory is ours!" His sword came out and he held it to the sky and cried, "Javelins ready!"

Every man of us moved to pick up our javelins; we could see the Picts ahead and coming down on us steady and fast, their war-cries causing birds to scatter out of the trees and fly away eastward. Drums pounded and echoed down the hillsides.

My hand trembled, my mouth dried. The Picts came on.

I braced into the ground, feet placed hard and sure. Their drums pounded louder, and the roar of them! Aware I was of how fast my heart was hammering, finding I had moved into the stance I took when ready to throw. Our own war-horns blew, answering the Pictish drums, and when I heard that single battle-roar from our side rolling up and down the ranks and lines, my heart hammered so fast it would kill me. I saw Arthur riding fast down by us, calling to the men to stand. His shield-men were at his sides and over him the Red Dragon banner flew as his sword flashed once in the morning sun.

I clenched my jaw.

The men on my right and left moved out, giving room to hurl their javelins; those without javelins held their shields in their left hands, ready to fight with spear or sword. I could not hold anything on the left side and I was open and weak. The Picts were almost on us, and Arthur was gone and I was alone in the face of a charging, screaming horde.

"Hold!" I called to the men. Picts rushing at us, hundreds of them, screaming.

"Hold! Hold! Launch now!" and I threw my first javelin.

Out with mine flew a hundred others and the Picts rushed right into them and were speared and down in a moment that came so fast I couldn't stop to think before picking up the next and hurling it with all my strength and power. Right-handed they flew, impaling the enemy in front of me.

Many lost their shields as our javelins lodged tight and could not be pulled out again, making the shields useless to hold and were dropped, leaving the Picts open and undefended, so many of them bare-chested, no armour at all. Somehow I managed to launch five more javelins, taking out four enemy as around me the other javelin throwers locked shields and brought down their spears to impale those who rushed in against us.

The archers let fly their rain of arrows, filling the sky and dropping Picts under our feet, impaled and stuck with darts all over their bodies. With the enemy falling, Arthur ordered the first cavalry charge, Cai's men

splitting the Pictish rear and carving through them, as another rain of our arrows flew up and outward, falling deep into the mass of them.

They fell wounded or dead into each other.

With all the javelins launched, the wedges formed up tight, arrow-headed, where the rushing Picts fell into the gaps between the wedges, trapped between the teeth of our infantry. More and more of them fell into the traps where they were speared and stabbed. Their brothers came rushing inward against those who were falling under our feet, trapping them in so close they could not use their own swords.

Their dead were piling up and blocking the inward rush of more of them, while we behind held to our shields. Our spears and swords came out through the shield-wall as the Picts slammed into our front-line, but couldn't penetrate the locked shields or move beyond the forest of spears and swords. Behind them, they were blocked by charging cavalry, while on each of their flanks, more mounted warriors cut them down.

Without a shield, I drew my sword and ran it through a Pict's naked chest and out. Something seized me from behind as I fought, and almost gagged me. I fell to the ground, near trampled on. All I saw were horses' hooves as I was down and men advanced past me.

Two warriors hauled me off the ground and bundled me up onto my horse and turned me to the rear of the advance, where I took a quick glance behind and saw naught but what looked like thousands of fighting men. Our infantry were advancing as a shield-wall and impaling, spearing and stabbing as they went; the Picts fell crushed against them, crushed by their own numbers pushing in from behind.

From somewhere their tiny arrows whipped by my head like horseflies. The men who had rescued me were Uki and Howell. They pulled me to the rear, where the Selgovae were advancing to catch any Picts who had broken through the infantry lines. Away on our left, Cai's units were spearheading down the hillsides into the Pictish right flank, breaking them apart and dividing them for the kill.

Over the roar, Uki cried at me, "You cannot fight one handed! You will get pulled down and killed in a moment, keep out of the mass! Arthur's orders! And don't disobey him." An arrow whistled by, and missed. "You are to stay back with Garwy's men!" he warned me.

The roars and screams from the battle almost drowned my own thoughts, snatched in a moment as I turned my horse forward. I knew I could not ride and fight one-handed at the same time. Though my sword was up in my right hand, I housed it and turned for a spear, more effective on horseback.

I cried out, “I’ll fight with Medraut!” and galloped to join the right flank, where both Arthur and Medraut were working to cut through the Pictish mass on that side. When I got there, I couldn’t find either of them, so I fought where I was, advancing along the outer left flank of the enemy, only to find I couldn’t maintain my fighting action there. The Picts were everywhere around me, mad and filled with a monstrous lust to kill. Through their ranks Cai’s men had driven a wedge and I saw his banner waving in the northern half of the field as his unit slashed, retreated and charged again and again.

Where was Arthur?

I looked for the Dragon banner, couldn’t find it, and almost died when a Pict launched at me side-on from the left. The man must have seen me disabled on this side and attacked me. I managed to wheel my horse and block him. I dropped my spear as I did, where I made a full turn and galloped back the way I came using the cover of the trees to keep from being so open and vulnerable.

As I galloped through the forest, I understood where the horses were going I had seen passing me this morning.

Turning left, I headed down towards the Breton camp, not only that, but I saw what Arthur had plotted for them. The advancing infantry were working away on my left; I could hear and see the mass of them moving and killing and stepping over the dead.

They were pushing the Pictish forces back towards the gap between the two small hills at the foot of the forest. I rode on through the trees, turning left and right and down the embankment, where I saw the Bretons waiting to trap any escaping enemy who struggled to flee down the gap and head for the lake and away north to safety.

Now out of the trees, I came down the small hillside to join them, and as I rode, I looked up and saw the Red Dragon planted on the hilltop above me, flying free and high over the horror below it…

I called and Awstin turned to me, turned back to his men and cried, “Come on boys, mark those drums!”

I called again as I rode in closer to him, “You are supposed to be waiting in ambush! Banging drums will signal your position to the enemy!”

“So true, our Fox! Don’t you want to fight now? Bring them down to savage us?”

I could not believe he wanted to pull this insane horde down on us, so I ordered him, “Stop! I order you to stop! This isn’t what your job is now. Ambush only. Wait for your time.”

Down at the head of the gap, I could see our infantry pushing the Picts back. Then I saw Arthur and Medraut fighting on the outer right flank; any moment now they would retreat and open the way for the Picts to flee down the gap and into our waiting spears. I turned my horse to see behind me, the gap ended at the lake. The forest ran down to the lake-shore, into the north was free land, but blocked by high hills, one of which flew the Red Dragon. To the south rose the high ridge behind us, so whichever way the enemy went, they would be trapped.

“Get back into the trees!” I ordered Awstin’s men, but they hesitated. Who to obey? Me or their own leader?

But they had pledged to Arthur and I was his lieutenant.

They did what I ordered. I sat on my horse and watched them take the high ground back under the trees, where they waited in darkness and shadows. So I studied the work being done back down on the field where it was easy to see Arthur on his white horse. His great battle-skill was holding and I watched him till he disappeared beyond the gap and away north, where I saw Cai’s men cleaving everything in their path before retreating fast up the hillsides, gathering and turning back down to barrel headlong for another strike and wedge.

Picts were falling like leaves; there was a terrible war-fury on them. They had nothing to defend themselves with other than sheer bravery. Their swords and shields were near useless; they relied only on numbers and a will to die fighting for their lords. And even as I waited in ambush, my sense of duty was to join my brothers and fight at their sides, but I felt near useless.

I grew sick and impatient and cried aloud, “How long is this going to take? There are still hundreds of them!”

Useless! I had no shield, had dropped my spear, and could not ride and wield a sword at the same time without the danger of being un-horsed, but I went anyway. Before I rode out to join the battle, I swore at Awstin to stand his ground and not signal his position, then I heeled my horse to gallop ahead. I rode for a while before turning back into the forest. I came out at full charge into the mass of Picts, snapping my sword right-handed at the first one's head and splitting his skull near in two. I think I lost all thought of what I was doing and became an open target, became a mindless soldier, killing or attempting to kill anyone who came near my bucking horse. I had no idea where I was on the field.

The infantry saw me and someone tried to throw me a spear, but I could not stop to house my sword and catch it. A break in the battle opened in front of me and I rode into it, turning to see where Arthur was. As I did, I felt a hot sting pierce my lower right calf, just above my ankle. A small Pictish arrow was sticking out of my leg; it had only just nipped through the flesh, though stopped by the cuff on my thick leather buskins. I shook my leg and it fell. I never even considered then that it might be poisoned.

I carried on fighting with arrows flying all around me.

Away down to the left, towards the gap between the two hills, I saw Arthur placing his units, ready to send the enemy down into ambush; it was working! The Picts were turning to flee into the gap, where they believed they could escape. I saw all this in an instant, sensing I could not last much longer on the field before being pulled down. Turning, I found myself trapped. So many dead lay around me that my horse could barely move. I went back the way I came, trying to reach the south road where there was no more fighting, as most of the Picts on this side had all been killed or dropped.

Uki, my minder, had disappeared and all the others were in the mass, either down the gap or waiting for Uthyr to come with the Dal Riada, if they would ever come at all.

Just ahead of me fought the rest of the infantry, still up with their shield-wall and pressing ever on, holding relentlessly to their battle-lines. I came up behind them, flanked them, fighting onward till I suddenly lost my horse from under me; a massive spear went thrusting through his neck from the left and as he fell, he crashed head-first into the Pict who had speared him, crushing the man and dropping almost on top of me. We fell to the

right and my horse's head thrashed against my legs as I kicked out from under him.

I rolled over onto my stomach and pushed to my feet with my sword, where I turned and jumped over my horse and smashed my blade against the Pict's head, bursting his skull, crying, "Bastard! You bloody killed my horse! You mad bastard, killed my horse!"

I stood over his body, breathing and gasping, wild, finding I stood in the midst of the infantry and they were laughing at me, cheering me as a break in the fighting came for only a moment before another Pictish charge moved against the shield-wall.

I was back on foot and using my sword in the way of the Roman, up-cutting into chests or spearing through throats. Staying alive as a foot-soldier meant me keeping my body behind others, those with shields to protect me; a number of men noticed me and pulled me close to them. On and on we pressed, protected by the shield-wall, where we heard a tremendous roar come from ahead of us, it was impossible to see, locked as we were behind the shields and yards of enemy warriors. What happened next was a great and sudden flight of Picts; they were fleeing left and right, what was left of them.

I could see nothing or why they were running, though I heard someone cry out, "It's Arthur! Stand aside!"

A charge of horses came through as we opened ranks; I saw Arthur come riding through with Medraut and Cai, gathering all units for a last push against the remaining Picts who still engaged the infantry.

The horses wheeled behind us, came in for another charge and this time Arthur was not with them; one moment he was there, the next he was gone, and I found myself fighting behind a charge of mounted warriors, barely aware of my own exhaustion.

At some point I dropped to my knees, where looking up into the sky I saw the sun nearing midday. I could not believe it. We had been fighting all morning and where was Uthyr? He still had not come. Then came the infantry, working to force the enemy right into the hands of our cavalry. I was not sure how I lasted through our final push. It seemed to last forever and I became aware of the intensity of my exhaustion. Remembered in a strange laboured way when a man does naught but kill to stay alive, I had not eaten any breakfast this morning.

After another long, aching push through the enemy, fighting relentlessly, I crashed to the ground like a dropped stone. I couldn't go on; all power had gone from my legs and I lay still, gasping to breathe among a huge mound of Pictish dead. My head was spinning, my tongue wouldn't fit in my mouth, and all I could think of was ale. Someone please give me a huge goblet of ale! But the ale never came…

What came instead was the terrible Medraut, splashed in blood, spotted with it, blood even on his lips, and he licked them as he sat on his horse over me, saying, "There you are, you dim-witted great prick! Get up and come with me before I piss on your blood!"

My head was still spinning, but I got to my feet and Medraut helped me up behind him, and as we rode away from the field, so tired now I cared nothing for my actions, I let my head fall against his shoulder, then up again, and realised something strange had happened to me. Last I had seen the sky it was midday, but the sun was now in the west, above the western hills.

"Snake, look, it's sunset! It cannot be."

"Aye, trust you to take a bloody long nap while the rest of us fight like madmen to save you."

And he picked his horse up to a canter, before breaking into a gallop. We rode down the field together in the sunset. I must have passed out on the field through sheer exhaustion and I could not decide if I felt a fool or not. So together we rode, riding down the field and over the dead and I watched the west, saw the sun touch the hilltops and burn the sky red. Another light caught my eye; just ahead and on top of the hill where flew the Red Dragon, a beacon of fire sprang out against the darker eastern sky. A fire on the hilltop, hot against the few cold stars.

Medraut turned towards it, turning up the hillside, winding up to the top where I could hear a frenzy going on. As we rode closer I saw all of our surviving warriors taking possession of the hill, clustering in their units under the Dragon in the early night, under the firelight, the beacon they had built to the sky, while under the Red Wings, Arthur stood alone.

He stood stripped of his battle-jacket, wearing his sleeveless leather vest, his treasured sun-rayed headband, and in his hand the Armorican sword, the patterned blade shining in the beacon light. Medraut brought me to Arthur's side and I jumped down from the horse and stood still. Arthur

looked at me and I looked at him; managed to smile as a mighty victory roar came from the throats of those around us.

He had won! We had won!

Arthur had done it without the aid of his father. The victory roar, drawn swords to the sky, the beautifully crafted British sword and the murderous Roman gladius held to the sky, points up and deadly. And of all the battles we had been through before, none had ever ended like this one. Because this one was the first major battle Arthur had plotted and won as Supreme Commander, and so, he had sealed something permanently in the minds of his men.

Around us, the victory roar went on and on, while below in the valleys and down the roads our voices were heard, as the beacon was seen like a fallen star against the blackening sky. The wind blew and the Dragon snapped its wings and flew. Below again the lake lay dark and filled with bodies, those who had fled to the lake and were ambushed by Awstin's Bretons and trapped there or pushed into the water and drowned.

The roar went on, and Arthur pulled me to him. I fell against him, spent, dropped and sat on the hilltop and listened and watched the warriors break into song, their joy unbounded, unshielded, we were alive!

We survived! We won.

The Dragon flapped and almost pulled out of the ground and took to the air above us. Men were coming forward and telling Arthur their tales; one told him all about me, things I was not even aware of.

"Bedwyr, we saw him fighting one handed! Taking on all those around him and no matter how well the Picts fought, he felled them with only one hand! No shield and no spear, Arthur, I saw him fight and kill, I saw him ride alone and undefended into the mass of them and win against them! Hail the Fox!"

The cheer went up for me as a hero while I sat on the ground, listening to all of it in a fog of exhaustion and disbelief.

Even Medraut was smiling at me.

The Bretons brought out their drums and began to play a beat that was a true-song with rhythm and power, fast and brilliant. I had never heard anything like it before and was astounded they could do this and wanted to learn how to do it too, one hand or not. Their drums pounded and rolled till they reached a height that ended with seven lone beats and stopped.

And in the silence, Arthur came to me, whispered, “Help me get out of here.”

I turned to Medraut and said, “Arthur needs your horse,” and he was up on Medraut’s black, and with me up behind him, we turned away from the wild celebrating warriors and rode down the winding hillside towards the lake below.

Arthur was quiet all the way down, and when we got there, we found more of our men camped, those who were wounded and waiting for the dawn to be carted away back to Luguvalos.

Fires were lit all along the lakeside, camp cooks making food, wounded tended, and those who were just too exhausted to join the celebration on the hill lay in groups by their fires.

We rode along the shore, and when the men saw us, they came to their feet and saluted us. We saluted them back and Arthur told them to rest, not to waste energy saluting him.

We made our way to where the forest came down to the shore, and he jumped off Medraut’s horse and went and sat down on a small boulder which jutted from the edge of the forest; he sat with his sword held between his parted legs, looking at nothing. For a moment I watched him, then dismounted and went to his side.

What I saw was him trembling, holding his sword and his hands were shaking—shaking so badly I put my arm around him and pulled him against me, trying to still him. We said nothing. I felt his trembling body, I held his head to my chest, holding him on through the early evening darkness, looking at the lake and a half-moon in the sky, touching the water where floated bodies of the dead. Beauty and horror together.

He turned then and looked at me; he said, “My father didn’t come. He didn’t come…” and a hard cry broke out of him and I knew he was battling not to weep. His father had let him down again, so much so it was breaking his heart.

“No, Uthyr did not come,” I answered.

“But I did it, I don’t know how I did…got through it; but he didn’t come.”

To my right I heard a noise, looked and saw Medraut approaching us alone through the trees.

“I came for my horse,” he said, standing with us. “Arthur, I cannot find Uki.”

Arthur looked at him, stood up and said, “Uki’s been badly wounded, I’m sorry, Medraut, I’m not sure if he will make it. I sent him back to Luguvalos with those who were the worst, they are gone already. Uki’s got our best doctors. I ordered them to take special care of him, even though I know it’s not fair on the others. I need Uki.”

“I have to go to him,” and Medraut went for his horse, mounted, and at once turned away into the darkness.

Arthur called out, “If you ride fast, you will catch him up within a league!”

But Medraut had already gone, and we two were left to stand in the night. I moved back to Arthur and began leading him down to one of the fires near the ridge where I had camped before the battle. By the fireside, I did not like to think of who else we had lost, who else could be mortally wounded, not just Uki. We had all come to love Uki. Medraut most of all. Arthur and me slept exhausted by the fire throughout the night. Slept like the dead…

39: UTHYR and LOT EXPLAIN

WE never left the field till well after mid-morn the next day. It had taken us a long time to find our dead, load them onto what carts we had, and then clear the ground. We also worked to strip the dead horses of their gear, for horse-gear was much too valuable to be left behind to rot.

Also, Arthur’s Epona had taken a serious wound on her left rump, looked like a sword slash and though she was not dying, she was badly wither-wrung, and couldn’t take her rider. He left her in the forest with the

other wounded horses, waiting to take her home to the horse-doctors. When we finally made our way back to Luguvalos, arriving in the late evening, we found all of the townspeople out to meet us.

The fort stood ablaze with torches and light. Gododdin guards lined along the approach to the fort's main gates and the Red Dragon was out flying from the roof. The hut for the wounded was fully prepared and ready with doctors, and when we came up the road as heroes, we found the doors to the hall wide open and heat and light flooding out, bringing the smell of roasting boar. And standing in the open doors was Uthyr.

Seeing him standing there, hands on hips, my first thought was that he had attempted to take the fort back off his son while Arthur was away fighting. The guard along the approach were not ours, of course, but Uthyr's, though as we rode by them they came to attention and saluted Arthur as he passed. Not a sign of a rebellion.

We continued on towards the steps before the main doors, and I watched Arthur carefully, for there was no knowing how he would react.

He looked hard at his father, jumped off his horse, and with his inner Clan following him, he came up the stairs and stopped before Uthyr and stared at him. "Where were you?" Arthur said, and he drew his sword, it came out slowly and I moved in, ready for trouble. Around me the Clan also moved as Arthur bore down on his father.

Uthyr backed away into the hall.

"Where were you, why did you not come?" Arthur forced on him.

"Put your sword away, boy, no need for this."

"Do not call me boy! Why didn't you come? You pledged to fight and support me in battle against the Picts and all the time I looked for you, but you never came."

"You can fight wars like this without my help! Unbelievable. Do you think I am standing here to defy you? Look around you, Arthur, all this is for you, my son. You are unbelievable. I told Fearghus you would win and win without us. I proved a point to Fearghus. I told him you are so powerful you do not need aid in war and he saw it was real. He is afraid now and—" He stopped, staring back at his son, seeing Arthur's powerful Clan of warriors surrounding him and ready to fight. Uthyr went on, "If you care to come in now and eat, I will tell you why I did not come."

Arthur housed his sword and walked into the hall, bringing us in with him. Inside it beamed with light; torches and lamps around the walls, and the main hearth-fire roasting not one, but three whole boar over the hot pit. And the first thing Arthur said to his father as he took off his helmet was, “Where are the girls? Where is Essylt, Arna? Where are they?”

He said this as a given order, as if he thought Uthyr had done away with them.

“Do not worry! They are here, working out in the kitchens.”

“Then get them out of there! They are not your slaves. I want them here with me, not in the kitchens as serving maids.”

Uthyr bowed to his son and said, “I will get them for you myself,” now moving to leave the hall.

And when he had gone, Arthur just stood still, struck into a moment of not knowing what to do next. We laughed at him.

If Uthyr had planned a welcome home victory-feast, we took it over, as outside, the troops were making their way to their own billets, the wounded to the huts for treatment with Lord Darfod and Arial and the other troop doctors. Our grooms took away the horses and some of us brought in our booty and stacked it against the wall. Everyone stripped off their gear, threw it down in piles for later and headed for the stocks of ale. I had been waiting for this moment forever! Ale, delicious and wet and it went down in one. Everyone drank, including the Pendragon.

I watched him down his mug also in one; said to him, “Let Uthyr say what he wants, then kill him.”

Arthur mocked me, laughing, “Oh, I couldn’t do that, that’s a kin-slaying. Do not want a kin-slaying mark on my head,” and he drew a sign on my forehead with an ale-tipped finger. Then he was speaking aloud to his men, “My father said I did not need his help to win a battle, you know? He was right!”

We cheered and made toasts and moved to the boar for something to eat. Again, huge platters of meat and all the breads lain out on the table, and in walked Essylt Fynwen with Arna at her side, both of them with exactly the same hairstyle.

The two girls went to Arthur with dignity and curtsied, before Essylt was in his arms and kissing him all over. Essylt, held in the arms of the one she loved, was consumed by him and had no thought for anything else

around her. Her love for Arthur tore at my heart and I downed another mug of ale just as Arna came pushing through the carousing warriors to find me.

Seeing her, I did not really know what to do with her.

She stood before me and smiled, saying, “You have no idea how relieved I am to see you home and well. Essylt gave me comfort; she is so strong and brave.” Arna turned her head to show off her hair. “She taught me how to do my hair like this, do you like it?”

I nodded and stared at her; I had only just come home from fighting like a madman in a terrible battle, seeing men die and dying, and Arna had to go and ask me witless questions about her hair. I could not understand her. The Bretons then began again their brilliant drum rolls, and I wanted to go and see how they did it, so I gave Arna my mug, took up her hand and led her with me to watch the drummers play.

This delighted her, I think, and she squeezed my hand.

With the music, a victory party started up, dancing and singing and drinking and through it all I noticed that Uthyr had not returned to the hall. He was absent; and I looked for Arthur. He too was gone, and so was Essylt. I turned back to the drummers, watching how they worked, three and two, each group marking different beats. Another of them began to play a flute and it was so brilliant it was as if the sun had burst through the roof and lit us all with daylight. Some began to sing, others to dance, the ale flowing and we were heroes.

Arna held my hand harder, swaying to the music. The drums rolled, then stopped, and one lone singer came out unaccompanied, stilling us all, a voice like an angel–Royri Angen of the Dal Riada–singing a rousing song of victory and power. His beautiful voice charmed us, the only Dal Riadan to fight this battle with us…it was not his fault his people had not come to back Arthur against the Picts.

Time passed in the music and Royri’s song, and then the side-door opened and Arthur came back in, and when he did, a murmur went around the hall before everyone fell silent, everyone moved aside for him, staring at him, all to a man, silent.

When I looked at him now…the change. Different again. He walked through us, and even Arna could not take her eyes off him. First he had changed and now wore a dark blue shirt, belted with his sword. Over his shirt he wore the dark brown silver-plated Gael jacket Lady Efa had given

him. He had washed and shaved and his hair was shining black, again held back with his sun-rayed headband, himself tall and dark and distinct, so different to the rest of us he left us speechless.

He had won us. Won the battle.

The power around him sparked like a sword being sharpened, and goddess above me, he was breath-taking. He went and stood under the Dragon banner and everyone turned to face him. We waited. He turned his dark eyes on all of us. And when we were silent and still, he came out from under the banner and walked through us, where he took out from the crowd those men he honoured.

First, myself of the Gododdin; Cai and Val of the Cornovii; Gwydre ap Rhobert also of the Cornovii; Awstin of the Bretons; Royri Angen of the Dal Riada, and some other warriors I did not know from the Selgovae, and still more.

Then from somewhere deep in the crowd, Medraut.

Arthur brought us all in together and joined our hands, and said, "One. All one United Britain! All of you, one. My battles, your victories as you fight for me as you fight for Britain. Your nation is your collective sense of self-worth, self-knowing, your power! For when you fight for me, you are Britain! I am nothing without you."

"No! The sun does not need acolytes for it to shine." This from Medraut.

A cheer from the warriors around us, cheers that got louder and louder and our swords came out and we cheered as one, we were one.

It was true; without Arthur to stand in our centre, we could never hope to unite the nations as one, because Arthur had greatly surpassed the tribal chieftains and he was more or less our High King, just as the Dal Riada believed him to be.

And when the cheers died down, he said, "These are the warriors who distinguished themselves in battle. They take the highest place in the Pendragon's Hall. Honour them, your heroes. I want those chairs behind the table brought out and set in a circle."

Men began to move at once, doing as he asked, taking the chairs and bringing them into a circle around him.

"Those who want to sleep and rest can go now, but if you want to stay, you are welcome to stay and drink the barrels dry. But I have work to

do."

As the warriors started to break up for the night, some to stay, others to go, Arthur took hold of my arm and led me to one of the chairs, saying to me, "You can go if you want, you can have our chamber to yourself." He glanced at Arna. "You and Arna…if you want."

"I'm staying," I told him and sat down on his left hand side. "What's going on?"

"Uthyr and Lot—we have things to discuss with them, but I have to have my captains with me."

All the captains took their seats, as Uthyr and his brother, Lot, came in through the side-door.

When they came into the ring of chairs, Arthur sat studying them for explanations.

Uthyr spoke first, staring at his son with unhidden admiration, "The reason why I did not come is merely because Fearghus refused this battle and stayed away. He tells me his Dal Riada have to live with the Picts on their doorstep, and going into battle against them now will bring the Picts down on them later for revenge; so, he cannot afford to take sides till his dynasty is stronger. Better for him to stay out of their way, either to fight them or not."

"That's fine for Fearghus," Arthur replied. "So you told me why he didn't come, but not you. You never came and that leaves a dark mark to add to all the others you have given me in the past. Explain why you failed me."

"Because he came with me." Lot stepped forward, explaining, "I know the lands above the hills like my own blood. Arthur, something you must know…" Lot turned and called to one of his men standing by the side-door. The door opened and a stranger was pushed in, hands tied behind his back, himself covered by guards. A Saxon. He was pushed into the ring and was down on his knees before Arthur. Long blond hair and blond beard, large blue eyes and a red face, his veins bulging as he struggled in his bonds.

Everyone crowded closer and I saw Arthur staring back at the man; he said, "Val, ask him his name."

Val spoke Saxon, spoke to the captive, who answered, "Elfrid."

Arthur looked at Lot.

And Lot explained, “I scouted the hills with Uthyr, as King Fearghus refused our battle, so we took to scouting. You have no idea what danger you were in during that battle. The Saxons were there; they have been coming in for alliances with the Picts for most of this year, since last summer. They came for this battle, but they have no great desire to die for Picts. They do not make alliances with losers. But they stayed and watched to see which side was going to win, then make their move. When they saw you fight, the way you fought, they retreated south again, that’s when we caught this one, lagging behind, took him before any of his people even knew he was gone. We kicked the name Octha out of him; he is from Octha’s war-band.”

Arthur sat up, looked straight into the Saxon’s eyes; he said, “Octha, son of Hengist.” It was like he had been given a taste of something hot. He sat silent a moment, studying the Saxon, and the Saxon dropped his eyes. No one spoke, we waited.

Arthur said, “They will attempt to attack south of the Wall now that we are depleted after this battle, aye, they will do it soon, probably within the next few days; if we move tomorrow we can intercept them. Val, ask him how many in his war-band.”

Val asked the words but the Saxon shook his head, no, and spat at our feet. Val kicked him in his stomach and the man doubled over, cried out against us.

“Again, ask him again.”

Val snapped out the Saxon words and again the man refused to speak. Val kicked him again, then again, but nothing.

“Stop!” Arthur stood up. “He won’t speak.” He turned to Lot and said, “How many men were there, that you saw?”

“Around one hundred and fifty, not more, maybe less.”

Arthur turned back to Val, “Tell him…tell him it was my commander who killed the brother of his chieftain’s father. Tell him it was Ambrosius who killed Hengist and Horsa, and it will be me who will kill Octha, as I killed Goodricke. Tell him he kneels before Arthur of the Britons now, the one who will stop his people from breathing our air without payment.”

Val told everything Arthur said and the Saxon began screaming and ranting at us.

Medraut stepped forward, drew his sword and said, “Let me kill him. Please, Arthur, let me kill him. What use is he to us?”

But Arthur pushed Medraut aside and picked the Saxon up off his knees and stood him up, saying, “I want this one to ride with me to war. I want him to see and be a witness to our power. Then you can fight against him when I set him free. Tomorrow we ride out, from one battle into another, and this time, Uthyr, you are coming with me. Lot, I’m leaving you behind in charge of the fort. Put Elfrid here back under guard,” and he gave the Saxon over to Lot, who took him away, back through the side-door and was gone.

For a moment all was still as Arthur walked up and down before us, thinking, then saying, “We ride tomorrow and track down Octha’s war-host and destroy them. All mounted; no foot-soldiers. All those who can ride, will, all ready at dawn. Go now, go and rest and be ready for the morning.”

Breaking up and moving out, the men picked up their war-gear and went to find somewhere to sleep, the higher ranked warriors to bunk in the hall. As all of this went on around us, Arthur looked at me and I could see what was on his mind; what to do with me? I gave him a wry smile and shrugged my one working shoulder at him.

He came over to me, said low, “Don’t you think it’s tempting Fate to go into another battle one handed? Right after this one? Do you think you can survive another?”

I sat in my chair and answered, “You are right; it would be tempting Fate to go into another. But you know me. I’m going.”

He sat down in his own chair next to me, slumped and rocked his legs back and forth, restless. “You will be riding one handed. I could take you as a scout but you cannot ride fast enough.”

“I’m staying right at your side and you will fight for me, protect me. How does that sound?”

“Sounds like you have got it all figured, but you are still ill from your wounded shoulder. I fret about you all the bloody time. Give me a rest, will you?”

I sat forward. I said, “I feel fine, tired, no, spent, but good. The pain isn’t so bad now, or I’m getting used to it. All I need is a bath and some sleep; lots of sleep.”

“Then you must sleep,” he ordered me.

I nodded to him, and went to our room, and fell on my pallet, fell into the kind of sleep which brought no rest…

40: BEDWYR's BATTLE-SICKNESS

UTHYR led us out one day's ride into the east where ran the old Roman coast roads, also where we hoped to catch Octha's war-host trying to cross. Our ride was designed to cut off their retreat, where early one morning we moved out in our troop and stopped on a ridge.

Uthyr's expert knowledge of the land and his line of tracking had brought us to within a few leagues of the crossroads that the Saxons would take to join eastward to the coast; they were in deadly danger from the north, the south and the east.

Our scouts had seen them coming, and Arthur broke our forces into three large units to cut off each of their three main escape routes. Three units of seventy men each, all trained to break into units of ten or twenty as needed, spear-headed, the wedge to cleave and break apart and cut down, retreat, charge, retreat as the next wave came in.

Whatever moves the Saxons made, we were faster, countering them even if they split their forces to face us. Cai and Gareth took the enemy's rear as always, Arthur leading the central charge, the rest stationed along each flank. And I watched from a hill, knowing that the very moment I saw the chance, I would join the fight.

Arthur had put me out of the way, but he and I both knew when the moment came, I would join the battle. Even though I was exhausted, in great pain and crippled, I would join his charge. With me was a small band of six other riders.

Together we watched from the hill, and it was a cold day; low clouds had come in from the north-west, sweeping across the hills.

From out of the north I saw the Saxons running in a long line, heading straight towards the eastern road that Arthur had surrounded with mounted troops. The front-runners suddenly stopped and the men behind crashed against those in front. Before them were three lone British horsemen with a Saxon prisoner between them. I saw Arthur take out his sword and use it to point the Saxons down the eastern road, as if he was giving them directions.

Go that way…

Val lifted the Red Dragon, Uthyr lifted the draco-standard, and Arthur heeled forward, easily within spear-throw of the Saxon war-host. I swallowed hard when I saw him release the prisoner. The man ran like a jack-hare back to his own kind, and as that happened, Arthur rode in even closer and one of the Saxons hurled a spear at him. The spear fell short and I heard Arthur call out, though he was too far below for me to catch his words. The Saxons roared at him.

The wind turned and I heard him cry, “You know who I am!”

The wind came up again and whipped my cloak around my legs. I pulled it tight and saw Cai’s men attack from the rear. The Saxons turned to defend themselves but most fled down the eastern road and ran into another unit of our horsemen. Being cut down from the front and the rear, the enemy broke apart, each man trying to defend himself, brothers clustering together, broken by cavalry charges. They ran into the forest while others took to the south road and were run down and speared.

Horsemen came from every direction, controlled riding against wild running. There were three fronts of fighting; north, south and east. The west was all high hills, where I sat with my six, burning to ride down and join the battle. From somewhere I heard Breton drums pounding, and when I looked down towards the southern road, Arthur was there; and so it was my time.

I turned my horse’s head for the south and heeled hard downhill, my men following behind. I rode using only my legs, and as I came through the mass at an angle, I pulled my sword and broke through a tight group of enemy and smashed their skulls like splintering wood, spearing straight through to Arthur’s side where our horses almost collided, I came so close, so close he almost took off the top of my helmet with his sword, but I galloped straight past him and deep into the fighting, where I saw a cluster of enemy trying to unhorse one of our men.

Me and Gwydre, with Arthur behind us, crashed into them and scattered them before turning to ride them down. Right at my side I saw in a flash Arthur moving in to block me, his sword took the top off a man’s head and Arthur wheeled, gave me a hard stare, turned back to ride down the Saxons fleeing before us. Together we rode them down, and those who stopped and turned to face us were trampled under our horses. We turned our shields to their sword arms, blocked their spears and rode on through

and out onto open ground, where we turned back to see behind us. We made another charge, cutting through at speed, engaging to fight before wheeling out to charge again.

This went on for an age; again and again we ran down fleeing men or cleaved clustering groups. Whatever Saxons dared to stay and fight were dying in a mass, while the field was beginning to clear around us. Those who could, escaped into the forest and we let them go. We sat on horseback a moment, gasping to breathe.

Arthur looked at me, and said, “I think it’s over, look, they have gone deep into the forest. Do you want to track them? If we ride up the north road, we will catch them on the far side.”

For a moment I couldn’t answer.

I felt as if I couldn’t breathe and even though the sun was in my eyes, I saw a black darkness come from either side of me.

I heard Arthur call, “Fox!”

I fell off my horse.

Everything went swirling around in my head, and again I heard Arthur calling, “Retreat, call the retreat!”

I heard the horn sounding, horses all around me, heard myself moaning like a broken fool, felt hands lifting me from the ground where I lay on my back; lifting me up onto Arthur’s horse and he held me in place before him; turned his horse away from the field, and I collapsed against him. All of my strength was finally gone. I struggled to keep the black out of my eyes, the swirling in my head, the weight of me in his arms as Arthur rode back to safety. I was awake only just, and felt the ride was long and I did not know how he managed to hold me.

We rode and rode, rocking, jarring.

Somehow I managed to say, “Drop me…drop me.”

“I don’t take orders from lieutenants,” and the sound of his voice went deep into my flesh, for Arthur would never drop me. Soon we stopped in a glade, all of our troop riding in around us and I was pulled down and tested to see if I could stand up, but I dropped. There was no strength in my legs, no strength anywhere.

I was lifted to rest against a tree.

Along with me came the wounded, while away somewhere in the distance, Arthur giving orders, “We will base here for the rest of the day,

Val, take two units and go back down to the road and watch for any surviving Saxons fleeing for the Wall. Attack them, but don't risk losing men if you think it's not safe. Come back by sunset. Howell, take the guard over there," and on till I slipped over sideways and blacked into exhaustion…

When dawn came, I believed I was near death; that my body was ruined and I fell into a black sorrow. Arthur pulled the troops out and we rode home. Of the Saxons, we had killed nearly their entire war-host, probably ninety out of a hundred and twenty men, but we had not killed their leader, Octha. If he had been there at all. Our attack had been a success, though our losses hit us hard; six dead and nine badly wounded.

The Dragon flew high as I rode at Arthur's side, unable to speak, carrying pain in my backbone, knowing now I could not go into battle again for a long time. And I could not speak. So tired I could not control the pain inside me; the pain of wounds, mind and body. But Arthur—he never wavered, always at my side, watching me, making sure I did not fall off my horse again. Cai rode on my left, another to catch me if I fell.

Because we were not tracking Saxons this time, we took a direct route back to Luguvalos, and even though the day's ride was peaceful, beautiful, cool wind and blue sky, the thoughts in my head were dark, black and killing. I did not want Arna to see me this way. I did not want to see her at all, as I sensed she would want to nurse me, and I couldn't bear the thought of her fussing over me. I wanted only Arial.

And by the time we got home in the glorious sunset, I had become a dark monster full of wild despair, out of control and punishing everyone who came to help me. I was crippled and yet wanted to fight.

I fought with Arthur, battering myself against him and him trying to control me.

"Don't let anyone near me, you Silurian bastard! And keep that girl away! I want Arial. Get this bloody bandage off my arm, my back! Get your hands off me!" and I punched him right handed in his mouth.

He took it, wrapped an arm around my neck and throttled me as he dragged me down to our room.

He pushed me through the door, saying, "You will have Arial. I'll get her for you."

He dropped me on my cot and started helping me off with my battle-gear, while stripping off his own and throwing things down in the corner; his sword hit the boards and he was rough like some old camp-doctor. I bit down the pain in my body. I had had enough.

So much pain, I was losing my sense of right and wrong.

"I know you hurt, I know you are in pain," he said as he held me still, and I looked into his eyes; I put my working arm around his neck. I breathed out against him, saying, "I cannot do this anymore, not for a long time…let me sleep."

I saw his top lip bleeding from where I had punched him.

"I will, but not till Arial has seen you. You are in a bad way, my brother, wait here and don't give in."

Don't give in…

And the moment he went out the door, I slumped, closed my eyes and saw armies marching through my head, where rode the dark Silurian, Red Dragon overhead, warriors carrying screaming draco standards. The Silurian cutting down everything in his path, Saxon heads splitting, and blood…so much blood…

Arial came and opened my body to her doctoring hands, for Arial everything must be naked. Bodies were her business and she had me naked, doing things to me, manipulating my backbone.

"Nothing wrong with your backbone," she said. "It's your shoulder hurting your back," and she dug her fingers into the bone in my back and groaned about how thin I was, said I was emaciated, re-wrapped my arm in a bandage that bound my entire upper body so that I felt like a prisoner in my own flesh. She dosed me with morphia extract and I slept for three days, woken only to have someone force-feed me.

I became plagued with nightmares and constantly woke, sweating and moaning deep at night, while during the day, the sun was bright through the window; summer was coming. Moats of dust floated in the rays and I imagined and dreamed on and on. Arthur left me alone. I wondered where he was. But when he thought that maybe he had given me enough time to rest, he came to see me late on the afternoon of the fourth day, when I was ready to get up.

I had my breeches on at last, and was sitting on the edge of the bed, trying to lace them one handed when Arthur came in and said, "You going

to smack me in the mouth again?"

I said, "Any time."

I looked for his reaction, saw him close for the first time in days, both dark and shining at the same time, so good-looking I wanted to attack him for it. I told him, "You look wild, what have you been doing?"

"I've been wooing one of my father's old trainers, he's a master of exercise; showed me how to lift my body off the ground one-handed. We have also been having cavalry games and I'm getting good at horseback archery; you never thought I could be good at any kind of sport. But I can. And I can do this." He stood up then and took out his dagger; took mine from where it hung on my belt, and began to throw them up in the air and catch them by their handles, two at a time, throwing them up in the air, swapping hands and catching them again, and as he did this, he said, "I can do it with three knives, it's better, more impressive."

This dagger throwing went on for a moment longer and I sat watching with my mouth hanging open, the knives flicking up in the air and Arthur catching them as I laughed, amazed.

"How did you learn to do that?"

"The same old master, it's juggling, and it's better with three or more…ouch!" and he dropped one of the daggers as it cut him coming down. I roared with laughter; served him right for showing off; but it was brilliant really and he made me laugh as he stood there, staring at a cut on his finger.

He said, "Oh, and the best news? Uki isn't going to die. Arial said he's going to make it, he's still very ill, but he's past the danger period. Medraut is coming out of his black depression too. And you?"

He sat back down and looked at me, sucking on his cut.

"I'm still plagued with nightmares," I answered, "but feel all right during the day. I want to get up now and start going out." I looked at him straight; said, "I'm sorry for smacking you in the mouth."

"I don't mind about that, who cares about punches between friends?" He dropped his head and laughed, saying, "All the country is up, heard about the Pictish battle and the one with the Saxons, our little skirmish. All the country is up and talking about me; I'm famous. And so are you. Reports are coming in from all over for me to go and set traps for Saxons. I have to be in ten different places at once and they actually think I can do

that. Listen, a letter came from Caan; said that the hall at Cadwy is finished, and they are waiting for me to go and occupy it. We can leave within the next few weeks. You feel up to riding all that way?"

"Am I? I would be out of here like a fox after a jack-hare if you say so right now. This is brilliant news."

Then a more serious look.

"What?" I said, feeling hot.

"Your girl, Arna, she cries on my shoulder every night, getting my shirt wet…and…she's getting randy with me. The other night she kissed my neck and said I smell good; what's that mean? Come on, Fox, you have to take her. She cries for you."

"Arthur, I don't know what to do with her. I cannot keep her where I'm going. I'm not sure how I feel about her, I don't know if I love her or not."

"If you loved her, you would know it. Maybe you need more time with her. Let her come to you, just so she stops sitting on my lap and giving me a bone. Take her or I'll smack you in the mouth." He stood up, looking as if he was going to leave, but I did not want him to go.

I said, "Where are you going now?"

"I have to go and tell my father I'm leaving, and I still haven't figured him out; if he will keep the north safe or not. And I think he's been lying to me about the Dal Riada; he hasn't got alliances with them at all. It's all bluff and shit."

I stood up to face him.

I said, "Don't go to your father without me being with you. I feel stronger now; three days sleep worked a treat. Take me with you."

"Done. It's good to have the Fox back again." He turned to go, leaving me standing as he closed the door so hard it slammed…

Later I got up, dressed myself badly, and went out into the hall for supper. I decided it was time to feed myself rather than have servants bring food to me. It meant too that I was regaining strength, my form no longer skin and bone. I had put on weight and I intended to stuff myself and put on more.

When I walked into the hall, I felt the mood was tense; everyone turned to look at me and I was hailed by the members of the inner Clan who were sat around the hearth. Cai, Gareth, and his cousin, Brendon Ro, Royri

Angen, Medraut with Howell, Gwydre, Tegid, Drustan, and a group of others, Arthur's shield-men and the twins, Dafin and Irfan. Lot and Uthyr, who was fast asleep in a chair by the fire, Essylt and Arna at their embroidery, all of them quiet.

All of the other warriors who had crowded the hall on previous nights were absent and when I went over to the fire, Arthur got up from his chair and came over to me. I saw what he had been doing. Sitting with him was a red-haired woman I thought I had seen somewhere before, a matron of around thirty years old, maybe more. Arthur had been giving her his seduction spell, and when he came over to join me, he gave her a glance that clearly meant he was out to lay her.

I said to him, low, "She's so old! Help me get some food," and I gave him the ladle and he spooned me some stew into a bowl and pushed it into my single hand, all the while taking glances at the woman, sitting there and giving him some kind of sweet swooning stare.

He said, "Glad you are up to being your usual sharp-eyed self. She's thirty and two. Just watch me, by the end of this night, she's mine."

"You are a whore, Arthur, you would cock your own horse if you could."

"I've already done that!" he called aloud to me as I went and sat down on a bench near the fireside, watching Uthyr snoring, the wolf-hounds doing their usual sniffing, thrusting their noses in my bowl, so I got up and went to the opposite bench with Cai and troughed everything before me like a pig. Cai watched every mouthful I took and I ignored him. But still it was quiet and I was mindful of Arna. I had ignored her when I came in. Goddess knows what she thought of me, but I knew I had to approach her sooner or later and talk to her.

Instead, I finished my supper and went to stop Arthur from doing what he was doing. I beckoned to him and he got up and followed me out of the main doors, where we stood together on the top step and looked out at the night. A warm night, sky bright and star-filled, torches above the gate-head and guards walking up and down, silvery shadows in the dark. We stood without speaking, Arthur leaning against the wall and looking at me. I knew without him having to say it that he was delighted to see me up and well, my madness almost gone; we were one in the moment. The night-

wind blew. A soft summery night wind that flicked his hair into his eyes and he pushed his long fringe back behind his ear.

"What's going on?" I said. "Where are all the warriors?"

"I sent Val back with a troop to Deva. I need to know what the Saxons are up to; they will start their summer raiding any time now."

"Then why are we standing here? We should leave now."

"We will leave soon."

I leant back against the opposite wall, looked at him.

We were silent again for a while, standing in the night and the soft wind and watching the sky for falling stars. I heard voices from inside the hall, low, and the tense feeling was still there.

Standing together like this, close, I thought over the past days in the beautiful quiet of the early evening. I thought over it all: my battle fatigue, the warriors, the wars, the Pictish battle, the first truly big battle he had plotted and won and I looked at him and said, "Arthur, you are a good leader. You lead us well. You are a good leader."

He stood up straighter, and for the first time he looked at me in a way that seemed almost embarrassed, or bashful. He needed this from me, needed to hear praise from me, the one who gave him so much trouble. He couldn't answer, just nodded and looked away at his guards pacing up and down, diligent and proud to be his.

I said, "So, who is this woman you are out to lay?"

"She's from Uthyr's camp; her husband was killed some years back and she has two sisters I haven't met yet."

"And you want to lay her?"

"Maybe I shouldn't. Maybe I'm just asking for trouble, but she was squeezing my prick under the table, and I swear I didn't have it out…but what do you think? Could I get away with having a woman her age? I think she's beautiful."

"It's a flush idea. I suppose you could try."

"And what about Arna? She's so sweet on you. She thinks there is something in you for her too, so you better get in there and speak to her," and he marched right back into the hall and I followed him, knowing I had to do what Arthur wanted me to do, that I did not want to do. I went and stood at Arna's side.

She stopped her stitching and looked up at me with sorrow in her blue eyes; then she was off her stool and throwing herself against me, where I put my working arm around her, held her close and kissed her forehead. I lifted her face and kissed her as everyone in the hall gave me dog-howls.

Medraut called out, “Take her and ball her, Fox!” and laughed.

And that was exactly what I did, leading her by a hand and seeing Arthur standing over his still sleeping father and staring down at him with a raging fire in his black eyes, as if he was finding a way to invade the man’s dreams and destroy him.

When I got Arna alone in our room, I said, “I’m really sorry for not seeing you, but things are better now, I’m better now. We have about two more weeks, then Arthur is pulling the troops out for Caer Cadwy. We have two weeks. Do you still want to do this with me?”

“Every night. I love you, I love you,” and she was kissing my face, my lips, tasting my lips, and I pulled her down on top of me, waiting for her to start stripping me of my gear. As soon as we were both naked, we rolled together under the skins of my cot, and I gave her what she wanted. I could only do it on my back, and she sat on my hips, and she did all the work till we both fell over each other, sticky and wet.

We lay together, breathing hard, her head on my left arm where it was strapped to my chest. She played with my fingers and kissed my broken shoulder; played with my hair and everything around me seemed deathly still and again I felt tension. As my room was directly next door to the hall, I could hear low voices coming through the wall. The voice was Uthyr’s and something pricked at me. A warrior’s sense of conflict. I got up and asked Arna to help me dress, which she did without comment.

And when dressed, I went back into the hall…

41: BATTLE of the PENDRAGONS

THE mood was so thick it was like a fog, and I moved to where Arthur stood before his father, the man still seated.

Uthyr looked up at his son and said, “…but I do know Fearghus, some years ago he asked me to aid him against the Picts. He let me down, he led a battle against us with the Saxons as allies…you cannot trust him.”

“Were you hoping to use me to get revenge on him?” Arthur answered.

Uthyr shifted in his chair, sat up, looked at his son straight. “The Dal Riada cannot be trusted.”

“I am not attacking the Dal Riada!” Arthur moved closer in anger, standing over his father, menacing him. “If Fearghus is clever, he knows that if he wants to stay in Britain, he must be British and live in peace, or else be driven out. But I’m not doing this for you. You never came to aid me in war, no better than Fearghus yourself. I’m not just your son, I am your Overlord and you failed me. You need to show me something special if you want this hall back again. I want reasons from you.”

I moved closer. Arthur had not even noticed me. He noticed no one other than Uthyr. He bore down on the man, leaning over him and putting his hands on the arms of the chair his father sat in, staring right into his face. Everyone in the hall sat watching, stilled and quiet, though alert and ready to fight if needed.

Arthur said again, “I want reasons from you, why you treated me so badly as a child. All I wanted was love and warmth, but what I got was your fist. Why Uthyr?” The words caught in his throat and he struggled to hold in his years of suffering.

I caught sight then of the red-haired woman who Arthur had been wooing earlier, she moved from a corner into the light, coming closer to Arthur’s side. I also saw Uthyr’s sword hanging over the back of the chair he sat in. I moved to cover it.

Uthyr did not reply and Arthur said, “I want reasons! Give me reasons or else I’ll hand over the charge of this fort to Lot; your brother never hurts his son with his fists and I know he can mount a defence of the North just as well as you. Do you want that? I can have you exiled; give me reasons.”

“All right,” Uthyr answered. “Reasons? Because you were dark and foreign. You came into the world as theirs, not mine. Their Silurian Clan of the Bear. Bear banners flew over their houses, their goddess was Artio, Goddess of the Bear. You came into the world as a child of the Bear Goddess, dark and ugly and Igrain called you, Arthur, the bear. I wanted you named Owen, she refused. I am from the line of Cunedda of the North, so how could I accept you into my family, you from the Bear?”

Arthur backed away.

Uthyr jumped out of his chair, advanced on him. “Silurian, get out of my fort!” and he raised a fist and Arthur suddenly became again the boy

who took that fist without protest.

He turned his face away as if he was going to be hit, and the red-haired woman cried out, “Leave him alone, you vicious swine!”

Uthyr turned and struck her across the face. I drew Uthyr’s sword, came forward as Arthur turned back and slammed his fist in his father's face, knocking him back over the chair.

The man was so hard he did not let himself fall, not even when Arthur hit him again; only this time Uthyr stumbled and his knees gave way, but he righted himself as I stepped between them and swung the sword at his neck, holding it against his skin.

“One more move and I’ll cut you down!” I warned. “Stand where you are!” Behind me came Cai and Howell, ready to back me.

Arthur came forward, said to his father, “I will leave this fort. And even though you failed to aid me in war I’m giving you back what you want, you deserve the Defence of the North. You are going to keep this land well, because if you don’t, I’ll have you deposed and broken; you will get to feel what it’s like to be broken. One false move and I will tear you down. All along you have lied to me. And I can make you look a fool. Now get out of my sight. I don’t want to see you again.”

Arthur turned away and went towards the side-door, the red-haired woman following him.

I pushed Uthyr’s sword into his hand and said, “Get out.” Noticing now what surely looked like a broken nose, and thick dark blood running into his mouth.

Uthyr looked around, saw himself alone and I could not fathom him for a moment; why be this way? What was in him to lie and hate like he did? When he moved back to gather his things, I noticed how he walked, he staggered, his son’s punches had hurt him somewhere after all. He tried to show dignity as he took up his cloak and sword; he walked out of the main doors, saying nothing and everyone watched him go. Then I too left, following Arthur.

I found him out in the side corridor with the woman, she saying to him, “I think he takes pleasure in cruelty, but you must know that underneath I am sure he loves you. I have heard him talk about you, praise for a son who is brilliant. Arthur, do not let him hurt you.”

“Too late. Too late for that,” he answered.

I approached them, watching her put a hand on his face.

He took her hand and kissed her fingers, told her, “Go to bed now, lady, I have to go.”

She pulled him back when he moved away, but he shook his head, no, and she let him go. I passed her, giving her a look. She nodded to me and moved away. Back now inside our room, I found Arthur standing still, in some kind of deep thought with Arna sitting up in bed, covers over her breasts and staring at him. He looked at her, then at me; none of us spoke. He undressed and got into his own bed. And so did I in mine, lying still in the darkness with Arna beside me, her knowing something had happened, but maybe daring not to ask. I stayed awake for a long time, thinking, before gratefully sleeping…

Next morn when I woke just after sunrise, Arthur was already gone. Both Arna and me got up and dressed, herself helping me on with my gear. We parted with a kiss at the door, and when I went outside into the corridor, I saw Arthur standing in the open back doorway that led out into the eastern courtyard. Silhouetted against the rising sun, he wore only short breaches and he looked hurt. I went down to join him, where I caught him wiping away tears, probably hoping I wouldn’t notice.

He sat down on the top step outside, and said, “I shouldn’t have thrown him out last night. I threw him out, didn’t I? I remember hitting him, then after that I’m not sure; did I throw him out or was it a dream?”

“It was real. You threw him out, he deserved it.” I sat down next to him.

“I shouldn’t have thrown him out!” he cried. “But he sucks the life out of me.”

“You don’t fool me, you were crying for him. I know you love him somewhere deeply buried, but you have to let him go. He’s too mean to hold onto.”

Together we watched the sun rise over the hills; listening to the sounds of a waking world, the army, and the farmers, horses neighing in the distance, the sound of the women making food in the cook-house near us. I looked at him; saw him dying for his father’s love.

He dropped his head into his hands and said, “I’ve got such a headache; and Lady Deirdre has gone home, back to him.”

“Lady Deirdre, you mean that red-haired woman?”

“She’s his; she’s my father’s, and she was giving me a bone under the table last night, remember? Can you believe it?”

“Aye, I do. With you, anything’s possible.”

Arthur got up then from the step and went back to his room; he was in a mood, so I followed him, found him poking around in the chest for something to wear. Throwing out things he did not want till he found a clean tunic and stood before me, putting it on and saying, “Have breakfast, then I’m going to see the wounded, then…”

“What then?”

“I’m going to Camboglanna. I have to see him. I’m going to apologise for hitting him, it was wrong. I shouldn’t have done that.”

“Arthur, you broke his nose. I saw it. It was what he deserved. It was justice.”

He pulled on a pair of brown leather breeches and looked miserable, tied up his boots, pulling the laces really tight.

Over in the corner, mounted on its kit-pole, stood the shining mail-shirt his father had given him. Thousands of shining linked chains in the morning light through the window. On the pole top was his helmet. The Armorican sword in its scabbard.

Arthur saw me looking at the mail-shirt and said, “He cannot hate me all the way through to his bones, if he gave me this, can he? Why give something so beautiful to someone he hated? I have to say sorry.”

“Then take me with you. You know you cannot go alone.”

So we did, together, we arrived at Uthyr’s hall one before midday. We came unannounced and with an escort; for Arthur had to be escorted by guards and shield-men wherever he went these days, too important to risk losing. And I had my six with me. Gwydre on my right, though behind me, as I rode always at Arthur’s left-hand side. Unlike last time, Uthyr was not standing at his hall doors to greet us. There stood an older warrior, most likely Uthyr’s door-warden, and the man smiled at Arthur when he dismounted and led me with him to the hall’s entrance.

“Welcome Arthur-mab,” the man said.

“Master Dlair, this is Prince Bedwyr, son of King Pedrawg, and my foster-brother,” Arthur introduced me, and the warden answered, “The Fox, of course, single-handedly killed three hundred men in battle.”

The man named Dlair clasped my hand and I told him, “The numbers I’ve killed keep on growing, sir. Only this morning it was two hundred.”

“Enjoy it, lad, for times like this for you may never come again. Enjoy it.” He then led us inside the hall, just myself and Arthur, as our escort remained waiting outside in the sun. Inside it was dark; a central fire burned and smoke drifted up to the thatched ceiling. Low sunlight from the open doors, filtering down through the smoke.

And there Uthyr sat in a chair before the fire, sitting very still, not moving when we came in. He looked only at the fire. Together Arthur and I stepped before him and waited. The door-warden, Dlair, moved away and back to his post by the main entrance. We three were alone. And even though I saw Arthur looking for her, we did not see Lady Deirdre anywhere inside the hall.

“Please sit,” Uthyr told us, without looking at us.

There was a long bench beside him. We sat, and we did not speak.

Uthyr continued to stare into the fire, and Arthur and I stared at him. It was clear that his nose was not only broken, but his left eye was bruised black and swollen; his face looked very pale and his hair was down and out of its braids. But then he stood up again and went and closed the hall doors, shutting us in darkness. Arthur looked worried as Uthyr came and stood before him. And Arthur said first, “I came to say sorry.”

“Stop! No son, you cannot come here and say sorry for hitting me. You cannot come and apologise for what you did, because what you did to me last night was the act of an eighteen year old boy retaliating against years of suffering at the hands of his father. So I won’t let you say sorry. I deserved what happened.”

Arthur sat up, and as I watched him, I saw him consumed by the man before him.

Uthyr looked at his son with deep regard.

He said after a heavy moment of silence, “You broke my nose, and when I felt it break, I came here and have sat all night, seeing my wrong, what I did to you as a child. I deserved it. So do not apologise, not as Pendragon and certainly not as my son. Honour is in you and shame in me.”

“I came—”

“You came because you are duty-bound! You know your duty and you do it at all costs.” Uthyr then turned and walked away, his back towards us.

I looked at Arthur and he was pale, biting his jaw closed tight, his hand, holding his sword was shaking. But Uthyr came back again, went and sat down in his chair, now facing Arthur directly.

He said, “What I did to you, I cannot mend. But I will say I am sorry for all those years. Your hurt and your pain, when all the time you loved me and you love me still, and I am sick of what I did. And of who I am.”

Arthur answered, “Did you ever love me? Even once?”

A strange smile touched Uthyr’s lips when Arthur said this.

He looked away into the fire and admitted, “I love you now.”

Uthyr’s words seemed to break him.

For Arthur, it was like someone had stabbed him into his heart. He turned his face away and looked into the shadows, but I could hear his breathing, a fast and broken breath. How hard for me to just sit and watch this strange harsh love between them.

Uthyr now dropped his voice, “Once, when you were about two years old, you fell and cut your knee. I had no hearth-woman to help me, so I picked you up and fixed your cut…then I held you for a while on my lap, and I kept on holding you till you fell asleep in my arms. And when you were asleep, I looked at your face, probably for the first time. You were so soft, sleeping in the arms of a monster. I saw your beauty only then, those black eyes of yours that never belonged in my family. You were not born like Medraut, all fair and golden, a pure Gododdin, but you were a beautiful and terrifying child. You had a mind as a child that shocked us all, playing Black Raven with adults that you could beat when you were six. At four, you were telling grown men where they went wrong when they added numbers. No, Arthur, this was too terrifying to face. But that one time when you slept in my arms, I loved you, and hid it away in some dark corner of my soul.”

Through all of his father’s speech, Arthur sat still, made no sound.

“I could not understand you,” Uthyr went on. “No one could. You frightened me. You were unnatural. Even now, you are unnaturally brilliant. But I love you. And it’s over. All those years and the pain. Your pain is now mine. I take it for you.”

Suddenly Arthur stood up, took a deep breath and said, “I want you to return to Luguvalos and be the power in the North on my behalf. I want you to lead a troop of men out to the Caw Clan and track down Cynan Aurelius.

I want you to do this. I'm leaving soon; I'm going south to Caer Cadwy and fight the Saxons."

Uthyr did not reply, just nodded his head in agreement.

Arthur went on, "I do not know if I can ever let go of what happened to me as a son of yours."

Uthyr said, "Tomorrow. I'll come back to you tomorrow. I'll bring my men and you can give me your orders. When you go, take Dlair with you. I'm giving him to you, because he was my most brilliant warrior and I want you to have him. He can teach you much knowledge of war-craft."

Arthur nodded as he stood, pale and shaking. He said, "Come tomorrow." He bowed to Uthyr, and I stood and did the same.

We both turned and walked to the doors, opened them and stepped out into the blessed relief of the sun, out into the free air, where we found the door-warden, Dlair, already waiting and with his things packed on a pony, obvious now that Uthyr had arranged for him to leave with us. Because Uthyr knew Arthur would come to say sorry.

The day was undiminished sunshine, warm with the coming of summer, the flowers in the grass and the birds overhead.

I did not think Arthur saw any of it. But as we came closer to the fort and the crowded fields of farmers and training troops, the work of a thousand lives, he said, "That was the real truth. And you know what the real truth does to me? It pushes me forward. Because it's what is real that makes life worth living. Not the lies of truth. But truth itself. Nothing can match it. Not talk of ghosts and gods, but the real truth. That's what Uthyr just did. He gave me the real truth."

We passed on, and I could not fathom Arthur now. I could not understand whether he was feeling good or bad. Could not place the meaning of his words. He was a mystery still, and I followed him back into the fort without words to reply.

42: FIGHTING with ASSASSINS

THE hall that night was crowded and overflowing; the main doors were open and the heat and smoke mixed with the cool night air. Most of the Bretons were still with us, though were soon to leave for home, back to Armorica as heroes.

I sat with Arna at the long-bench, the fire before us, crowds around us; most of our Clan was gathered, save Gareth and Drustan, who had gone back up to the Scouts Camp with the rest of their men.

Over near the end of the bench sat Cai, being loud, as always.

Medraut stood guard with the other wardens at the main door, overseeing everyone who came in or went out, paying no attention to his sister, Lady Essylt, who was trapped by a group of Selgovae warriors. Between kissing Arna and watching the Snake, I also watched Essylt. She looked distressed, as the Selgovae were after her body and Arthur was nowhere to be seen.

I had not seen him since we parted, and as I looked around, I noted that most of us here tonight were young, as all of the older men were down in the village, and sometimes this could mean trouble. Most of Arthur's best disciplinarians were all older warriors, men who the younger ones respected, and without them here now anything could happen.

And it did.

Just as I thought I better go and tell Medraut to get his sister out from under the Selgovae noses, Arthur came walking in.

He aimed straight as an arrow to Essylt's side and dragged her out from the middle of the pack, telling the Selgovae, one in particular, "She's mine. Keep your hands off her."

The man made a protest, "I say she is mine, she is coming with me," and he pulled Essylt back again, but ended up flying backwards against the wall behind him as Arthur pushed him aside. The man rushed forward like a charging bull, made only three paces to attack when Arthur struck a punch, centre into the Selgovae's face and the man went down in one; he lay on the floor, gasping like a landed fish.

"I said she's mine," Arthur told him, standing over him before reaching down and pulling him to his feet. He sat the man down on a bench and said, "…you can just sit here and think about where you are now and who you are talking to."

Cai came and offered the gasping Selgovae a large mug of ale, saying, "Never come between Arthur and his cunt; it's the worst thing you can ever do."

"And you, Cai, you can shut-up as well. Essylt is not cunt," and Arthur pulled her away with him, coming over to sit with her on the two-

seater Roman couch near Arna and I.

Straight away Essylt settled against his chest and Arthur gave me a look, noticing that my arm was now free of its strapping. For that afternoon, I had gone to have the bindings removed from my arm, and it was now free, and I wore only a sling.

I moved my hand up and down between my legs, pretending that I was pulling on my prick left-handed, back to normal again.

Arthur laughed and Arna slapped my hand aside.

"Do not be so rude!" she warned me.

I pulled a face at her and went back to my ale, though I kept a watch on the Selgovae warrior Arthur had landed. The man sat on his bench, staring at Arthur with a fixed and savage look. The other Selgovae around him did not seem to care; most of them had laughed when he got landed and they were happy enough to carry on drinking and laughing.

And even over the noise, I clearly heard Essylt say to Arthur, "Am I yours? You said I am yours. I was so scared he was going to rape me. Am I yours?"

I glanced at them. Arthur did not reply to her question.

Only he put an arm around her and hugged her; she sighed and moved in closer, kissed his neck, then pulled his head down to kiss him. He resisted a moment, held back, but I saw her fingers pull on his hair and he gave in, brought his mouth over hers and they began a long, slow deep kiss that seemed to last for ages. Again I looked over at the Selgovae; the man was still staring at us. I knew that if he did not stop, I would have to go over and put him back on his back on the floor.

Still Arthur and Essylt bound themselves in their kiss and Essylt had fallen limp in his arms; she seemed about to pass out and I said to Arna, "Is that girl in love?"

"So much, he can kill her with a kiss," Arna told me. "He's gorgeous, your dark friend."

"Gorgeous? What kind of word is that?"

"Like you, Fox."

"What?"

"Come to bed?"

"I cannot. Not with that Selgovae warrior giving Arthur the evil-eye like he is. I'm going to break his head open," and I got up, was just about to

move out and hammer the bastard now, but Arthur caught me.

"Don't," he ordered. "Do not start trouble, Fox. I can deal with him."

"Let me do it," I told him, suddenly feeling the spin of aggression rising inside me. "I want to."

"Fox," and he gave me a hard warning stare.

My heart was already pounding. I looked at Arthur, and then at the Selgovae; saw the man make a cutting sign across his neck like slitting a throat. He pointed at Arthur, mouthing the words, 'I will kill him…'

For this threat, I went right over the bench top, kicking mugs aside and as I came through the crowd, I grabbed the Selgovae by his tunic and pulled him up, but he punched me in the face. I did not go down. I came back at him fast and hit him; he fell across the table and I picked up a mug and slammed it into the side of his head. He roared in pain as I smacked his head a few more times with the mug, and blood gushed down his face.

I knocked him on his back over the table top, dropped the mug, and hit him again and again, my left hand around his throat and my right fist going at his head till I felt something smack against my own head, I hardly felt it. Again, I did not drop but turned and saw another Selgovae after me. I pulled my dagger and heard someone cry, "No weapons!"

Someone grabbed my hand and near broke my only working arm. Through the pushing crowd I knew it was Arthur; he did something to my arm that flared pain into my shoulder and I dropped my dagger, bellowing with pain. As Arthur did this, he turned and hit the one who had punched the side of my head. I felt blood run into my mouth and my head began to spin and I staggered back.

Someone caught me and threw me aside.

Here I heard Arthur order, "Stand still! All of you!"

Everything spun to a stop and when I turned back, righted, I saw he was standing in the centre of the hall, his sword drawn.

"Stand! Or I will break the lot of you!" he ordered.

All of our Clan were up at his sides, some with drawn swords and the Selgovae backing down.

Everything stopped and stilled, everyone breathing wild and hard. I tasted blood and my right hand was throbbing.

"Everyone dismiss! Get back to barracks!"

The Selgovae leader came through and lifted his man up to his feet and everyone began turning left and right, gathering their gear. I stood where I was, trembling. I turned and saw Arna and Essylt sitting together and looking terrified. Arna looked at me, shocked.

The girl did not know me now.

Then Medraut was at my side; he said, "Nice work, you mad bastard. You always have to start trouble, don't you?"

Outside I could hear Arthur talking to the departing Selgovae leader, "It was just a drunken brawl, do not take it seriously."

A reply I did not hear.

Arthur again, "I said don't fight me. Do not break with me because of something foolish like this. You are still pledged to me and you fought with me in war. Do you think this is something serious enough to break over?"

"No, my lord, I do not," I caught an answer. "A brawl is a brawl, always over a woman."

"See me in the morning; we will talk then when everyone is calmer. Do not let your warriors brew over this, it's not worth it."

"Just as you say, my lord."

The hall cleared around me, Medraut standing as my guard.

The Clan all looking at me.

Through the open doors, I could see Arthur standing in the torchlight, watching the Selgovae leave for their billets. Behind me I could hear Arna crying. And when everything had fallen quiet, Arthur turned and came back in. He came over to me and stood right in front of me, stared at me. I stared right back.

I swear it is no easy thing to hold Arthur's stare, so black…

He said to me, "Remember when Ambrosius had you flogged for fighting?" He shook his head at me. "I'm beginning to see now why he had to do that." He grabbed me by my shirt, said to my face, "You may think you are something special to me, but when I tell you not to fight, you don't. Do you want to turn me into something I'm not? A leader who flogs his own warriors? You have to learn when to stop when I say stop. Learn when to obey and when we can be us, you and me. Learn it, Fox. Learn it before someone takes you out from under me."

"That man threatened you," I had to answer back. "He mouthed a threat at you and I took it seriously. I'm not going to sit by while strangers

make threats to your life. I am your warrior."

He tightened his grip on my shirt, pulled me closer to him. "What threat did he make?"

"He signed a slit throat then pointed at you, mouthed that he was going to kill you, and as far as I'm concerned it was a true threat to your life." Now he released me, though we still stood, staring at each other.

Behind us, Arna cried.

And Medraut said to Arthur, "Are you just going to let him get away with this? You are a fool for this prick, aren't you?"

Meaning me.

Medraut walked away, going to get himself a horn of ale.

"What do you want me to do with him?" Arthur called after him. "Have him flayed alive?"

Medraut did not reply, and Arthur let go of me and went and sat down between Arna and Essylt.

He put an arm around my girl and said, "Don't worry, I'm not going to have him beaten, he's tasted that already in his life."

The girls looked at him in the way women do, as Arthur had a way with women for sure, and Arna took his hand and said, "Do not take him away from me, please, Arthur, my lord, please, do not take him away," and she looked at me with her blue eyes swimming with tears. I went over and took her by the hand and led her to bed…

And later that night, I slept so hard, I never heard the horn call to rise in the morning. Though after I woke, I kept on thinking over and over about the fight the night before. Arthur had told me not to fight, but I went anyway…learn it before someone takes you out from under me, he had said.

Arna was already up and gone and I was alone.

Neither had Arthur come in last night.

I wondered where he had slept; with Essylt?

As I turned to go and get breakfast, I found guards standing outside my door. They crossed their spears against me as I went to leave.

"Why are you barring me?" I demanded.

"You are to stay in this room till you are summoned, Supreme Commander's orders," one of them told me. And they shut the door on me. I stood for a moment, feeling shocked. So, Arthur had me under house-

arrest. I smiled and went back to bed. Though I did not have to wait long. Not long.

The door soon opened and Arthur came in, came over and sat down next to me and said, “Uthyr’s here. This means we can leave. I’ve just given orders to have the fort cleared out tomorrow morning.

A rider came in at dawn with news that the Saxons are attacking southern towns, so we have to leave.” He got up and starting pacing, saying, “The unit captains are already getting their troops packed and ready, the grooms are out gathering the horses.” He turned and looked at me. “You have got a nice bruise on your forehead from last night.”

“That Selgovae bastard threatened your life.”

“I know. Essylt saw the threat too, so did a lot of others. So I cannot let it go and I want you now. Come on, I’ve got him bound under guard.”

When I stood up, I said, “Am I still under house-arrest?”

“Only for today, you can manage that much, can’t you?”

He thought it was funny and started laughing when he saw my sour look. Bastard, he made me love him like a fire burning in my guts.

We left together and went out into the hall, where I saw a crowd of men standing around the Selgovae captive who was bound tight to a chair with Medraut standing over him.

The man’s Selgovae leader was with him, along with Uthyr and his men, most of our Clan, including Cai, who had missed the fight because he had been out ploughing a new girlfriend. And there was Essylt, standing near her brother. When the Selgovae prisoner saw me, he started squirming against his bonds, giving me a look of hatred. Most of the left side of his head was bloodied and torn from where I had smashed the mug against his skull.

Arthur said to me, “Tell them what you saw last night.”

I told the gathered men, “I saw this one here make threats to take the Pendragon’s life. He signed a slit throat then mouthed the words, ‘I will kill him’, pointing at Arthur.”

Uthyr said, “No one threatens the life of the Pendragon in his own hall, no one threatens the life of my son.”

Arthur looked at Essylt; she stepped forward and told, “I also saw the threat. It was clear and plain. Without doubt it was a threat against Arthur’s life. I saw it.”

“These men of the Clan Bear also saw it,” Arthur said, speaking to the Selgovae leader, Angor ap Cain.

And it was only then that Angor told us, “But this man is not of our nation, he comes from the far north. You can do with him what you will.”

“Where do you come from?” Arthur questioned the man.

All he got in return was a snarled, “Death to you!”

Medraut struck his face hard, ordered, “Where do you come from? Speak, or you will find yourself ready to rot in your grave before noon today. Speak.”

The captive looked at us all, around the standing circle about him. His face turned white and he said, “From the north.”

“The Caw Clan?” Arthur said.

“Aye! And I am your assassin. I know you are going to kill me for this, so aye, I came to kill you!”

“And failed stupidly. Who sent you?”

“Cynan Aurelius!” and he went to spit at Arthur, but he stepped out of reach. Medraut hit the man again, only harder this time and he howled as blood poured from his mouth. Arthur looked at me, turned to his father and we moved away, going to discuss what to do next.

We moved into a group and Arthur said to Uthyr, “Take him with you north, use him to track Aurelius.”

“I was going to suggest that myself,” Uthyr said. “I know how to make him take us to where we want to go. Either way, this one will not live to tell his story.”

Arthur agreed; “That’s done then; when will you leave?”

“Lot is coming back sometime today; we cannot leave till he returns to take charge of the fort. Tomorrow, when you leave, we will go north as you go south.”

Arthur turned back to the captive; gave him a long cold look, and said to Medraut, “Put him somewhere safe.”

He gave Medraut a nod and the Snake gave a long sweet smile and bowed. My blood ran cold. I had no doubt now that Medraut intended to torture his prisoner…

43: FROM NORTH to SOUTH

THERE was a feast that night, a farewell feast.

Uthyr had arranged it and people came from all over, even people from the village outside the fort.

And I was surprised to see many of the women crying, even some of the old men, because in their simple hearts they believed Arthur to be some kind of young and powerful son of theirs who had saved them from the Pictish horrors of their constant raiding. It was moving to see them holding his hands and saying their tearful thanks and farewells, so obvious to me they did not want him to go.

They loved their new Pendragon, and Arthur stood at the main door, doing his duty, greeting the people who came in to see him. A lot of the villagers brought gifts with them, mostly parcels of food we could carry with us to help feed the troops on the long ride south.

Around me, the Bretons seemed high and happy to be going home, the Clan just as high. I moved over to help Arthur greet the people, for he was not the only one they wanted to meet. The Fox also had a glamour as a warrior-hero, and there was an ecstatic look on Arna's face when I turned to her; she moved through the warriors, helping to serve.

She looked happy, and she was happy because I had told her earlier in the day that I would take her with me back to Cadwy. I had to. Arthur was taking Essylt, and Arna would be destroyed to see her friend go while she herself had to stay behind.

I could not leave her like this, so I told her I would take her, but I would not marry her. I gave her a smile now and she laughed. Musicians began to play and women to sing, the villagers moving in the main door and down the corridor and out into the rear courtyard, and as this happened I saw Arthur coming over to me with a spear in his hand.

He gave me the spear and said, "You are on guard-duty," and he laughed at me, left me standing as he went over to join his father and Lady Deirdre. Here he turned once to look back at me as I stood, staring back at him before giving him a dry smile. Put me on guard-duty would he? I marched down the corridor and stood by the rear entrance, helping to shovel villagers out and down the steps.

My watch lasted an hour before Gwydre came to relieve me.

He took the spear in hand and I went back to join the party, where I found about twenty men all trying to lift the solid oaken Pendragon's High-chair into the air and carry it out of the hall.

I went to join the uproar, and Arthur told me, “Uthyr said I could keep it, take it with me to Caer Cadwy. It’s his gift to me, only now they have to get it out of here and onto a cart outside. Stand back and watch the fun.” He crossed his arms and moved aside, smiling to himself, watching his men take control.

And I thought it would be an easy enough thing to do, for a hundred and fifty warriors to lift one chair, even heavy as it was, and carry it out of the main doors and down the steps and pack it on a cart.

No way in the world could they do it without causing a riot.

Uthyr looked outraged by their ridiculous efforts to lift the chair and carry it up over their heads, passing it from man to man towards the door, and Arthur stood back and laughed and laughed as the chair went out of the door and everyone shouted and we followed, watching as it went down the steps, up overhead as someone slipped on the bottom step and the chair came crashing down on another’s head.

Arthur said to me, “Why don’t they just carry it two men each side?” and laughed again. “They just want to make a big show,” I told him, laughing as the men fought together for the honour of finding a cart big enough to carry it.

“Shall I make it even more fun?” Arthur said. “I could go and sit on it while they do the carrying.”

“Go on, do it!” I thought this a flaming good idea and laughed and went back to get some ale before that too disappeared somewhere on the back of a cart. I drank and turned and saw Arthur suddenly clasped in his father’s arms, Uthyr holding him tight, looking distressed that his son was leaving and Arthur incapable of holding him back; he stood very still and allowed the man to hold him, still too deeply scarred to show Uthyr open affection. When the embrace ended, Uthyr went to touch Arthur’s face but he flinched away and bowed to his father before coming over to join me now. He looked pale and he was not laughing any more.

He said, “Do me a favour, go and tell the men the evening is over. Make sure they load that chair without breaking it, then get them to sleep.”

I saluted and turned to go and give his orders. I cleared the fort of everyone, because deep inside I was tense still about assassins. That Selgovae killer was still in my head. That man had got into the hall

unchecked, and it seemed to me only by sheer luck that he so stupidly gave himself away.

By late after midnight I had the grounds and hall down to only the inner Clan. Uthyr and Dlair, and a few close warriors of theirs. After this was done, I got Arna into bed and she ploughed me like a wild-woman, for she loved everything about me and I thought she was going to devour me, and when she was finally sated, she let me sleep…

Dawn a new day.

When I opened my eyes I found Arthur up and fully dressed as if for battle, full battle-gear, and Arna lying next to me and watching him with her eyes big and wide, gazing at him, enthralled. I nudged her and she turned to me and tried to pretend she had not been lying there, staring at him. I jumped out of bed and started dressing; we were leaving, and outside, we heard the cry of horses being brought into the grounds, as the plan was to ride out after breakfast and pick up the mounted troops as we took to the south road, going back the way we came.

"They will be calling for me in a moment," Arthur said as he picked up his shield. "They took the banner down last night and packed it with the chair."

"You know, I think Uthyr is really cut about you going," I said. "To him, you two have only just begun to heal and now you have to leave. It's not really a good thing for either of you."

"Nothing is going to stop me from leaving. You better get your girl up. Arna, are you still pretending to be asleep? I saw you watching me get dressed; I would show it to you, if you are that keen to see it. Arna?"

He leant over her and gave her a shove; she turned over and looked at him before glancing at me.

She complained at us, "Will you please let me get up and dress? I am naked under here you know."

"We don't mind," Arthur said. "When a girl is naked, it shows off all her most attractive features. I'll show you mine if you show me yours." He winked at her.

I glared at him, and Arna turned red.

I picked up my gear and we walked out together, both of us staring at Arna and daring her to get out of bed, naked and fresh before us.

“You have to lighten your dark heart, Fox,” Arthur told me as we went down to the hall. “Don’t be so bloody suspicious, I swear I didn’t take it out in front of her, but the truth is, she saw it anyway.” He laughed and I followed him out to breakfast.

One watch later we were ready to leave, at last.

Outside the fort and waiting in the bright sunlight was the Clan Bear, surrounded by mounted troops. They were waiting for us. But we stood at the main door of the hall, Uthyr and Deirdre together, saying farewell. Arthur stood before his father and they looked at each other in some strange way, regard, even sorrow.

Uthyr took off a ring he wore and gave it to Arthur, saying, “I want you to have this ring. Look at it.”

A wide heavy gold band, carved with horses all the way around, beaded on the outer edges with raised silver links, truly beautiful. When Arthur took it, he bowed to Uthyr, and found that the ring perfectly fitted his right index finger. He looked at it, then clenched his hand into a fist, lowered his hand and stepped back.

“Let me look at you before you go,” Uthyr said.

What he saw was a son taller than himself, the sun-ray headband around his forehead holding back raven black hair. The gold torc at his neck. He wore the mail-shirt and on his wrists were two silver gauntlets that came from King Garwy Hir of the Selgovae. On his back he carried the heavy Roman bear shield, and at his side, the Armorican sword.

“You could fight a war right now,” Uthyr told him, smiling. “But please, will you come back soon? I want you to come to my wedding. I’m going to marry my lady, Deirdre, in September. Will you come? And Bedwyr too?”

Arthur glanced then at Deirdre and she dropped her gaze.

He said, “It’s a long way to ride from Cadwy to here, we are on opposite ends of the country. A long way. And I might be at war. I don’t know if it’s possible.”

“Try. Please try. It would mean so much to me. I will send a rider with the date, not set yet. Please, Arthur, come.” Uthyr saluted him.

Pain crossed Arthur’s face and I saw him hesitate.

But all he did was say, “I’ll try.”

He turned aside then and marched out of the hall, down the steps to our waiting horses. And just as Arthur mounted, a great horn blast echoed out across the land and we were moving, riding down to the gates where Medraut was waiting to escort us south on the homeward road; the Snake was not coming with us.

Arthur wanted him to go north with Uthyr to track Cynan Aurelius and to find Princess Indec and bring her back from the Caw Clan, to steal another man's wife and bring her back with him to Caer Cadwy when the time came. It was a mad idea, but this was Arthur; he had never forgotten his Princess Indec and so, he began lusting to have her back again.

Madness.

A huge cheer came from our troops and the gathered villagers as we came out of the gates, hundreds of people to see us go, and we went through the crowds and up came the Dragon banner flying in the wind, horses hooves thundering behind us, the cheering crowd and women rushing out, some were weeping, others reaching up their hands for us to take as we passed. The reins of my horse were back in my right hand, and as always when I rode with my brother at my side, our warriors behind us, the feeling was joyous.

To feel this way was worth all the pain of war and of love.

We were champions and everyone in the land knew our names, who we were and what we had done. And above all, what we would do in the future, because already we were marked to be the Defenders of Britain. All the land knew this, and we could ride free as the wind, Lords of the Road, the Masters of War, the Heroes of Arthur of the Britons.

This was me. And I felt this feeling pounding in my blood as I took the south road away from Luguvalos, the scene of one of our greatest victories. Only once did Arthur look back towards the fort, and there stood his father, a lost figure, left behind. But when he looked forward again, I saw his mysterious smile touching his lips. He bowed his head as people began calling his name as he rode by them.

Unmistakable in the sunlight, Arthur opened the road before him like a knife cutting flesh, and I loved him ever deeper because he had given me this. All before me, I could not even hope to dream of such things without Arthur's power to form the way ahead. And I kept close at his side, and

when I heard my own name being called I laughed and reached out to touch those who reached out for me.

"The Fox!" they called. "Arthur's champion!"

Hearing them, Arthur looked over at me and we just laughed, laughed and rode on down to where stood the rest of our troop, all mounted and waiting on the side of the road, ready to join the train south. Far to the rear came the carts, and the wains carrying the girls with their ponies trotting behind. Sad for us, as our Arial had decided to stay behind to carry on working with those still wounded from our last battle.

When we broke free of the lands around the fort, heading for the open road, Arthur and I stopped to say farewell to Medraut. Both cousins were off their horses at once, holding each other as if they would never see each other again.

Medraut looked sour, pleading with Arthur, "Don't leave me alone in the north, you Silurian bastard, I go mad without you."

"I'm not going to forget you. You are working for me, you know. Let Uthyr find Aurelius if you want, and then you will be mine forever. You are my blood. Remember that."

They fell on each other again, Medraut close to tears—so strange to see one such as him near to tears.

Medraut told him, "Uthyr invited you to his stupid wedding, didn't he? So come for me if I'm not back by then. Come and get me."

"I want you back well before September, two months, no more, then come to Cadwy."

One last hug and Arthur moved back to his horse, mounted as the Snake ran over to me, saying, "Look after him. You fight like a hero, so look after him."

I nodded, surprised that Medraut had said this to me–you fight like a hero–and then we were heeling away, leaving him to bear his madness alone.

44: A NEW HOME

ON the last few leagues towards Caer Cadwy, I felt dark, for I kept thinking about Arna. I began to think I had made a great mistake in bringing her with me. Deep inside, I knew I did not really want her and I thought strange things. I did not want her, did not need her, wondered how to deal

with her without destroying her. Maybe Arthur would take her off my hands. I had often caught her gazing at him with rapt adoration, so maybe he would take her from me.

I looked over at him now as he rode at my side. The night before, he had been invited into Aquae Sulis by the chief magistrate, Adrian Marcellus, to dine, for the man wanted to meet our new Supreme Commander, the one who would be living and ruling the army almost on his doorstep. Arthur alone had been invited to supper in Adrian's villa.

So I said to him now, "Did you get well fed at the magistrate's house last night?"

"Fed me like I had never seen food before in my life. They think soldiers don't get enough to eat, and they are right. But they tried to make me drink. I wouldn't." He now did an act of the old magistrate; "Drink it boy! Comes from the southern lands and is bloody good for you! If you want to carry on fighting and winning, then drink my ale! It'll make your balls grow even bigger!"

"Like Jupiter's balls?" I laughed. "I would like to see you drunk. That would be a sight. You have never been drunk, have you? One horn of ale and you are done for the night. Bloody unnatural, you are."

We rode on and he said, "But you are not happy, are you? What's wrong?"

"Nothing. But I just feel now I did the wrong thing in bringing Arna with me. I've made a mistake."

On in the sunshine, and Arthur had no answer for me. In the end though I did not ask him to deal with Arna for me, it was a foolish idea. I would have to deal with her myself as I knew that I would all along. I turned back and saw the train of warriors following our lead, making sure they kept smart in their columns. With us was the standard core of one hundred and fifty equites; the rest being stationed in other posts.

The area we rode into now was rich with farms and old Roman villas, a beautiful land, and hot. All I wanted was to get up to Cadwy and get out of the burning sun. So we rode on in the quiet of the day, sometimes meeting farmers and villagers who came on their ponies to watch us pass by, hailing us with waves and cheers.

The Dumnonians, and to them, we were their most powerful line of defence against Saxon incursions, and when we lifted the Red Dragon

standard high over Arthur's head, the people moved in closer and the cheers rose higher. Now in the early afternoon we sighted the immense and staggering beauty of Caer Cadwy towering over the land. When we saw it, Arthur halted the ride a moment and we stopped, and sat on our horses and stared at it, enthralled, speechless, with Cai giving out a huge deep moan, "Look! Sweet Mithras, what a sight!"

Epona began to shy and Arthur allowed her to give out her tension before reining her in, as if she sensed his own feelings of amazement.

None of us had any real idea of the immensity of our new home. We had never seen anything like it before in our lives, towering over the plain and the lower hills where everything around seemed to live in its shadow. The winding road up to the south-western gate was protected by battlements and gate-towers, a solid gate, all of it surrounded by massive ramparts and ditches and high solid stone and timber walls.

Nothing in the entire world could assault this place.

And I said, "I don't think we need worry too much about being attacked up there. It must be impenetrable."

"Which is why we are going to take it and keep it. It is a fortress, not a fort," Arthur replied. He lifted his hand and ordered the troop on, and as we came, all our banners lifted and the trumpeteer blew a great blast on our war-horn, warning of our arrival.

And what we found when we rode up and through the double gate was a hilltop crowded with people; men and women of the Dumnonians, Durotriges and Cornovii, even the Dubonni, all joining together to build this place for us. A welcoming party all waiting and calling, and the moment felt like the coming of princes and kings to their subjects who stood in adoration.

The road to the great hall was lined with people, and standing at the main door, we recognised the high chieftain of the Summer Country, King Gerren Llyngesoc, and with him were his two sisters, the Ladies Efa and Elin, his son, Prince Cador, grown into a handsome youth, all their family and dozens more to welcome Arthur to the site that would be his from this day on. With them stood a small delegation of lesser chieftains, those who kept the other hill-forts for leagues around Cadwy.

We rode up to them and dismounted, and were greeted by our allies as if we were long-lost sons returned. Lady Efa, dressed beautifully and with

her hair raised high on her head, kissed me and Arthur both and led us inside the hall, where she began at once to give us a tour, and we were not expecting what we found inside. Proud as a mother over brilliant sons, she stood back and watched as we filed in, staring around at what they had made, floors laid with skins, the walls hung with tapestries, a huge central hearth-fire. The upright posts hung with banners—banners from the Dumnonians, Cornovii and Durotriges.

The far right wall, right of the main door was bare, waiting for us to hang the Red Dragon banner. While hanging from the rafters was a huge circular lamp carrying an army of iron scones where would burn dozens of lamps overhead, a device that could be lowered for lighting by a rope and pulley that was bound to the wall near the door.

We all stood staring up at the thing, then up again into the high roof, and around the walls, to our left was built a long walled partition, stretching the width of the hall and ending in a solid door.

Long tables and benches for the warriors crowded the hall, all ready for us to sit and eat.

"See what is over there?" Efa said to Arthur. She pointed to the rear wall, where stood a huge dark table.

Arthur recognised it at once. "Ambrosius' old campaigning table!" and he went over to it, ran a hand over the top and gave a sigh. "His old table, how did you get it here?"

"It came from Viroconium. It came down on a wain with some men to carry it in. They said there are more things left for you behind in Viroconium, if you want them."

"I know," he said. "Lord Ambrosius left all his possessions there for me. I should send for them, or else they will be lost forever."

We stood still for a moment.

Efa moved back and looked at us, waiting maybe for one of us to praise her good work. But we were silent, all of it around us so new and different, and we could not place ourselves as a part of it so soon, even Arthur was quiet, like someone given a beautiful gift into his hands and made speechless because of it. Efa's eyes were wide and beautiful as she gave Arthur glances, for I knew what was going on in her head. How long would it be before she could get him between her legs again? I smiled at her and she lightened.

“Come, I will show you your private chambers,” she told us.

Efa then took us to where we were going to live.

We walked down to the closed single door in the partition wall. The door was set above ground level so we had to step through, and going through, there was another door inside the private chamber on our immediate left, then a short set of stairs leading up to a private upstairs chamber, high over the main hall.

We climbed the stairs; here in the upper chamber we found a wide bed lain with cured and furred animal skins, sheets and bolsters. The main wall of the room did not reach the ceiling, but finished over head-height and was lined with wooden bars to the upper joists. Lamp holders were set above the bed, while the rest of the room remained bare.

Efa explained, “When you get married, Arthur, this will be a much needed retreat for your wife,” and she laughed, delighted at his sour face.

“It’s perfect,” he answered, polite, reserved. But he gave me a look, ‘wife’? He turned away now, and marched out of the room, back down the stairs, leaving me and Efa looking at each other. She came and took my hand. “Welcome back, my love. I have long wished for your safety, home to Cadwy well and whole. You look so handsome, Bedwyr. Do you have a woman of your own?”

I knew now how Arthur felt, with all of this talk of women and wives. I did not want to tell of my girl problems, but said, “There is a girl,” then shrugged, gave her a kiss and moved back down the stairs with her following.

Arthur stood outside the hall with the troop, but Efa showed me through the second door at the bottom of the stairs; in here was a large room with three single pallets, a small table and a chair. There was also a tiny window, looking out over the grounds.

“You could use this room for yourself and your closest companions,” she told me. “The stables and kitchens are out the back, and more houses are going to be built for the ranking warriors this summer. There is nothing to worry about. Now, I have to go and organise for something to eat,” and she was gone, leaving me alone in a room that was to be mine, shared with two others, most likely Cai and Medraut when he came to Cadwy.

I walked outside and saw the whole area on the hilltop being staked out by warriors making their camps and pitching their tents. The supply

wains were still rolling in through the gate and I took a walk around the hall, studying it, taking in the astonishing work that had been done on the battlements that surrounded the entire hill top. Huge in size, and filled with men, horses, villagers, tribal chieftains and local women working everywhere I turned.

I wanted to climb the gate-tower and look out across the land, where I knew towards the east and south were the encroaching South Saxons, led by their king, Aelle, who was arrogantly calling himself bretwalda; such enemies who could not push into our land without us knowing about it, for the land was fortified almost in every direction we looked. Cadwy was perfect for central control of the many hill-forts and towns around us. Already, I could smell cooking from our camp-fires, it was growing late afternoon and when I went back to the main hall, I found Arthur introducing Essylt to Efa.

"Lady Essylt Fynwen is my cousin, my father's brother's daughter and Gododdin born and bred, sister to Lord Medraut ap Lot."

"Oh! Aye, I can see your resemblance to young sir Medraut," Efa said, delighted it seemed by Essylt's great beauty. "I cannot believe she is your cousin, Arthur!" she added, staring at him with doubt in her eyes.

"He is and I adore him," Essylt answered, standing up straight, as it looked as if she had taken Efa's words as an insult of some kind.

An awkward moment followed and Efa said to Essylt, "Then you must come and stay with me in my house, this is no place for a beautiful young girl such as yourself. Too many warriors here on the prowl!" and she laughed.

Arthur said, "Essylt will stay here with me, she's safer with me than not."

Of course Essylt flushed with delight and Efa curtsied before leading them inside. I turned away to go looking for Tegid, for something to eat when I saw Arna walking towards me with a bundle of her clothes in her arms. I stopped.

She came up to me and said, "You keep running away from me! Where will I lodge in this horrible place?"

And she looked around at the soldiers working around her, not pleased by what she saw.

“I’ll get you in with one of the women,” I told her. “But you have to understand this is a warriors’ camp; this place wasn’t made for luxury, but practical living.”

“It’s so primitive!” and she screwed up her face in dislike.

I did not want to argue with her, but felt she needed to understand. I said, “Later this summer, houses and barracks will be built around the hall. There’s also the village of Lindinis. I can arrange for you to go and stay with Lady Efa of the Dumnonians, her brother is the king of these people. Would you prefer to stay with Efa, or here?”

I started to walk away as I spoke and Arna turned and followed me, saying, “Will I sleep with you if I stay here?”

“No, it’s not proper. We are not married, are we? And I have to share with other men. But I don’t intend to share with them the rest of my life. Later, they will have their own lodgings here. It’s up to you where you stay.”

“Bedwyr!” she grabbed my arm and stopped me. “Why are you so mean to me? Are we not lovers? Don’t you want to be with me anymore?”

A gust of wind blew her hair around her face and her eyes narrowed at me.

“I’m a warrior,” I told her. “This is my life. You have to work with me, not the other way round. I cannot marry you, Arna, I told you that long ago. I cannot swear to keep you always, not here.”

I turned back then to find Tegid, and Arna turned towards the hall, looking for her friend, Essylt, and saying nothing more to me.

After sunset, when campfires burned across the hill top, we carried into the hall the Pendragon’s Chair that we had carted down from Luguvalos, this time without a lot of fuss, and placed it in a central position before the fire and told Arthur to sit down on it and see how it looked. He sat and tried to look important and everyone cheered.

Overhead the fantastic lamp was alight and blazing down on us. The Dragon banner was up on the wall above the campaign table, with Arthur’s sword laid in its scabbard on top, his bear-shield mounted beneath the banner, while outside and over the gate, one each side, flew two smaller Dragon banners.

We had already marked this place as our own. The hall was crowded, men and women spilling out onto the hill outside. The tables were laden

with food and drink, musicians played and sang, and we were all meeting and getting to know many of our new allies, their warriors and their chieftains. That night we took at least fifty new pledge-makers into our ranks, though if any of them wanted to join the Clan Bear they would first have to prove themselves worthy in battle. They would have to prove themselves trustworthy to me.

Later in the night when everyone had been ordered out to sleep, leaving only the girls talking to Efa and Elin by the rear door, I kept my eye on Arthur. He seemed deep in thought with the pressure on him as Supreme Commander, his responsibilities to run an army and keep our land safe. He was deep in discussion with Master Dlair, who sat at his side. Arthur listened to what Dlair had to say, sometimes answered, nodded, and I knew he had found someone he could talk to on a deeper level, that deep-thinking level Arthur kept hidden away. The old man fascinated him. Someone once told me that Dlair was sixty-four years old and no matter how hard I tried to see it, he did not show his great age. He was thin and fit and his face hardly lined, only his dark hair was streaked with grey to give away his long years of living.

After a while of watching them talk, I decided to go and sleep in Cai's tent, trying to avoid Arna, but she kept on looking at me, before allowing her gaze to wander back to where Arthur sat, again gazing at him in the way she did, perhaps to provoke me, perhaps it was genuine, I did not know or care. What was going on in her head confused me and I knew I had to deal with her sooner or later.

So I went marching over to where she sat and I pulled her up to her feet, pulled her out of the rear door where we stood outside in the dark.

I said to her, "What are you trying to do, Arna? Why do you keep staring at Arthur like you do? Are you after him now? Who do you want; him, or me?"

"All I am trying to do is get you to notice me. And you know? The best way to get to you is through Arthur, your Supreme Commander. I know you do not love me, but can you try, just try?" She took my hand, moved in against me, put her arms around me.

I found it hard to answer to her warmth, her love.

"Tell me what you are plotting," I said.

"Just to be forever at your side."

“Why do you keep staring at Arthur? What’s going on in your head?”

She did not answer at first, but began struggling not to cry, and she answered in sobs, “I want him to…to protect me, I want him to notice me, because he will protect me, you won’t, you want me gone.”

Tears rolled down her face and she fell against my chest, crying against me, her arms tight around my waist, holding onto me as if she was about to fall, crying, crying. She sensed now the truth of me.

She said, “Arthur won’t send me away…he will stop you from sending me away, but he has to notice me. Bedwyr, you cannot…I am pregnant.”

My guts sank, everything in me sank and I looked into her eyes.

I saw and understood her terror, a girl of sixteen years, sent away from what she loved, away back north to nothing. “Pregnant?” I pulled her against me, stroking her hair. “I will not send you away. I promise. But you have to know something. You have to know the full truth. I do not love you, I won’t ever love you, but I will not send you away.”

When she heard what I had to say, she stiffened and pulled out of my arms, stood back and stared at me, hard and cold. She dragged the tears off her face and turned and went back into the hall, saying nothing more. My night was over and I walked around the rear of the hall and over the field to where Cai was camped. I went inside his tent, found a spare cot and threw myself down, listening to the other warriors around me snoring. I hardly even understood that I had just got my first girl pregnant…

45: THE FOX’s GIRL TROUBLES

I woke before the horn call to rise, before dawn.

There was a familiar grinding pain in my left shoulder and it woke me. I sat up, stood up, went to shrug my shoulder and an odd cracking sound came from where I had taken the stab wound. It hurt, so I took up my sword and went outside and stood at the tent door and began exercising my left arm with my sword as a weight.

All around me a fog hung low over the hilltop; a few other men were up and walking around, though everyone else was still asleep. I tried to throw the sword from side to side. I could only go so far before the pain ripped my shoulder like the Pictish knife all over again, but I kept on,

lopping the blade in circles and trying to open my shoulder. To my left a low light came on in the hall, shone out through the rear open door.

This was when I saw Arthur come out and he started walking over to me, came right up to me and pulled on my arm, saying, “Come with me. We can get some breakfast straight from the hot-plate in the kitchen.”

I followed him across the field towards where the kitchen stood to the rear of that hall. We went inside together and found a few women lighting a fire in a huge old stone furn.

Straight away we knelt to help them build the fire, and as we did, a giant of an old drabish woman appeared in the doorway and bellowed at us, “What in the devil’s name are you two doing in here? Are you moon-blasted? Get out at once!”

Both of us stood up at a jump, turned to face the woman, huge and built like a bull, who stood glaring at us with hands on her hips, monstrous breasts down to her waist.

She stared at us, saying, “No boys are allowed in my kitchen, you come in here only to steal my food! Get out!”

I glanced at Arthur and broke out laughing at the look on his face.

The old drab saw me laughing and screamed at me, “Take that smirk off your face! Now, what are you two doing in here?”

“Getting breakfast,” Arthur said. “I’m hungry.”

“Oh, hungry are you? And do you think those warriors out there are hungry?”

“Ravenous. I’ve come to help you start the fire.”

The woman advanced on him. “Who gave you the right to come and start fires? This is my domain.”

All the time I tried not to laugh, for it was killing me and Arthur stood where he was and gave her a smile.

He said, “Before this time tomorrow—”

“What!”

“Before this time tomorrow, I want the fire started and breakfast ready, before this time tomorrow.”

Sweet Jupiter’s stones, I thought she was going to slap him down.

Her face went red and she came even closer, breathing on him, “Before this time tomorrow you want your breakfast, do you? Would you like it served in bed with handmaidens at your beck and call?”

“Yes, please, my lady. But early, earlier than now. I’m leading the warriors out tomorrow. We are going hunting for Saxons. Early breakfast. Before this time tomorrow.”

The woman stood thunderstruck, with me trying not to howl with laughter. Her face twitched and her lips curled into a snarl. “You are leading these warriors out? And you want a nice early breakfast.”

“Have you ever toasted bread, and you put honey on it, have you ever made that? I want that.”

Her face went even redder and I knew she wanted to slap him, but there was a hesitation in her now.

I was just about to add my piece, porridge with honey dribbled on top, when she said, looking Arthur up and down, “Are you the Silurian?”

“No, he is,” Arthur pointed at me. “I just do all the talking for him, he’s a deaf-mute.”

“Balls, I am,” I said. “See? I’m talking now; you can hear me can’t you?”

The old drab stared at me, then back at Arthur. “Oh, no, you do not fool me, young sir. He is no Silurian.”

And she gave me another flushed stare.

I held her look till she turned back to Arthur, and damn her sweaty bones, she poked him in the chest and said, “You are the Silurian, you have eyes black as coal—will you hunt Saxons for me?”

“Why? Do you cook them too?”

She did not answer.

He said, “Only if you give me lots of toasted bread and honey for breakfast, early tomorrow, my lady.”

“As you say, I will, now get out.”

She turned and pushed him towards the door, threw me out with him, and once outside, I laughed, “Did you see her face? She loved you! None of the workers here know who you are.”

“I thought I handled her well,” Arthur told me as we walked back to the hall. “You know what else? We have to get that Roman bath-tub off Medraut and get it sent down here. I don’t think any of them take a bath; she smelt like the bottom of an old frying-pan.”

So our first full day at Caer Cadwy began with us calling our new cook, Frying-pan. Where later in the morning, she fed us an amazing

breakfast she carried in herself on a huge iron platter, chopped pork, cooked beautifully, and when she saw Arthur sitting in the Pendragon's Chair she tripped over her own feet in surprise.

The hall was full and everyone laughed at her.

After breakfast, we went to gather the warriors and Arthur gave them orders for the following morn; reconnaissance of the land, taking patrol of the Saxon borders, using our new Dumnonian recruits as guides.

We spent the rest of the day exploring the hilltop, the battlements and the land to the east, where the horizon was hidden by high hills through which was a valley-pass.

A group of us inner Clan climbed the stairs up to the walkway that ran the entire length of the battlement wall, from up here, high over the land, we could see in every direction unhindered.

We spread out, looking towards the east. With us were Medraut's two twin shield-men, Dafin and Irfan ap Clare, who not only looked exactly alike, but also had the very same gestures, and I watched them, the way they studied Arthur as he walked up and down behind us.

They turned their heads at the same moment and Arthur stopped before them, asked them, "Over those hills, should I attack?"

They both answered at the same moment, two men, one voice, "Yes, Commander."

Arthur paced back along our line, said as he came, "Who else thinks I should attack?"

"I do," Cai turned. He looked hard, even annoyed that Arthur was even bothering to ask such a thing. "We should attack; let them know we are here."

"You want Saxon blood," Arthur told him, walking up to Cai and standing in his face. "You think they don't know I'm here? I think they are going to hope I don't notice them."

He smiled; walked back along the line again, and when he came towards me, I could see the plots and plans working inside him, though he did not say now what he was thinking. "What is your reason, Bear?" Cai called after him. "Or should I say, what are you plotting?" When Arthur failed to answer, Cai went on, "Dawn raids and crop burning like they do to us! They should be stopped for that alone. You should attack and attack soon!"

All of the others nodded agreement, and we turned to staring out at the distant eastern hills, where far beyond began the lands of the South Saxons. Arthur said, “When we ride out of here tomorrow, I don’t plan on attacking anyone.”

Cai made a groaning noise.

I laughed to myself, watched as Arthur stared towards the south where lifted more distant hills; far out that way was another hill-fort. Northwest was a conical hill, the Tor it was called, with its tiny chapel of the Jesus-men somewhere hidden across the lake that surrounded its feet. Yet no matter which way we looked, we were the King Hill.

“Get ready for tomorrow,” our Commander ordered us. “Pack provisions and make sure your swords are sharp.” He turned then and went walking back towards the stairs, leaving us standing on the battlement wall, looking at each other…

After supper that night, Arthur went again into deep war-talk with Master Dlair. Essylt sat close to him, stitching some embroidery. With her was Arna, also stitching. I stood at the main door, watching the warriors heading for their tents, early sleep, early rise. No one else was around save a few women from the village to serve ale or food.

It was late and I closed the main door, told the serving women they could go home, closed the rear door after they left.

I went over to Arna, told her, “Come with me,” and I offered her my hand. She put down her stitching and took my hand, smiling at me. I led her through the partition door into the lower room where there were two pallets. I pushed them together to make one.

The night was not very warm, even though it was late June, and we got close in together, stripped body to body and I grabbed her closer still and kissed her. With her mouth on mine, I felt nothing, no passion, and I knew I was doing her wrong, but Arna seemed so afraid of everything around her that I felt sorry for her; sorry I had brought her with me.

And she started crying almost at once, stroking my face and kissing my lips, her hot body against mine. I could not help but grow hard, so hard I pushed her beneath me and she opened, wrapped her legs around my hips. She gasped with every thrust and dug her nails into my back. I kept on thrusting hard, almost in anger, and she cried out, pushed back against me where I felt between our legs a wet smear of something sticky. I pulled out

of her and looked down, my thighs, my prick, my lower stomach, all covered in blood. Even in the darkness, I knew it was blood.

Arna cried a little and I looked at her, misery on her face.

I said, "What's wrong, what is this?"

"It's blood," she told me. "My woman's flux; it's here now. I am not pregnant and you are free to send me home."

"I won't send you home. But I cannot do this anymore with you."

She slumped beneath me, sighing, "It started now, only just now. I love you…do not send me away. I love you."

"I told you, I won't send you away!"

I looked at her small slim body in the darkness, her white skin, her own thighs smeared with light patches of blood, her high breasts and nipples, her long red hair in waves around her shoulders. I knew she had a beauty of her own, and I told her, "I know you love me, I'm sorry this has happened…but you have to let me go."

She slumped even more, like someone drained of life. I knew then I would not sleep with her ever again. I would not risk it with her again and it felt wrong, like I had slapped her down for no reason other than she was a girl who loved me and I could not love her back. No matter what I did, she would get hurt. I would not sleep with her again.

46: SHOOTING SAXON PIGS

THE next day, and for the first time ever in our history, we rode out the gates of Caer Cadwy as the Clan Bear, down the road at a trot, banners flying, Arthur, myself, and Cai in the lead.

Though Arthur was now riding a different horse; he had left Epona behind, as she was still wither-wrung, and in season, and so he rode the big brown he had ridden home from the Pictish battle after its previous owner had been killed. And I was sure that our dead warrior would be proud to know his horse had gone to such a new master as Arthur. And Arthur had given the horse a new name, Big Brown. I laughed…

It was another fine summer morning and the land was dry, no rain for weeks now, and the road was dusty as our horses' hooves kicked up the dirt. Just behind us rode five Dumnonians and one Atrebate, who said he was from Calleva, capital city of the Atrebates.

All these new men had come in the day before to offer themselves as scouts and aides on our border patrols. I had not yet learned all their names, but one of them, the lone Atrebate, was huge, even taller than Uki Wolf-leg, though he was an even match for Cai Long-man, and I wondered, as we hit the main Fosse Way and turned south, how Uki was healing back in Luguvalos. We all missed him, just as Arthur was missing Medraut. He had told me this morning about how much he wanted Medraut back, that he was going to send for him regardless of what was happening in the North.

So we now headed for Lindinis, four leagues from Cadwy and nowhere near Saxons, yet a good place to pick up supplies. After this, the plan was to head for the next hill-fort, further south. As we were out scouting, we took only what we could carry on horseback or on our own bodies, no wains now to hold us down.

This was what we were trained for, mounted skirmishing, quick sudden attacks. We moved fast and I drew my sword as I rode, snapping it left and right over the head of my horse, getting back in practice, my left arm so long unused I had grown rusty in the art of fighting from horseback, and I was proving my doctors wrong. My arm could move again, though not far out from my shoulder, though enough I hoped to defend myself in battle.

Fully armoured all of us, we were ready for anything, and I rode on, still throwing my sword in arcs of attack, fending aside imaginary Saxons, defending my left leg, practising the upper cut to a man's throat or down against an undefended head. And the more I did this, the more I wanted to fight. I was ready to go into battle now, but around us there was nothing save a long narrow road, dusty under the morning summer sun.

Also for the first time ever, Arthur carried a Roman bow. For a while now he had been growing fascinated by firing arrows from horseback, and I think he planned to try it out on this tour—if he ever decided he was going to attack anyone. After a while of a firm trotting, we slowed to walk the rest of the way and the morning grew hot. A small settlement of Dumnonians kept the old Roman fort at Lindinis, and the land around was rich with Roman villas and farms; one of those villas belonged to King Gerren Llyngesoc. We knew that with Cadwy now occupied, the settlement would grow to supply us with all that we needed.

When we arrived, we were greeted as heroes even before we had fought any major battles in this area. Though the men hereabouts spoke of our battle against the Jute, Goodricke, when Arthur had taken the Armorican sword. And of course, they wanted to see this sword now. And I swear, when Arthur drew the blade, and held it before them, they all fell quiet to a man when they realised for a truth that the Silurian was here to live in their lands, and fight like they had heard he could fight.

They gave us everything we wanted without payment. So we were gone again, finding our way south, then turning east towards Venta Belgarum, riding free through villages and showing our strength, till a strange love affair seemed to spring out of the ground where we rode, our names on the wind that swept through the treetops above us, that cried down into the valleys, and people ran and ran alongside our horses, crying they had seen the foul Saxon, stinking and unwashed, burning their crops and running for the hills away into the east.

We rode all day that first day, and made camp as close to Venta Belgarum as we could go by sunset; we camped on a rise of land and did nothing to hide ourselves from any Saxon spy.

Our guides had led us to the last known Saxon attack site. And like Cai, I knew we could not go so far and not launch an attack against them sometime over the next few days. Our camp was high on a ridge, overlooking a shallow valley, with another ridge running on our left, leading down into South Saxon territory.

When we gathered around our fires for supper, Arthur said, “I wonder if Octha Hengist-son has come back down from the North yet? Are all these attacks down to Aelle alone?”

One of the new scouts answered, the giant Atrebate, “We hear Aelle is fighting to become bretwalda. It is him who raids into our territory, not Octha. Aelle must be stopped.”

Arthur stood up to face the guide and said, “When do you want it done?”

“Tomorrow, if you can manage it,” the man answered and he sounded serious.

“Not tomorrow, Gleis, but it will happen. When I’m ready,” Arthur told him.

“Aelle pushes us. You must push back.”

Arthur glared at him, “I must push back? You Atrebates need someone else to fight for you, do you? Or do you want me to do it all for you?”

“We don’t need no stinking Silurian to do it.”

“Then why are you asking me? You either want me to fight for you or you don’t. What’s it to be, Gleis? A stinking Silurian, or you?”

This one named Gleis, his insults towards our leader began rousing the Clan, and we moved closer to him. He felt our threat and did not answer back. Arthur turned away and sat down before the fire.

Val asked him, “Commander, what are you planning on doing?”

Arthur gave his enigmatic smile.

All of the Clan gathered closer around the fire, fifty inner warriors, and Arthur stood up again to tell them, “I’m going to test their boundaries. There has to be a point in their leaders’ minds that stops them, a point they will not cross. It’s a barrier of mind, not territory. This is what I want to test.”

I watched the men’s faces and no one looked as if they knew what Arthur was talking about, though they nodded, while others gave each other looks. I stared at the one named Gleis, studied him hard as Arthur reassured us, “Do not worry, brothers, I will not lead you wrong. But you must stand firm with me, give me your trust! I will not lead you wrong.”

To a man they saluted him and he dismissed them to their own fires to eat. There ran a small river on our right and the horses were led to drink, ready to picket for the night; guards were posted and the scouts sent forward and to the rear. And after I had stuffed some food into my face, and swallowed some ale mixed with water from my water-bottle, I took my spear and began patrolling the outer eastern edge of our camp.

I had a habit of putting myself on guard whenever I felt uneasy; it was in my nature to watch, too untrusting to think others could do it better than me. For a while I stood with Gwydre and we watched the horizon together, the twilight sky, the sun setting behind us through the trees. Gwydre looked at me, trying maybe to gather courage to ask me questions.

“What?” I said.

“You are his lieutenant, what did he mean about barriers of mind?”

“Do not worry Gwydre, Arthur is here to baffle us, and if he can baffle us, just think of what he does to our enemies. He has a hidden mind

and it's probably for the best, that way he doesn't show what he's going to do before he does it, and this stops opponents forestalling him. Trust what he said; he will not lead us wrong."

From behind we heard someone chopping wood and we turned to see a group of warriors building a bonfire in a hollow out beyond the trees. Arthur was there with them, helping the men stack the wood.

"Jupiter's balls!" I swore. "He's building a bonfire; he's going to signal to the Saxons we are here. Mad. He's mad, Gwydre," and I laughed at his horrified face.

A few hours later, after I tired of patrolling up and down, I went walking down into the brightly lit hollow towards the still-raging bonfire. All down the length of the hollow, men were sleeping in their units or standing around the fire. I came towards where I had picketed my horse, stabbed my spear into the ground, waited for a while for Arthur to join me, and when he came and rolled himself up tight in his blankets, I did the same. We slept on the ground under our horses' hooves…

On we went the next morning.

We took the Old Trackway that led us deeper into Saxon territory; we kept heading east into the rising sun and on again, shields up and banners flying. Riding this way, the power hit me again, and anyone seeing us coming fled into their fields or shut themselves into their huts.

One hundred and fifty thundering warriors, fully armed and on horseback, we could ride over anything in our path and there was nothing uncertain now in the way Arthur led us. Never a sign of being unsure of himself, never a hint of indecision, the Red Dragon high overhead so we would follow him down into the very cracks of the earth and fight the Romani Christian's Satan for them. So we rode on beyond Saxon field-crops, and when the sun was up higher, we came to a point where we could not ride ahead any further.

For there before us was a Saxon settlement, a palisaded village, not very large and with its main gate wide open. Before it, Arthur halted the ride and broke us into our fighting units, five units of thirty riders each, each headed by a unit captain, the fifth headed by Cai, our rear-guard. Our own central unit walked forward in our ranks and stopped within calling distance of the Saxon village.

To the north, a wide track ran past a crop-field, and coming along the track from around the side of the village was a young Saxon woman leading some oxen pulling a cart, and when she saw us ranged in our war-host outside her village gate, she screamed like a stuck pig, dropped the lead on the oxen and ran through the gate and was gone.

Arthur called me and Valarius forward with him and we rode alone closer to the gate, though not too close as to make ourselves targets for spears or anything else they wanted to hurl at us.

Arthur said, “Val, call out to them. Tell them to send their ealdormen out to talk to Arthur of the Britons. That’s me.”

Val cried as loud as he could in Saxon…then…nothing.

All remained quiet inside the palisade, though we could see some men running around and shutting down the door of the largest long-house. We waited in the growing sun and no one sent out a reply.

“Call again.”

Val gave another call, louder this time, waited a moment before saying, “They won’t come out. They think we have come to kill them wholesale.”

Arthur told him, “Order them to keep out of British territory, tell them to keep their bloody leaders back beyond the boundaries I will set for them. Tell their ealdormen to send to Aelle of the South Saxons that I am his Overlord and I have manned the lands to his west. See how they like that.”

The sun bore down and Val moved closer, crying aloud what Arthur had told him to say, though all stayed quiet beyond. Their gate was still open, no one seemed to have the courage to come out and close it in our faces. If there were Saxons outside the village, they must be hiding, as we saw no one or nothing moving.

We sat still on horseback, watching through the gate, seeing only their pigs rooting around. These Saxon intruders seemed more than happy to set up home on our land, all without daring to come out and talk to us about it. We waited for longer again, sitting, knowing they wouldn’t come out.

“How long are we going to sit here, Commander?” Val turned and asked.

“Just a little longer,” Arthur told him. “I want to see if they’ve got big enough balls to come out and face me.”

And so we sat, our horses dropping their arses, then their heads as horseflies attacked our faces. The sun rose higher and it got hotter and hotter and I started to sweat like a pig from under my helmet. A bloody great horsefly landed on my arm and I slapped at it and missed. It started flying around our heads, and Arthur just sat unmoving, staring at the long-house, as behind us our units started to roast in their armour.

I said, "If the Saxons cannot hear or see us, they'll smell us in a moment. I'm swimming in sweat."

"Go back closer to the trees, Fox, in the shade."

"I'll stay."

Longer and longer we sat, and I thought I was going to die on horseback from heatstroke from the boiling sun bearing down on me. Just then some pigs came wandering out of the gate, as there was no one home to keep an eye on them. This was when Arthur lost patience and I witnessed a rare event. Him losing his temper.

Quick as a whip he snatched at an arrow from the quiver on his back, fixed it to the bow and said, "…ride all this bloody way and they won't even come out and face me!" and he let the arrow fly at a pig, and good luck to him, it went straight through the animal's body and knocked it off its legs; it squealed for a moment before shuddering still.

Arthur swore at us, "Did you see that? I got it in one!" He then let fly another arrow, this time right at the long-house itself. I saw it sail over the palisade wall and thump into the top gable of the long-house roof. All the men laughed.

Arthur turned and called, "Cai Long-man! Set fire to their field! And someone go and pick up that bloody pig!"

I started to laugh, because I had never seen Arthur so angry and I turned with him, still laughing. So it was me who went to pick up the dead pig. I even got off my horse right by the palisade wall and slung the pig over my saddle. I mounted and rode up the track after our unit, watching as Cai and his men set about burning down their stinking field of waving barley. Hard into my horse's sides I heeled, took off to join the troop as we headed further out into the north, turning to watch as behind us the field burned like a fire-storm.

Then we kept on riding and burning down Saxon fields wherever we went, firing crops and turning again into the east, ever closer to Aelle's

encampments, and though we did not attack any settlements, we fired as many fields as we could find, again and again till the horizon behind us was all aflame. We passed back again into British territory, where we found a place to make camp for the night, all of us fired up like the fields behind. And I had carried that bloody pig all day and I stank so high everyone fell away from me when I came and dropped the thing down before the first camp-fire.

"Oh goddess, the stink! Someone kill him!" Irfan cried at me.

"Drown him in the river!" his twin answered and I stood back and told them to breathe deep as I hugged Irfan to me and made him suffer my stink even more. I loved it.

"Beg me not to drop my breeches," I told them. "Then you will really suffer!"

Tegid came out laughing at me to gut and skin the pig for roasting, though it was not anywhere near big enough to feed us all. And as Arthur was the one who had killed it and he was our leader, he gave it over to Cai's men, the ones who had done the most work all day burning fields.

So the night went on, with the pig roasting and stars breaking out on the horizon as the sunset burned the skies through the smoke of our fires. We camped on a high plain with hills around us to the east and north, so beautiful in the early summer evening, green and fresh our earth and I fell in love with the lands that had birthed us, our lands from time beyond time, hardly a touch of Rome left in us now. For the spirit of our land was Arthur, and as I approached him now, he said, "Stand back from me, pig-boy, your stench is keeping the horseflies away."

"You are the one who killed it, so I hold you responsible for my smell. And not only that, but you lost your temper today, Commander."

"You wouldn't be getting a fat haunch of pig if I hadn't," and it was true, because when the animal was roasted fine and crackling, Cai cut me a slab from the hind leg because I was the one who had carried it all day. It was the best tasting pig I had ever had and I told Arthur to go back the next day and kill Saxons just for their pigs.

"Or we can take the pigs hostage," he said.

Cai and his men came over, Cai saying, "Thank you, Bear, for giving me action today! I would have thumped you blue if you hadn't. And tomorrow, the same?"

“We are going east again, aye, maybe take the Trackway through to Londinium. We are going to Calleva Atrebatum first and camp there for a while, see if any Saxons take our bait. I also want to try and woo the Atrebates to my side, that one, Gleis, doesn’t like me at all,” and he laughed. “At least I don’t stink as bad as Fox does now.”

Cai slapped his hand down on Arthur’s shoulder, saying, “Finally, you say something clever! More Saxon pig?” And he shoved some pork into Arthur’s hands.

And then, for our entertainment, our lone Dal Riadan, Royri Angen, stepped before the fire and gave us a song in his fine and powerful voice. And what I heard, I could not believe; a voice wild, untamed. The sound of him went down the glade and up into the hills, so strong and beautiful all the world must have heard him, even home to his own lands.

Every man of us roared and cheered and he sang a song in words I couldn’t understand, but what in all the world did that matter? His words gave me goose-flesh for the mystic sound of them.

When the night ended with the horn call to retire, we broke for our horses and again unpacked our blankets, myself with the bearskin, where I slept on the cold ground under the stars, horses hooves at our heads and Arthur beside me…

47: MEETING MASTER RHODRI

THE following dawn we rode straight for Calleva Atrebatum; we were there by late morning, taking over the town and filling the townspeople with excitement. We rode down the main street and people came running from every direction.

And Arthur called to one of them, “Where is the magistrate’s house?”

“Just past the forum, sir! Keep on this way!” a woman called back. So we made for the square and dismounted, crowding the roads with our men and horses. Even though Calleva was a large town, we still managed to fill it and Arthur gave orders to the unit captains to free their men to find food, rest, drink, take care of their horses, and on like a free-day for the army to replenish itself. We were safe in Calleva and we roped our horses to the barriers that surrounded the main city square.

I said to Arthur, “I could do with a bath.”

"You do; go and see if you can find the bath-house and a place to billet. I'll go and see the magistrate, oh, and take Val and the twins with you." But even as he said this, we looked around and saw a tall fair man, striding fast towards us, a very good-looking man.

He came up to us and demanded, "Who are you warriors and what do you want with my town? I am the Magistrate here."

Our Clan gathered around us and Val told the man, "We are the Clan Bear and this is Arthur the Supreme Commander of Armies in Britain, the Silurian, heir of Lord Ambrosius Aurelianus, come to take possession of Caer Cadwy in the west. Surely you know about this, sir?"

The magistrate judged us with deep suspicion. "I have heard of such a one. Lord Ambrosius' chosen heir, aye. Silurian, you are him?"

"I am," Arthur answered. "I need to talk to you, sir. Our land is changing and I bring this change. There's a new force now in the land and you need to know the changes I'm going to enforce. Can we talk in private?"

The man looked horrified. "Changes? What? Do you mean here in Calleva?" and he pointed at the ground, the land under his feet that he believed was his alone entirely.

Arthur told him, "Changes not just in Calleva, but across all British lands, from one end to the other. From north to south, east to west."

"And you are the one who fought that great battle in the North we heard about? Against the Painted People? Are you him?"

"I just told you, sir, I am. I need to talk to you in private, Master. Can we go now?"

"Yes, yes, I am sorry. Your arrival here is sudden and unannounced. You took me off-guard. Please, Silurian, follow me."

Arthur looked at me, for I was now in charge of our unit, and he walked away, following the magistrate down a lane that ran past the forum, before turning into a house on the left. I watched them go before gathering those men who wanted to find the bath-house before doing anything else. We took a tour of the town: myself, Val, the threatening Atrebate, Gleis, and the twins, Dafin and Irfan. The place was full of tall houses and shops working in the summer heat, the forum shops were all open. It seemed a prosperous place, as Calleva was one of the capital towns of the Atrebates, very prosperous people.

As we went on our tour, some boys came up to us and asked if they could show us around. I told them what we wanted and they said the old bath-house was no longer used. So we ended up in a large house with a room that held a huge corn-dying furn in one corner and a giant hotplate used for heating water on top.

One of the boys said, “You can get a bath here, sir. I’ll go and tell the girl to bring the water,” and he ran off somewhere through a door beyond. We all stood in a group, waiting.

There were some old wooden chairs by one wall and I sat down and stretched my legs out and sighed. I was feeling tired and my left inner thigh had a sore spot from where it rubbed on my saddle. I hoped not to get saddle-rot, and a bath would ease the pain of it, but no one seemed to be coming in with anything that even looked like hot water, or even a bath-tub.

“Well, this is bad service,” Gleis said, stomping up and down. “I don’t think there is anyone alive around here.”

Irfan turned and started shoving the wood piled on the floor in through the furn’s open door. “We will have to do it ourselves,” he said, and then stood back, while his twin leant against him for a rest. “Get off me you shit-eater,” he cursed.

Val stood aside, looking concerned at the lack of attention being paid us. Gleis came and stood at my side and stared at me, then kicked my chair.

“Hoi, lieutenant,” he snarled at me.

“What?”

He menaced me, his long dark hair around his shoulders, deep-set dark eyes staring at me when he said, “Your Silurian; is he really capable of doing all that he says? I heard him bragging his mouth off about changing all of Britain. Big fat claims from a bloody arrogant cock from nowhere. Tell me, can he do it, or are you as stupid as he is to believe it?”

“You think he’s stupid, do you?” I looked up at him, crossed my arms over my chest and relaxed more in my chair. “You think it’s an act of stupidity to take the army off Ambrosius Aurelianus and become Supreme Commander in Britain through winning battles so young?”

Gleis kicked my chair again; “That one, Cai, he told me your Arthur wins battles through luck; said Arthur is naught but a lucky brat and sooner or later it will all collapse around him, taking us all down with him.”

“Cai can go shaft a goat,” I said. “He thinks the whole world is Fated on luck versus bad luck. If you listen to him, you are the stupid one, not Arthur.”

But Gleis grabbed me by my shirt and hissed in my face, “I say your Silurian is stupid, he should be hunting down Aelle of the South Saxons, not showing off like a king-prick before our headman.”

Val intervened, probably knowing that if he did not, I would start another fight, which I was thinking of doing, but Val stopped us and said to Gleis, “I had the great fortune of going to military school with our Silurian, and I can assure you, stupid is not a word you can say of Arthur. One day he will make you look a fool, Gleis, I swear it.”

“Swear it, do you? Then we will put money on it. A wager?”

“No bloody wagers with you. It’s my word that counts, not worthless coins.”

As all this was going on, Dafin and Irfan stuffed wood into the fire and I sensed nothing was going to happen other than me breaking Gleis’s jaw, so I got up and said, “I’m leaving,” and I walked out on them, not caring if they all killed themselves in a brawl or not. Just as I reached the door, I stopped and called back to Gleis, “I’ll give you fair warning, man, challenge Arthur and you will be finished.”

Gleis’s face burned red, and I turned away and went walking back down the main road. Gleis had turned me wild, so I went looking for the magistrate’s house, following where I had seen Arthur go earlier. Down behind the massive forum and its shops, down the lane and turn left, where I saw a young boy playing alone.

“Is this the magistrate’s house?” I asked him.

“Yes, sir, go in!”

I did. Through the front door, down a short corridor, heard voices before me and knocked on the door, opened by the magistrate. Arthur was there, sitting at the table in a kitchen-room.

With them were two lads around our own age. Also as I came in, I saw, sitting in a corner behind the magistrate, a small squat and very ugly girl, a simpleton by the look of her slack face and lips.

Arthur stood up when he saw me, said to the magistrate, “This is my lieutenant, Prince Bedwyr ap Pedrawg, of the Gododdin, from Dogfeiling in Gwynedd. Bedwyr, this is Master Rhodri of Calleva and,” he looked

amused as he added, “he doesn’t like my army being in his city,” and laughed as Rhodri smiled, adding, “Now, who said such a thing?”

But when I looked the magistrate, I could see a profound sadness in his eyes. “You see, Prince Bedwyr,” he explained to me, now standing up to meet me. “These are my sons and Arthur here is going to take them from me.” He sat back down at the table, and the sons, both grown old enough by the look of them to have left home long ago, they looked wild with offence.

The younger one protested, “Not take us away, Father, we want to go. We are old enough now to make our own decisions. Let us go.”

“You want to join our army, is that it?” I said to the boy, no older than myself, that I could see, and how it must hurt them to see me and Arthur, the land’s leaders and highest warriors so much their own age, and themselves, farm-boys. It must hurt like a wound to have us in their house, fully battled-dressed in our fine Roman armour.

The older one stood up to face me. “I am Sandedd, I am eighteen. This is my brother, Pedr, he is sixteen. We are old enough to join you, are we not? And we are strong and brave.”

“And untrained,” I said. “Arthur and I have been in formal training since we were eight years old.” I went towards Sandedd, and drew my sword as I did. He looked alarmed and stepped back, but I held the handle out towards him.

“Take it,” I told him. “Hold a real British-forged blade.”

Sandedd glanced at Arthur, then reached for the handle of my sword; took it from me, maybe holding a real fighting-sword for the first time in his life. But as soon as he took it, he let the blade waver and he flushed in embarrassment as he tried to hold it still.

“You see?” I said. “Untrained, you cannot even hold a sword.”

“But if we come, you will train us?”

“You cannot come now,” Arthur answered him. “We are on patrol through Saxon-lands and we are not returning to Cadwy for a long while yet.”

“Take us with you, we can learn.” The boy looked desperate.

His father sat still in his chair, sad, saying nothing.

The simpleton girl sat behind him, dribbling and staring between me and Arthur and back again.

“Can you ride?” I asked the boy, Sandedd.

“We can ride. Though only ponies. We have our own ponies.”

“No good, you need not only to hold a sword but fight with it from horseback, from the back of a warhorse, not a pony.”

“We can help around camp,” the younger one said, now trying to back his brother. “We can take care of your horses, fetch and carry; all till you go back to Caer Cadwy. Please, Lord Arthur, it’s what we want.”

Arthur said, “I cannot take you now. We might be going into battle. I’ve sent Cai’s unit back along the road to Venta,” he then said to me. “And he’s going to send in scouts if Saxons are sighted on the march, looking for revenge for us burning down their fields. So battle is looming.”

I nodded agreement and Sandedd answered, “Then as soon as you return home, sir, we will come to you. There is nothing for me and Pedr here anymore.”

He still held my sword, practising lifting it and holding it up, but his wrist was weak and he could not maintain a strong hold.

He gave it back to me, looking at me with envy and desire.

“If you come to Cadwy,” Arthur warned him, “you will be trained as warriors, but come only with your father’s blessing.”

“You will take them from me, blessing or not,” Rhodri said, the sadness building inside him. And as I watched Rhodri’s face, his movements, something reached out at me. I saw something in his eyes, a furtive glance, a downward glance, something hidden that I felt and I turned to Arthur and said out loud, “I think this man is hiding something from us, Arthur, there’s more here…”

Arthur got up and marched around the table and stood at Rhodri’s side and gave him a long dark stare. He said, “What’s going on here, sir?”

The boy Sandedd spoke up for his father, “We are being forced to pay tribute to Saxons.”

Arthur looked back at the boy, hard, then at Rhodri. “Is this what’s going on here? You are paying tribute to Saxons?”

“Yes, lord, we are. My father will not admit to it,” Sandedd answered, and his father scowled at him, shook his head, no.

But Sandedd persisted. “Another reason why we want to come and fight for you, Lord Arthur, as the Saxons come often and take produce from us. We must pay them or else they attack us.”

“Why not tell me this before, Master Rhodri? I can stop them.”

“It’s not as bad as my son makes it. We have been trading peacefully with Saxons for about three years now.”

“No, Father, it’s not peaceful, they come and they take. It’s not trading, it’s menacing for produce and tribute.”

“Tell me who they are and where I can find them,” Arthur ordered the boy.

“We do not know where they come from!” Rhodri cried in anger. “They appear from nowhere, then go again and we do not know who they are. Do not interfere in this, Silurian. You can make things worse for us. These Saxons come with a man who speaks our language. Then they go again.”

“I’ve seen them come from the north,” Pedr said.

“Did you ever hear names spoken?” Arthur asked him.

“Oh aye,” the younger one said. “I hear many names that they babble foolishly. They think we cannot work it out, they think we are all stupid British. They say, Octha over and over. And sometimes, Aelle.”

“That’s right,” Arthur said. “Octha Hengist-son, and as son of Hengist, he will not sit back and let this land go without him trying to make himself bretwalda. Master Rhodri, the Saxons are beginning to fight for overlordship, and this will mean the need to expand their territories and take more from us. Once they set up bretwaldas, the invasions will start in earnest. And this is why I’m here, to stop them.”

Rhodri nodded, resigned. “You will change things, and you will take things, no different than Saxons themselves.”

Arthur looked at me. “We are going to base here for a few more days and see if we can hunt down these Saxons. Can I use your house as a base, Master Rhodri? Though I do not offer you a choice, just to work with me.”

The two sons looked wild with pleasure, that their house would be for Arthur himself, to hunt their Saxon enemy!

“You can use my house,” Rhodri agreed. “You two can have my sons’ room to sleep. There is plenty of billeting in town for your men. My daughter here, who is a cretin as you can see, will cook for you. She might be simple, but her skill in cooking is magnificent.”

“Thank you, sir.” Arthur stood up straight, and said, “I have to go to my men now, but we will be back at supper-time after I’ve got them billeted.”

As Arthur was about to leave, I looked at Sandedd, he looked at me. I said, “If you want to be in our army, start now. When the Supreme Commander gives orders and leaves the room, you salute him. Like this,” and I showed them how to salute a superior officer. Their first lesson.

They did as I showed them, embarrassed again.

Yet Arthur not only returned the salute, but also bowed to them. We left now together, and as we came out into the lane, we burst out laughing.

“Did you see their faces when they saluted me?” Arthur said, laughing as I went with him down to the main road. “You sure know how to make boys blush, the perfect drill-master. A prince. Prince Bedwyr of Dogfeiling.”

“Thank you, lackey,” I answered. “But those boys have to learn sometime. As far as I’m concerned, they have to kiss the ground you walk on, that will give me an idea of the lengths they will go to show loyalty to you.”

We turned down right to find our horses and I added, “Oh, and look out for Gleis ap Merin. I think he’s after your blood. The fool thinks you are stupid. Cai’s words too.”

“I know. Cai’s been picking at me because he thinks everything I do is through luck. He has no notion of mind. What’s Gleis going to do to me?”

We mounted our horses and turned to go and find where everyone had gone. I said, “I don’t know, challenge you to single combat probably.” I laughed at his frown. “Just beware of Gleis, I don’t trust him.”

It took the rest of the day to round everyone up and get them billeted; there were barrack-like buildings both sides of the main road near the forum, and we found rooms the entire length of the street, from west-gate to east-gate. There was a fine old temple as well, for those who wanted to give offerings to their gods and goddesses.

All the unit captains had their orders to stand in Calleva for the next few days, all till Arthur could plot which way to go next. He abandoned the idea of riding to Londinium, but concentrated on building a foundation of respect in Calleva, to take out the Saxons who were demanding tribute from the townspeople.

When the men dispersed to the various tabernas for something to eat at supper-time, me and Arthur returned alone with all our gear to Master Rhodri’s house. And as we went in and down the corridor, we smelled

something delicious being cooked, though when we went in, we were first shown where we were going to sleep. Sandedd and Pedr were waiting for us, eager and full of energy and excitement.

"Father said we are to be your servants," Sandedd told us. "This is your room, I mean our room, but it's yours now, sirs."

He led us down another corridor, where at the end was a small comfortable room, neat and tidy, and I guessed they had been cleaning it up all day, with pallet beds with fresh sheets and blankets, the room itself looking out over a small apple orchard, private and secluded and peaceful, the trees standing full of birds.

"This is the best room in the house," Pedr told us as we dropped our gear on the beds.

Here I saw the two brothers eyeing Arthur with lust. They were drinking him in like they were parched soil and he was their water. I could see a thousand questions in their eyes, staring at his sword as he unbuckled his belt and hung it over the right corner of his bed.

"Strike me dead, sir," Sandedd sighed, "what a beautiful sword."

"He won it in battle against King Goodricke of the Jutes," I told them. "Put his old sword through the man's throat, then took this one as a war-prize. We killed eighty of them that day."

The boys looked at me with awe, mouths open, and Arthur was happy to let me do all the bragging for him.

"And you see those silver gauntlets he's wearing? Gained them for winning against the Picts, the Painted People, in the far north, a gift from King Garwy Hir of the Selgovae. And his shield is a part of a secret Roman army hoard from Viroconium, as is my sword, helmet and mail-shirt."

I wished now Arthur had worn his own mail-shirt, that beautiful armoured-shirt would really make their eyes bulge, but he had left it behind, finding it too hot for light cavalry skirmishing. The mail-shirt was for deep heavy fighting, like our great Pictish battle.

Just as the boys were about to ask for more, Master Rhodri appeared in the doorway, saying, "When you are ready, supper is on the table. And there is a wash-house just along the garden path, go out this side-door and into the garden, turn left."

"Thank you again, sir," Arthur replied and Rhodri dragged his sons away with him, closing the bedroom door and leaving us to unpack. First

we went to explore the wash-house down the garden path, hidden away under the drooping apple trees, a latrine, a washbasin and a huge urn full of fresh water, soap-oil, and behind us, a bath-tub at last! I laughed. “Must get in this later on, if we can get them to boil up the water.”

“I’m first.”

“No, I am. I was the one who carried the pig. I’m first.”

“Fight you for it.”

“Any time, brother,” and I shoved him out the door and came out after him. Arthur jumped me in a headlock, and we wrestled like mad back to our room; here we found Sandedd waiting to take us through to supper. And supper was as delicious as Rhodri said it would be, cooked by his odd stumpy little daughter who never spoke but had a magic hand for food. It was a small feast, a kind of baked vegetable plate, with roasted pig and to finish, apples in honey pastry that me and Arthur stuffed entirely to ourselves, with Rhodri and his boys watching us.

Arthur explained, “Soldiers never get enough to eat, we’re always starving. One of the hardest things I’m finding as Commander is getting enough food to feed my men. We requisition from those we defend under Ambrosius’ standing tax laws.”

Rhodri nodded, “I know, you will want provisions from Calleva too, I suppose. You will keep Ambrosius’ taxes for your army. First it is Saxons, now it is you,” and he poured us mugs of a fine apple drink that was as strong as any drink I had ever tasted.

Everything around hereabouts was apples, pigs and wool. And it did not sound to me as if Rhodri was happy with Arthur for keeping the requisitioning tax laws in place, but how else were we to support our army? Armies needing feeding, and Rhodri knew it. He too would have to pay for our fighting arms.

When everything had been devoured, the girl cleared the table and Rhodri watched her with his sad eyes; no wife and mother to help him it seemed. He said, “Running this town and looking after Robyn is wearing me down. And if my boys leave, if you take them away it will be even harder to maintain.”

We stayed silent, for as well as the taxes, it seemed Rhodri was sour too about his sons wanting to join our army. He looked down at the table top, away from us. He soon enough looked up again and gave Arthur a deep

penetrating stare. “I do not like the idea of you taking my sons. I am resigned enough to pay taxes for your army, but I do not like you recruiting my sons as well.”

Arthur did not answer.

But Rhodri kept attacking him.

“You have such confidence in you even though you are so young, the same as my Sandedd here, I can see you are no older than him. So young and so confident. Some say confidence comes before a fall, and those you believe will back you are the very ones who will betray you. My advice is to watch for betrayal.”

Rhodri got up then from the table and bowed to us. “If you will excuse me, I have to take Robyn to see my medicus. The boys will take care of you tonight. I will be back tomorrow, early.”

Then he was gone with the girl holding his hand and we were left talking to Sandedd and Pedr for hours. They wouldn’t let us go, kept on asking question after question, digging for the battles Arthur had fought, the men I had killed with only one hand, the training they would have to go through, what was to be expected of them, and they paled when I explained just how much they would have to learn. Not just how to fight, but how to understand the hand signals we used in battle, the meanings of all the different horn calls, the conventions of army life, how to train their horses for battle, how to mount a horse wearing full kit, to wield their weapons from horseback, on and on till Arthur said, “Shut-up, Fox, you’re making them feel sick.” He got up from the table and added to them, “Maybe if you two go to bed now, I’ll let you come with us tomorrow, but only for one day.”

Both of them jumped to their feet, both forgetting to salute as they turned to go.

“What did you forget?” I called them back.

The brothers looked at each other, whispered together, turned and gave Arthur and me officious salutes.

“Dismissed,” Arthur told them and laughed again when they went out, with him coming to pull me out of my chair and dragging me down to our room. “You will sit here all night, drinking that pig’s piss if you don’t come with me now.”

“But what about my bath?” I asked him.

“Oh hell-fire, aye, you boil the water and I’ll go and sit in the tub.”

Bastard.

But in the end we had our bath, though it took half the night to boil enough water for the both of us and we did not get to bed till nearing midnight…

48: WOMAN-KILLER

WE left city-Calleva after breakfast next morn in a troop of ninety riders, and brought Sandedd son of Rhodri with us, deciding after all to leave the younger Pedr behind.

I heeled forward to join Arthur at the head of the ride. Just behind him rode three men carrying draco standards and the banners whistled in the rushing wind for half a league before lowering them to run on, the standard-bearer with the Dragon banner snapping overhead, and I drew my sword once again, throwing it in circles, trying to break the stiffness in my shoulder.

When it released its constant pinch on me, I sheathed the sword and rode on. Housed on my saddle in a case were three javelins, Arthur carried his bow and arrows, while behind us we had raised a small group of men to fire Roman crossbows with bolts so deadly they could pierce most armour. With them too was a small band of standard horse-archers.

I looked back to check on Sandedd, as he was my responsibility since I was chief of new recruits, and all I saw on his face was unhidden wonder. Sure he was overwhelmed that he was now riding in cavalry with Arthur of the Britons, all of us under the power of the Red Dragon. We had provided Sandedd with a buckler shield, strapped on his left arm, a spear as he did not have the skill needed to wield a sword, a padded cap as no one could spare a helmet, and I just hoped he had enough sense to keep out of the fray if we ran into a battle.

On we went through the morning, and stopped around two before midday, close to the Tamesis-water, and watered our horses, grabbed something to eat and drink, walked around to stop getting saddle cramp, then gathered into a large group to decide which way to go next.

There was no sign of Saxons, though one of the Atrebate guides, Afan, told us he had heard of a growing settlement very close to where we

were now, though further east and on our side of the river; a settlement that was pushing right into British territory.

Arthur said, “It could be something Octha’s directed. He could be attempting to put settlements in places close to our lands as bridgeheads. Places like this have to be checked. Lead the way, Afan.”

The mass of us mounted again and turned east, and as we rode, the sky gathered with heavy dark grey clouds and a cold wind came out of the north-west and all the land hereabouts fell into shadow.

The guide, Afan, rode with Arthur, leading deeper and deeper away from our own lands, where as we rode on, I began to feel a gnawing tension, pulling my muscles tight and I felt fear. The sky, the land, all of it fell black as if winter had decided to rush down on us in the middle of summer. Far on our left, a forest black as a hole in hell rose up along a ridge, the trees whipping dark in the wind. Rain threatened, heavy lashing rain down from thunderous dark skies, the wind rising when we came like a storm ourselves to find the Saxon settlement issuing out a hundred Saxon warriors through the high palisade gates and halting themselves when they saw us, a hundred mounted and armoured British equites pouring like a fall of water towards them. And when I saw this rush of Saxons right at this moment, I felt as if we had been led into an ambush. These Atrebate guides, could they be trusted? For why else would we ride right here and now into a Saxon force? But Arthur never faltered.

He cried, “Ride on to attack! Don’t stop! Attack now!”

With our horses already running at full flight, it would have been madness to halt them, so we broke across the flat between us and the Saxon settlement, split into our fighting units and used our forward thrust to charge straight into battle. No one halted and I had no time to call to Sandedd to stand aside.

The sky fell even darker and the Saxons charged forward and dropped into a shield-wall, spears down to repel us. But we split right and left around them and blocked their retreat back into their own settlement and fought them from their rear. Fools! As they moved to change direction, this was when their formations broke and we charged into their gaps and cut them down like weeds. I was riding down and splitting heads before I could even glance up to see the sky break with a deluge of rain, so heavy the water almost cloaked our sight.

The light fell into darkness and I killed from my left. As I wheeled for another charge, I glimpsed through the rain a large knife winging towards me that I blocked with my shield, moved in a right turning arc and was out and galloping towards the Saxon palisade; here I turned back to face them, housed my sword and pulled my first javelin. I launched the javelin at a running Saxon, a war-dog by the look of him. My javelin tip struck his shield and he dropped it as I drew my sword and charged forward; I smacked the top of his head as I past, and he fell into the mass.

Still the rain lashed and the wind screamed across the field as I saw our warriors cutting through the Saxon ranks. And as I came back down their left flank, I heard the horn call to retreat. At once our warriors wheeled out of the battle and galloped back the way we came, hearing the Saxons roaring at our backs. They believed we were fleeing. It happened every time. To them, a retreat meant fleeing, but we gathered to where our standard-bearer had planted the Red Dragon, waiting for Arthur to regroup with us.

When he came galloping up and pulling his horse in, he turned and cried to us, “Take down their left flank! Keep attacking their left flank and to their rear!” and his voice faltered and I saw something as he turned up and back along our lines. He dropped forward over his horse’s neck and I saw three crossbow bolts gone through his right leg, one in his thigh and two through his calf. I saw the pain on his face when he called us back into a charge, the units obeyed at once and flew down the field, back into battle.

I hesitated and rode to Arthur’s side, called to him, “Get off the field! You cannot fight with those bolts in your leg! Dafin, Irfan! Take him off the field and ride back to safety, look after him and we will pick you up when this is over! Don’t try to take those bolts out!”

The twins looked at me, for Arthur was near falling off his horse and they obeyed me now. For they knew as well as I did that Arthur would only ride back into battle with those bolts in his leg. But I knew I had to stop him. Irfan took hold of his horse’s reins and turned its head and I watched as the three of them went riding fast back up the road and were gone over the crest of the hill.

The battle was now mine, and I turned back, heeled my horse to a charge, drew my sword and lost it when it was snapped out of my hand by a Saxon wielding a massive club. The club came out of nowhere and hit the

blade near the hand-guard, just missing my wrist. The blow was so powerful it ripped the handle from my hand. I heeled out of the man's reach and drew my famous Pictish dagger, charged on through the mass and saw a Saxon jump out at me; he threw himself towards me through the rain and I stabbed him with my dagger, only the dagger went driving into his forehead and lodged in the bone of his skull and would not come out no matter how hard I tried to pull it back.

My horse carried on and I dragged the man with me, the blade still buried in his forehead, me twisting the handle desperately trying to remove it. Something snapped in my own head, because nothing in this entire mad world would have me let go of the handle. I had gone through hell-fire for this Pictish knife and it was mine and nothing short of someone chopping off my hand would have me let go, so I continued on, dragging the Saxon with me by his head, his hands wildly gripping at my leg to hold on.

Here I snapped the handle back and forth, leaning down from horseback and trying to crack the bone to free the blade. Rain drove hard into my face and I saw the man's eyes staring wild and insane, I could not believe he was still alive. But his hands dropped and I pulled like a madman back and forth in his skull till I saw the bone of his forehead crack open and the blade came out and I was away again, just seeing him go down as a band of his brothers trampled over him to get to me.

I heeled away, bounding over the dead and wheeled to come in again, seeing our enemy struggling on in defeat, only a handful left and I cried to my warriors to finish them. Gwydre and Taredd were there, riding by me as I sat for a moment, still holding my precious dagger in a hand that was red to my elbow, the rain washing the leather of my armour into a slick bloody trail. I sat and watched, breathing hard and fast, as our men ran down and speared the remaining Saxons; it was over. All over the field laid strewn and broken bodies, speared and hacked.

When our men began gathering to me, Val came over and said, "We should burn down this long-house, but the rain!"

"We'll come back when the rain is gone and burn it to the ground. Everyone! Search the field for our wounded and dead!"

Behind us we began to hear wailing and howling coming over the palisade of the Saxon settlement; their women, wailing for the slaughter of

their men outside their walls. The sound of it was hideous even above the roaring wind and the lashing rain and everything felt evil.

I jumped off my horse into the slush and blood and began searching for our wounded, also searching for my lost sword, bringing my horse with me. In the mess, I glanced one of our boys lying under a mass of Saxons, and as I bent to pull him out, the gates of the settlement opened and a screaming band of women rushed out.

I looked up fast to see a woman, a short sword raised high over her head; she came with a tortured look of horror and grief on her face towards me. She cried in wild hatred, throwing the point of the sword at my back, but I stood up, blocked her blow with my shield and her sword went flying. I dived for it, picked it up and swung it at her as she came clawing at my face. I struck the back of her head with the blade and split her skull in a cracked break of bone and hair.

She fell over one of her men and I swung around and saw another clinging like a wildcat to Val's back and trying to scratch out his eyes. I ran for her as Val threw her off and leapt aside. I came forward and stabbed the screaming witch through her chest as she went to lunge at me with a long dagger in her hand.

Again I turned; saw the other women fleeing back into the settlement and closing down the gates, screaming out from behind in hatred. I heard them screaming, "Wealas! Wealas!"

Their name for us British; wealas. Foreigners, Welsh-men. They called us foreigners in our own land! I cursed after them and turned with Val to go and clear the field.

Sandedd came riding up to me, four loose horses behind him.

This meant four riders were down or dead and they had to be found. We searched for them, and I tracked back to where I thought I had lost my sword and found it lying and unbroken near a dead Saxon, found the four that were downed, and we carried them with us back up the road, Sandedd saying to me, "I saw two horses flee north and I couldn't catch them, sir! I'm sorry!"

Damn it to hell-fire!

Another two were left behind, maybe lying wounded and so I ordered him to go back and find them. Sandedd wheeled back down the road, taking

two horses with him for the downed riders. As I saw him go, I took off up the road. Up ahead I saw Irfan standing in my path and waving at me.

I stopped and leapt off my horse, went with Irfan and found Arthur sitting against a tree, his face pale as death, his lips white.

"I'll get you back to Calleva," I told him. "Hold up, I know the ride will be long, but you have to hold up."

I then ordered Irfan to support Arthur back on the ride to town.

Turning to me, Arthur said in a hoarse and low voice, "Take a dog-leg south…we can hit the Portway, then west to Calleva; it's a shorter ride," and he gave out a deep cry of pain as we moved him to Irfan's horse, his right leg frozen and immovable. Those bolts were ours. He had either been shot on purpose or by accident in the confusion of battle, but I was suspicious again. Yet I kept my mouth shut and helped him up before Irfan, who held him tight, heeling his horse on. Having Arthur wounded smashed everything down. We might even have to return to Caer Cadwy and call off our summer's campaigns.

So we rode. And rode all through the day, following Arthur's directions, and when we hit the Portway, we turned west and rode for seven leagues straight for city-Calleva, and by the time we got there, Arthur was close to failing.

We rushed him back into Rhodri's house, and the boy Pedr ran for their doctor. And I hoped the man would carry morphia extract in his supplies for Arthur's pain. I then sent a rider to find Cai, for we needed him back with us. The doctor was a Greek physic, introduced as Master Nicomede Nikolaidhis of Athens, and he came in with Val. Together we got Arthur down on his pallet, stripped off his gear, and began cutting through the cross-gartering of the lower leg armour, then cut part way up through his lamella thigh armour, which proved useless in this case, and saw the extent of his wounding. The two bolts in his calf; one had gone all the way through his leg, but was stopped at the wings.

And as I held Arthur tight in my arms, the doctor snapped the wings from both bolts with cutters and pushed them through and out before Arthur could even get ready for the pain. Like last time, when Arial had doctored his thigh, he made hardly any sound, but controlled it deep inside himself. But I felt it. I felt his body stiffen like pounded steel, and when the doctor

began fiddling with the bolt in his thigh, Arthur truly began to show his pain now.

When I looked, I saw the bolt was lodged in the scar tissue of his old wound, the one where Cai's horse had ripped out a chunk of his leg. The scarring there had stopped the bolt from going in deeper, and this was a blessing in disguise.

The doctor just ripped it out and tore the tissue all over again and Arthur gave a cry like a shot animal. I kept a strong hold of him as he squirmed and moaned in my arms. And what I saw the doctor do next made me sick to watch.

I said to Arthur, a whisper in his ear, "Don't look at this, brother…you know it was a great battle we won, though we have to go back and burn down that settlement."

I tried to distract him with words as the doctor inserted some kind of funnel into the wound on his calf and poured liquid down to flush through the holes, first one then the other, and Arthur began to shiver like he was cold, moaning and sweating and I held his head to my chest.

I told him, "None of them survived. Cleared them out to a man! You should have stayed, really, aye? Hoi, and I stabbed a Saxon right through his forehead with my Pictish blade and it lodged…"

I stopped, because Arthur now went into a falling-seizure, and I had to let him go, lying him down on the bed and standing back to watch him fall into spasms.

The doctor cried, "No! He is convulsing. Hold his leg near his ankle."

I took a grip on Arthur's ankle and found the spasms in his leg too powerful to hold. Blood began welling out of the bolt holes, spilling down his calf and splashing on the floor.

"This is good, this is good," the doctor said. "The blood will flush out the wounds, flush out any poisons gone through with the bolts."

"Poisons! These bolts are not poisoned."

"No, but when the bolts penetrate through armour, they take pieces of metal from the plating in with them. I am sure these wounds are clean now. Does he do this convulsing always or only now?"

"He has falling-sickness. Ever since he took a wound to his skull when he was fifteen. He falls like this a lot."

I looked at the man as he watched Arthur convulse.

The doctor said to me, “He has epilepsia, this is epilepsia.”

Just then the spasms stopped, and Arthur fell into the strange un-wakeable sleep he always fell into after a falling-seizure. Relief flooded me, as I knew from experience he would now get a few hours sleep, oblivious to his pain. I stood up and asked, “These convulsions? It has a name from the doctoring world?”

“We physics of Athens call it epilepsia; convulsion-illness caused by a misadventure of the brain.”

I thought about this, tried to commit the name to memory so I could tell Arthur about it when he woke.

I said, “If you know its name, do you have a cure?” I felt excited. Could this man have a cure?

“Many treatments, but none of them cure the falling and convulsions. I can bring over some potions this evening, though we all agree that morphia is the best.”

I had a lot to do and think about before morning.

That night, Arthur groaned sometimes in his sleep, though he did not wake or make a fuss. He slept through his pain right till dawn when the simpleton girl, Robyn, came in with a tray of breakfast. Not long after this, the room began filling with our men, the doctor coming back, Master Rhodri, his sons, and anyone else who wanted a look at Arthur’s leg, propped up over a pile of pillows and with the wounds unwrapped to aid drainage from the holes. He sat up against the wall, looking pale, but well enough to stuff his face with breakfast, and me watching him. I was dying to interrogate him over his wounding.

Who shot the bolts into him and was it done on purpose?

But the unit captains wanted their orders for the day and Arthur told them, “We are basing here for a while longer, so if you haven’t already, you need to send for Cai now.”

“I’ve sent for him,” I said.

Arthur looked at me, glad for my decision.

“Good work,” he said. “When Cai comes back with his men, we can keep watch on the land around these parts. Through these lands the Saxons can advance westward and I need full-force for this defence. So you are not going back to burn that settlement. We wait for Cai, which means you have a free day to do anything that needs to be done in the troop.”

He looked at us and we looked at him, he said, “Everyone dismiss; except you Bedwyr and you, Valarius.”

The men saluted him and left, leaving Val and me alone.

Arthur told us, “This is just the beginning, and I need Medraut here. Send for Medraut, Fox. Tell him to bring Gareth and Drustan back with him.”

“How big then is this coming battle going to be?” Val asked.

“Not a battle, Val, I’m expecting a war.”

Me and Val glanced at each other; a war?

Arthur then said to Val, “Those are interesting marks on your face. How did you get scratched like that?”

Again Val and I looked at each other.

It had to come out sooner or later…

Val told him, “We were down and off our horses after the battle, looking for our dead when the gate to the settlement opened and a horde of screaming Saxon women came out and attacked us. One of them jumped on my back, raked at my face with her nails, went to slit my throat with her knife, but Bedwyr saved me.”

And Val put a hand on my shoulder and I moved closer to him, he was my support. Arthur looked at me for answers.

I told him, “I killed her, two in fact. One came for me with a sword, so I killed her just as I would a man. Then the one attacking Val, she came at me with a knife. The rest of them fled back into the settlement when they saw us fighting back to kill.”

For a moment Arthur did not react; he only turned away and stared at nothing, then looked down at his weeping leg and the tear in his thigh, so lucky the bolts had missed hitting bone.

He said, “Val, go and get those scratches cleaned, scratches can fester, turn bad. That doctor who did my leg is bloody good.”

Val saluted, turned and left, leaving me standing alone.

But Arthur continued to study his wounds, and said, “It was battle. Women who fight armed in battle die in battle like the rest of us. Why don’t you bloody well sit down?”

I sat on the stool by his bed and told him, “Now you can tell me how you got three bolts in your leg. Tell me how. Because I don’t think your wounding was an accident.”

He gave me a sharp glance. “Not an accident? I was shot on purpose?”

“Well, don’t you think it odd that we rode right into a Saxon force and then you getting fired with arrows?”

“The Atrebates. You don’t trust them, do you?” He began stuffing porridge again and dribbling honey over it, talking to me between spooning food into his stomach, I ate nothing.

I got angry with him and stood up, leant over him, telling him just what I thought, “No, I don’t trust them. You know, Arthur, that’s your biggest failing, bloody trust. Trusting unknown men, giving trust to strangers, giving your heart right into their hands without a thought for who or what they may be. You do it all the time! You have to inspect these men before you can even allow them near you.”

“They give their lives into my hands. How can I turn aside men when they are willing to die for me? To follow me wherever I lead them? I give them my trust, willingly.”

“You are a moon-blasted fool. By doing that, you will let an assassin right in through the front door, no wardens, or guards.”

“That’s your job! You are the gatekeeper. You are suspicious of your own shadow.”

“It’s a bloody fine thing I am! Without me, you would be worm food right now. You wouldn’t survive a day without me, would you? You’re like a child who plays with poisonous snakes, and you do. Like Medraut. Like Gleis, you never even put a check on him or his past. Someone shot you and I’m going to find out who. I’ll round up the archers and find out.”

Arthur looked miserable when I said this. He put his empty bowl down on the little bedside table and stared forward, and knowing him so

well, I could see him concealing something. So I menaced him some more, looked at his leg, weeping watery blood from the holes.

Then he came right out and said it, “It was my own fault. Right there on the battlefield. Me. I got myself shot.”

I did not say anything; it was too ridiculous to answer.

“I rode right between the archers and their target. Just for one moment, I lost concentration. I saw a flash of light in the sky and it went right through my skull and I…I lost my way and they shot me.”

“I saw no lightning. There wasn’t any lightning, just rain. No thunder. So what light in the sky? You are making excuses.”

He looked up at me standing over him.

“There was a light,” he said. “You can send the archers to me later this morning. I have to say sorry to them, because they are probably killing themselves over this. I feel such a fool. Supreme Commander and I get myself shot; don’t tell anyone else, will you?”

He gave me a pained look and I broke into a grin. What a way to be.

Though I said, “I still think you are too trusting, you need to learn to be more guarded. And I still don’t trust these Atrebates. Gleis in particular.”

“I hear you.” He started groaning, holding his wounded thigh. “My whole leg is throbbing like someone’s smashed me from hip to ankle with a club. Get the doctor, will you?”

After I sent him the doctor, I did a full tour of the town, getting to know its layout better. Baths used to be here in Roman days, but were since disused. Also an amphitheatre outside town in the east, and there was plenty of billeting and housing for our troop, even with the added men who would arrive later with Cai. I hunted down the tabernas, making sure the men were not out spending all their time drinking, and those that were, I pulled them out and sent them back to their units.

I spent the whole day organising men and horses, then finding a rider to send out to bring Medraut and his Gododdin Guard down from the North; it would take a long time and I sensed that by the time the Snake reached us, any battles would be long over.

By late afternoon, as I headed back to Rhodri’s house, I saw Gleis ap Merin, and the guide, Afan, standing in a laneway and talking head to head. I stopped and watched them. In fact, I made a point of them seeing me watching them.

They looked as if they were arguing, not heated, but enough…a moment longer, Afan turned away from Gleis and came over to me, he said, “I don’t agree with him, if that’s what you have in your head.”

“How would I know what you agree with?”

“You are the Silurian’s lieutenant. Gleis thinks your Arthur is going for a fall and will drag us all down with him. He opposes Arthur’s command. I do not agree with him, not for a moment.”

I did not respond. Afan could be bluffing me and I studied him closer, long red hair loose around his shoulders, while around his neck he wore trinkets from every belief in the land, all of them in gold or silver.

He saw me looking and said, “I pray to all of them. I pray to this one and my prayers are never answered. So I pray to this one,” him showing me each trinket as he went, “and my prayers are never answered. Even this one, the one of Jesus Christ, I pray to this one, and still my prayers are never answered. So Jesus is no different than all the others, but I keep them all to be safe!” and he laughed and smiled and said, “Do not worry about Gleis. He just needs more time to get used to this strange Commander of yours. More time.”

“I doubt if Arthur cares if Gleis wants more of his time or not. What Gleis is going to get are battles. Victorious battles.”

Afan offered me his hand. “I am not a traitor.”

I accepted and we shook hands; I turned away and went back to Rhodri’s house; here I found him watching through the door into our room, spying through a gap in the partly open door. I stopped at his side and said, “What are you doing, Master Rhodri?”

He laughed and answered, “Watching this, look.”

I looked and saw Rhodri’s daughter, Robyn, sitting on the stool at Arthur’s bedside, and him holding her hand and playing some kind of game with her, like the games we played as boys. He drew circles on the palm of her hand, and Robyn giggled and pretended to pull her hand away, then wanting more of the same.

“No one ever pays attention to Robyn,” Rhodri told me. “She is either ignored or spoken down to. And I have certainly never seen a boy talk or play with her like this.”

I watched; Arthur still held her hand, her fingers closing over his and he talked to her, asking her secret things.

“Never seen such a thing before,” Rhodri whispered.

But I broke the mood by marching into the room and saluting him.

Arthur looked at me and said to Robyn, “Here is the Fox. Prince Bedwyr of Dogfeiling. Girls swoon when he comes into a room. It’s his chestnut hair and those eyes of his…see, Lady Robyn? Made with a strong dose of endurance, he is. He fought with only one hand against the worst enemy in the world without a break an entire day, not till he decided to take a nap on top of a pile of dead Picts.”

He laughed and Robyn stared at me, smiling in her own strange way, and all the time Arthur kept a hold of her hand, that is till Rhodri came in and gently got her to leave, though she did not want to go. Made an odd little whimper but obeyed her father.

Though as soon as the girl left, Arthur collapsed on his back and sighed hard, “It’s the wound in my thigh that hurts the most.”

“No need to worry about anything. Cai should be here by nightfall. Just take a few more days in bed. Everything’s fine around camp. Can that girl talk?”

“I can understand her. Does embroidery as well as cook. She’s a sweet little thing.” Still on his back, he closed his eyes and said, “What did it feel like?”

“What are you talking about? Feel like?”

“Killing a woman. What did it feel like?”

“Sad, but in the end, in the moment, no different from killing a man.”

“Do you think I could do it? If it was me, could I kill a woman? I’ve been thinking about it, if it happened to you, it could happen to me. Would I do it?”

“There was no time to think about it. I just did it out of our years of training to kill. I just did it.”

“It is sad. I don’t want ever to have to do that.”

“Don’t blame me.”

“I don’t. I do not blame you for such a thing. I just hope it never happens to me. I would live it over and over again till it sent me mad.”

He did not say any more and he seemed to sleep, so I watched him, knowing he was feeling remorse for the deaths of those women I had killed…

49: CAI's TERRIBLE FALL

I woke in the night, seeing the face of one of the women in my dreams, the one who had tried to kill Val. When my sword went through her chest, she had looked into my eyes as she fell.

My rule of battle had been broken; never look into their eyes when you kill. And I saw her face, her eyes in my mind, touching me once, and I woke and shook away the phantom.

I got up early. Cai had not yet come in and I was sure he would be home soon after sunrise, and I wanted to meet his arrival at the west-gate. So I dressed, then tried waking Arthur to tell him where I was going, but he wouldn't wake. I shook him and shook him, calling, but he would not move and he scared me. I felt his chest, his heart beating firm and steady; felt for a fever, no, no fever. I wondered how he could sleep so deeply like this. I watched him for a while, feeling for his pain.

Then I left him alone and went out into the cold growing dawn, collected my horse from the stable and rode down to the main gate, where I sat for a while, hoping that Cai would make it in for breakfast.

Calleva came alive around me and many people hailed me as they saw me sitting like a guard at the gate, and walking by, they nodded to me in respect. I returned their nods and saw a farmer bringing in some sheep to the market-square that was always full of bleating animals of some kind. A few wains were coming down the road with produce to trade; this whole area was rich. No wonder the Saxons tried intruding on the richness, stealing it for themselves with violence.

Away to the east and south were Octha's people in the land of the old Cantuvellauni, and Octha was gaining in power, ready to begin his push deeper into British territory, ready maybe to join forces with Aelle of the South Saxons. And then we would really be in trouble; out from Calleva, we would try to stop them.

That is Arthur would stop them, though he was wounded and I grew impatient waiting for Cai. Still he did not come and I turned away in anger and rode back to Rhodri's for some breakfast; arrived to find his household up and alive, breakfast already made and little Robyn trying to tell me she had managed to wake Arthur.

And when I went in to see him, I saw with relief that the doctor was here again, finally bandaging his wounds, binding his leg to splints around

the wounds, explaining, “These splints will help take pressure off your leg, so the holes do not keep opening when you walk. Though you should walk with crutches for at least a fortnight.”

“I cannot be like this for a week,” Arthur answered, “let alone a fortnight! I have to get up on horseback by tomorrow, the day after at the latest. I can only get out of this if the Saxons decide they don’t want to retaliate against us for our attack of the other day.”

“Do I hear you telling me you plan to go into battle like this? With these wounds?” the doctor demanded.

“Master Nicomede, they are only holes,” Arthur answered.

“Resistant to doctor’s orders are you?”

“I am resistant. I am Silurian. My people resisted the Romans for a century longer than all other nations, so what can I do about it?”

“Resist, it seems.”

Nicomede stood up to leave and gave me a look of frustration as he went, shaking his head and closing the door. I looked at Arthur, thinking of telling him to do what he was told, but I knew it was pointless.

He said, “What have you done with my leg armour?”

“I gave it to Rhodri to have it repaired, should be done by tonight. There’s an armourer here in Calleva, and a good leather-worker making some amazing boots, everything’s here all right.”

I sat down next to him and he answered, “Are there any girls? Did you see any pretty girls?”

“Feeling better, are you? Stop thinking about your prick.”

“No one else thinks about it.”

“Just tell me what are my orders for today.”

“Where in all hell-fire is Cai? I want scouts sent out to find him. I want the rest of the troops out training, and I want you to take your men out on patrol. Be back before sundown. Don’t get into battles if you find Saxons; track them if you can, but no battles. If you see anything significant, come back to base, let me know. But what I really want to know is what’s happened to Cai. He should have come in yesterday, and I do not like it.”

I nodded and stood up, saluted him and he added, “Take Sandedd with you. He knows the area. Take him and be back before sundown.”

I saw now the pain in his eyes; the pain of his wounds and the worry he was feeling over Cai. As I gathered up my gear before leaving, I put a hand on his shoulder; he gripped my wrist, then we shook hands in the way of warriors and I turned and went to find my men, taking them out on patrol. Sandedd, Gwydre, Taredd, Tegid, Owain, Coll and Druce, I also rounded up Dafin and Irfan, and Gleis ap Merin of the Atrebates, just to keep an eye on him, all of us riding out of the east-gate and taking the road we came in on after the battle. This road, if we were to keep on, would lead us to city-Londinium, and all we saw before us were fields of grass for raising horses. Then the dark forest through which we had gone that time in the rain and nothing else, no Saxons this way.

For a while we posted on a hill and watched the land in the haze of summer, and it grew so hot we stripped off our mail shirts and packed them away on our saddles, drank from our water-bottles, ate camp biscuits and saw quiet fields of crops growing away into the north-east.

We stayed on the hill till the sun left midday and I turned the men back down onto the Old Trackway and rode a touch further east, where we came across a river. We watered the horses. And it was here that Gleis decided to give me a lecture on the Saxon Shore forts as we stood under the shade of the trees, letting the horses rest before heading home again.

"Aelle is in danger of destroying the forts," he barked at me.

"We are not here to defend forts."

"The Silurian will let that Saxon run wild on the south coast."

"The Silurian cannot be everywhere at once. The coastline is impossible for us to defend. We are cavalry, not a static garrisoned army. Why don't you put in a defence with your own people? Surely you can mount a defence of your own if you want it so bad. Arthur already told you this…do it your bloody self."

Gleis gave me a dark glare, his eyes a steel blue and he was ugly as a worn boot. When he did not reply, I said, "But aren't the forts already taken by Saxons?"

Again he did not reply, just snorted and spat on the ground at my feet and went for his horse.

We all pulled out and turned back homeward. There was nothing to be seen, though we stayed on the ride till the sun turned westward, and even

though there were many hours left still of daylight, I wanted to get back and see if Cai had finally returned.

Back through the east-gate, stabled our horses, I next went to Rhodri's house, carrying my gear. Here I found Arthur up and walking on crutches out in the garden. Robyn followed him up and down, telling him how to do it. He walked bare-chested in the late afternoon sunlight, wearing short breeches and with his leg bandaged and splinted, he kept hitting at fallen apples on the ground as he went.

I went out to see him, I said, "No Cai?"

"No Cai. And now the scouts haven't come home. But I'm glad you did. That's something good."

We three walked up and down under the trees and I did not like the sound of Cai going missing. I watched as Arthur began putting his wounded leg down fully and walking on it without the crutch. "I have to be up on horseback tomorrow," he said. "I have to make this leg work. If something's happened to Cai, I have to ride out and find him, full force. Full into battle if I can track who attacked him, because nothing would hold him back like this other than an attack."

So we stayed walking in the garden, and when it started to grow fully dark, Arthur threw the crutches aside and walked, slowly, painfully up and down without aid, without me or Robyn trying to support him, though Robyn was too small to be of any real help.

She ran off then to make supper.

Not long after, Val came charging into the garden, calling, "Arthur! The scouts are back and so is Cai! But it's not looking good, they have come in, but they have missing men, a lot of missing men. Cai's coming in to see you and he doesn't look happy."

We went back inside, and I helped Arthur find some clothes to wear, got him dressed, and as this happened, Cai came in with Howell ap Berth, his second, following. They came in with the air of defeat hanging over them, and Arthur was up on his wounded leg, standing there as Cai and Howell saluted him. For a moment we all stood silent, because there was great pain in Cai's manner, something unusual for him.

"What happened?" Arthur said. "What happened, tell me everything." And he sat down on the edge of his pallet and stared at them.

These two were in trouble and Cai's face crumpled in some kind of deep despair. Howell stood at his side, watching him and hanging his head.

"Tell me!" Arthur ordered. "Were you attacked? Where are your missing men?"

"All killed," Howell told him.

"What! How? Stop hanging this out and tell me. Why didn't you come in on your orders?"

"We saw…we saw Saxons coming from the first village where we burned the crops. The one where you shot the pig, Commander."

Howell did all the talking, while Cai stood and trembled, as I stood at Arthur's side, watching Cai all the time, because I could see on his face not just despair, but shame.

"Go on!" Arthur ordered Howell.

He answered at once, "It was as if they had sent for reinforcements, because there were many of them." Howell stopped altogether and hung his head and shifted from foot to foot.

"Tell it all," Cai mumbled to him. "Tell it all and tell the truth."

Cai looked at Arthur when he said this, now able to lift his gaze from the floor.

Arthur looked at Howell to go on, said to him, "Detail it all, the full battle from beginning to end, give me the exact formations of what you saw, exactly where you saw them, where they might be now."

Howell hesitated a moment, then told, "About a Roman mile before the settlement itself, a large war-host is making its way west. Right now I would say they are about twenty-five Roman miles from the Venta-Calleva crossroads. We counted around two hundred and fifty of them. I think they have Jutes with them too."

"Jutes…then they have called in reinforcements," Arthur answered Howell's earlier statement. "They have responded to our provocations. When did you see this force?"

"Yesterday, all this happened yesterday. We sat back under cover on a small hill and watched them pass, bypassing us to the south and they are heading towards Venta Belgarum."

"Are they travelling fast?"

"No, Commander, I would say they are conserving their energies, so we watched them go and saw to their rear a detachment of a different band

following behind the main mass, the Jutes…" Howell's voice trailed away.

"And this is where things went wrong," Arthur told him, and Howell nodded agreement and glanced at Cai, whose head went down again.

"Tell him," Cai mumbled.

"It was then Cai here ordered us to attack the smaller band," Howell explained. "I reminded him that your orders, Arthur, were to scout only and not to engage in battle, not even a skirmish. Cai thought we could take the Jutes, but they were still too close to the main mass for it be successful. I tried to stop him. I reminded our men what your orders were and they agreed. No attacks. No skirmishing. But Cai was adamant and he called for an attack, he called for volunteers."

With Howell saying this, Cai did something I never imagined would come from him, our braggart, our warrior of the rear-guard who could tear an enemy to shreds with his bare hands. Once full of pride and power, he went down on one knee to Arthur and bowed his head in shame.

"I led them to their deaths," he said, his voice just above a whisper. "We lost twenty men and their horses scattered and some killed."

He lost his calm, and for the first time in my life, I saw Cai Long-man of the Cornovii openly begin to weep.

Howell went on, "The men lost were the ones who were willing to disobey your orders, they followed Cai into an attack and were wiped out as the main war-host turned back to help their brothers, but he jumped down from his horse and fought on foot, so did the others and they were slaughtered. There was nothing the rest of us could do, for we did not know what to do—join in and be slaughtered ourselves or retreat? In the end we gathered the horses that were fleeing and managed to rescue Cai, leaving the others to die. It was hell, stupid hell! Stupid mistake! He wouldn't listen to me!"

I looked now for Arthur's reaction.

I got ready to stand between him and Cai as I saw the black fire in Arthur's eyes turn to a hot flaming stare that could burn holes through stone walls or level a man who was not strong enough to face him.

Slowly he came to his feet, steadied himself a moment by putting a hand on my shoulder, and I felt the steel hard grip of his fingers, his strength doubled as he was in a rage. He stepped forward and said low, "You wiped out over half your unit. You thought you could win against

higher odds and on foot. Against Saxons! You think that what I do, I do through mere luck, and you thought you could match me; now all those men are gone." He stopped.

I saw him swallow his words as he stared at Cai, who still wept down on one knee. The pain in him was so immense it filled the room, himself too ashamed and disgraced to lift his head and hold Arthur's stare.

"My life is broken," Cai sobbed, "…broken. I see now I was wrong… learned a terrible lesson of blood, our blood…you will break with me for all time…Arthur…"

He lifted his head, face streaked with tears, and as I saw this I remembered Cai coming to Gwynedd as a boy with his father to fight with my father against the invading Gaels from Hibernia. Cai, who had joined with me in defending Arthur from the other boys in our village, who attacked or baited him for being different. Cai, who had loved Arthur from the start, seeing in him something worth protecting, worth fighting for. Cai, of all the others save Medraut, had been our friend from the day we met, and here he was on his knees and weeping.

Arthur turned away without saying another word; he dropped down onto his pallet and the fire died in his eyes, closed his eyes and hung his head into his hands, and everything around us remained as still as a hot day of stormy skies.

Twenty of our men dead.

And the Saxons who had killed them still on the rampage, most likely fired up by their victory and wanting more British blood to drink as they marched on to sack Venta Belgarum.

When Arthur lifted his head, he told us, "I want to turn this defeat into a crushing annihilation of those Saxons; tomorrow we ride for the Venta crossroad. But what do I do with you, Cai? I don't know how to deal with this."

Looking now at me, Arthur asked me, "What do I do with him? He's the best rear-guard I have, will ever have. I cannot tear him down and I don't know how to deal with this."

Cai told him, "You must punish me. Under Ambrosius, I would be executed for direct insubordination and causing the deaths of our fighting men. But I know you won't do that to me…so I should give up my life for

this. I led those men wrong. They died on my orders. I should give up my life, it's the only worthy payment for what I did."

"Do not say that!" Arthur cried at him. "No one in my army is going to sacrifice their lives for…for…Cai, I can only demote you. You cannot lead a unit under me again; not till you understand fully that I do not win battles through luck. Not till you understand you cannot do what I do."

"I've already learnt it. I know you are special. I thought I could ride on your wake. I thought I could take the power of your name and use it for myself. What I did…I'm destroyed and I've learnt it already."

The silence around us now seemed even more intense; it felt like the end of all things, and Arthur sat and thought about Cai's words.

He said, "Get up off your knees. I see your shame. Tomorrow, we are going to hunt down those Saxons and destroy them to a man."

"Commander," Howell told him, "you have to know this; the men who went with Cai did themselves disobey your orders. They volunteered and paid with their lives for insubordination and the whole troop will know it."

"But, Arthur, please, you are wounded," Val reminded him. "You should give the battles over to me. You should stay and recover here."

Arthur ignored him. He said, "Howell, you will lead the remnant of Cai's men till I can rebuild your unit. Cai, you are stripped of rank and you are staying at my side where I can watch your every move. We are riding out tomorrow, all of us. Val, go and get the troops ready to ride after dawn. To the Venta crossroad and stop these bloody Saxons from attacking the town. I'll come and see your surviving men after supper. We have to talk about this; I have to know how they feel about seeing their brothers slaughtered."

He looked at Cai now; said to him, "I trusted you…trusted you with my life. What went wrong?"

Cai looked at me; he looked at me for help.

Plead his case? I could not say anything, as I felt the same as Arthur. We had trusted him with our lives.

Cai answered only what he knew, "I thought I could take the power of you, Arthur, you make me feel invincible. For those of us who know you, who ride at your side and fight in your wars, you make us feel invincible. I was wrong. I am not invincible. But you have won every battle you have

engaged in, and I'm not the only one who believes you are invincible. That's why these men follow you. They live off your invincibility."

"I think you should go now before you start blaming me for your own failure, because it sounds like it already. Go and join Howell and be ready for tomorrow."

Cai stood up and saluted him, upright and bravely, turned to go, and when he had gone, leaving us alone, a cold sense of pain passed through me. Arthur looked at me, an indescribable look.

He said, "Is that what I am, invincible? Every battle I've led, I've won. And I'm going to win tomorrow. So do you think this of me, and is this why Cai did what he did?"

I told him what I believed to be true, "I think so, he did not mean to disobey; he meant to use your name, just as he said. But I don't think of you as invincible. I see only you, just you. And I feel safe when you are at my side. That's all I know, and that's enough for me. I don't need you to be invincible and I'm prepared for you to lose."

He answered, "And that's why you are the best warrior of all, the best."

50: BEGINNING the SAXON WARS

WE raised all hell-fire with the noise of us as we rode out of Calleva for battle the following morn; the townsfolk now seeing the full force of our mounted army as they stood aside and waved. We thundered by them, horse after horse, riding in two single file columns.

We watched as Taredd, our new scout, took the main road south to warn the people of Venta that Saxons were marching their way. The rest of us turned east to take the road that would lead us to the crossroads, where we hoped to stop the Saxons before they could reach Venta. The morning grew overcast, though the sun came shining through breaks in the clouds, almost as if the light was showing us the way to war.

The ride to the crossroads was short, and we would reach our target in less than one watch. Arthur did not push us beyond the reach of our horses, but kept us steady. He kept Cai right at his side and the sad remnants of Cai's unit just behind again, now commanded by Howell ap Berth. And so we rode on, fierce, because what we wanted was revenge, revenge to add to defence, making our ride a purpose even more powerful than not, making

our ride another source of power that we gathered with each forward trot of our mounts.

On for an hour and we reached the crossroads, and saw nothing. No Saxons, only empty land and we stopped, Arthur signalling to dismount and rest for a while.

Straight away Howell came over to us. Said, “Commander, I think the Saxons are further south again.”

“I know,” Arthur answered, watching out towards the south. “There’s a smaller crossroad,” he called to us all. “South again from here that leads directly to Venta. I remember it from one of the maps Ambrosius had made years ago when he used to defend these rides. We cannot stay long! Just enough to take a drink.”

Grabbing something to eat and drink from our packed provisions, we mounted again and waited for orders.

Arthur trotted up along our lines, calling out, “When we sight the Saxons, full charge! Five units, myself in the lead. Full charge. I have to stop them taking defensive positions. But nothing will stop you in the line that I take. No Saxon can stand in the face of two hundred charging British horses. No Saxon will stand before us! Today these Saxons believe they take what is ours, and make it their own, but they do not know about me! They do not know about my men, the warriors of the Clan Bear! Britain’s greatest defence. Full charge and nothing will stop you!”

He turned and rode back to the head of the line, and we followed him, rode on beyond the main crossroads and headed further south, all the time watching for the enemy. And found them.

Found them walking in a host of over two hundred men, straight for Venta Belgarum across a wide open plain in a band near twelve men wide. The plain before us had low undulating hills, more like low mounds that we could use to gain a long charge.

Right at this moment Arthur gave the signal to form into our units, and our spears came down, and he went first into the charge, myself on his right, and we spearheaded at full gallop down the plain with the draco standards screaming like banshees above us, and when the Saxons realised they were caught, they stopped in confusion.

Over two hundred fully mounted warriors charging for their heads, they scattered and broke and we ploughed into them so hard, so fast,

whoever stood in our way was trampled and crushed; bones snapped and shields shattered as our front-line horses, Arthur's and mine were armoured. No man, not even a strong and powerful one could stand against an armoured horse in full charge.

Saxons were thrown down as if they were nothing, smashed into the warriors beside them, crushed between us and unable to move; in too close to even use their spears, we barrelled through them, taking heads, then out the far side. We ran past and wheeled to come in again.

Arthur led us in at an oblique angle, slicing through the thinnest side of them, where behind us on our rear flanks, left and right, came another two units and it was like ploughing down wicker-men that stood in a field to scare the crows. And as we came in again, we crashed through their desperate attempts to stand and form a shield-wall, but they could not move, as we had stolen their plan.

Charge after charge we made, three units to push through the mass, another two to hold the rear and the front. The straight line of attack that Arthur wanted was working; this way, the Saxons could not drop into their shield-wall and bring down their spears against our horses, as we had already broken them, and there was no way in all living hell-fire could they reform to stand against us again. On through the centre of them we smashed their skulls, sliced their necks, and drove spears through their chests, killing everything in front of us.

To the rear, Howell held his lines and stopped the Saxons from retreating; too far into our territory, they must have known themselves trapped from any hope of escape, for they could not run forward, they could not run behind, their right flank was already cut through and their left was the only hope for them: now they ran, but there was nowhere to run. The plain stretched long and wide and we chased them down and cut through their heads and necks with our swords and watched them drop under our horses' hooves. A small band of enemy escaped the mass in front of me and ran free in a line south and east. I separated from Arthur, just glimpsing him turn to join the main battle.

While before me, I chased the Saxons with my own warriors, Gwydre on my right, the others in a line behind; as we galloped, one Saxon turned and hurled his spear at us; a beautiful cast I thought as it winged past between me and Gwydre, though hitting a target behind.

I turned to see one of my men drop, the spear in his chest.

Rage!

It came over me like a wave and I urged my horse on, came up behind the Saxon and rammed my spear through his back as he tried to flee. Then letting the shaft drop, I pulled my sword as I turned back to kill his brothers. There, far back the way we had come, back in the mass of the battle, I saw the Dragon standard waving in the distance. My horse carried on without me leading him, a turn that bent inward at an angle; the angle of attack that we had learned in training.

And left-handed, I felt my sword come into my hand almost as if it had a will of its own, and turning in this angle of attack, I saw three Saxons standing in line to face me, on their feet one last time before they died. Or before I died. As being left-handed, I offered them my heart, open on my left. They saw this and all three hurled their spears at me, one after the other, but I dropped low over my horse's neck, dropped my left shoulder against my horse's left front leg and the spears winged over my back, missing me and my horse by the span of a man's hand.

I dragged in a hot breath and held it. And when I came up again, I saw Gwydre there on my left. Together now we rode in.

One of them Gwydre killed with his spear, and the second of them, I killed with my sword.

Gwydre called to me, "They killed Druce! He was my friend, my friend!"

"Come on! We have to re-join our unit. Can't you see there's more to kill?" and I took him back with me towards the fighting mass, the numbers dropped to well under half.

Away to my right, Howell had charge of Cai's unit and they were still holding the Saxon line of retreat, firing arrows into them as some had managed to band into a group to repel our charges. Arthur had taken the head of the battle, where he always fought, right in the lead, in the hardest line, also where he could watch the play of battle and direct our plan of attack. As I rode up, I saw him charging straight through the thickest point, calling for Gerren to pull out and regroup with our own unit. I saw what Arthur had seen; Gerren and his men were in danger of becoming trapped in a circling band of Saxons, the last to stand and fight and it was up to us now to smash through from the rear, breaking their circle.

As Arthur came through, I joined on his right, Gwydre wheeled to his left, and we sliced through the thickest part of the Saxon rear, where they were attempting to stop Gerren's men from splitting them in half. A great slow weight of fighting descended, and we moved through, broke free, regrouped and charged in, each time cutting down another rank. The Saxons who were left to fight began a retreat into the west, heading towards Venta, as if they could find escape there. They ran, splitting into two as they went, the largest band moving straight ahead.

Arthur called to me, "Ride down that second group! The smaller band. I'll take the larger!"

Our troop now began gathering in greater numbers to ride down the last of the enemy. Behind me, Howell's work was almost done. Gerren, saved in the centre, finished his work, while the rest of us gave the last final chase. Again, me and Arthur parted, and I rode down the last of them. I kept on, now finding that Cai was on my left; he gave me a fierce glance as he charged beyond my reach, his longer sword arm taking out the Saxon in front of me.

I sat on horseback and watched him fall into a battle-madness, no doubt born out of the insanity of his actions of the other day, to take revenge for his own stupidity in a wild savage attack that hammered down any living thing in his path. He went on before me, snapping his sword in a reckless fight from man to man, bellowing like a bull as he went mad like a god-struck priest, unable to stop.

I saw him pick a Saxon straight up off the ground and stab through his throat with his sword and then drop him like a child. And he went on like this till nothing was left to kill; only another high bellowing cry from behind me, and all in a dreamlike place of exhaustion, I turned back and saw Arthur down off his horse, on his knees with a Saxon smashing hard against his shield with a club, trying to break his skull, bellowing like Cai. I rode back; saw someone coming from my right, from the corner of my eye, someone streaked by in front of me.

And as I came up, I saw it was Gwydre slicing the edge of his sword against the Saxon's throat, hacking out two or three times where a sudden massive spray of blood gushed over him, even over me as I came in, feeling blood spray over my face and into my mouth. Here I saw the Saxon's head fall half severed from his neck, while under him Arthur had sliced through

the back of his knee with his sword as the man staggered to turn. The last Saxon standing dropped sideways, twitching and gushing blood from his neck. I jumped off my horse, ran over and helped Arthur up off the ground, pulling aside his shield, and when he came up, his face was dark with fresh running blood.

He stood before me, sword in hand, breathing hard, yet quiet, watching the field around him through the blood running into his left eye, now in a kind of moon-tranced stare and spitting blood from his mouth.

For a moment we all stood still; all around us dead men lay on mounds of more dead. And as before, Arthur was trembling so hard he dropped to his knees, head down and blood dripped off his chin, down to the ground where I stood, my throat so dry I not could swallow. Around me I heard the sounds of crying and pain, and a wicked sense of endless battle rose up yet again when Cai came riding over.

He jumped off his horse and began killing every wounded Saxon under him who still lived.

He raged still like a bull, going from man to man and stabbing them through their chests with his sword, half mad, till Arthur looked up, stood up and cried out, "Somebody stop him!"

"I don't think we can, he's in a battle-fever," I told him.

"Cai!" and Arthur ran after him. "Stop it! Stop killing now! Stop!"

He pulled on Cai's arm to stop him, jumped in front of him and landed a punch into his face. Cai staggered back and dropped and hung his head in misery, finally stopped. All around us now men began gathering to the Dragon standard, our rallying point after battle, all ready to be counted alive, but Arthur stood alone in the midst of a mound of dead men, looking back at me, then away again into the west and called, "Someone's coming!"

We all turned to see a line of wains, and riders coming from Venta Belgarum, and when I looked back, I saw Gwydre sitting on his horse, watching me. He turned and walked away. I followed him, because he was walking back to where Druce had fallen, and he was off his horse and picking his friend up from the ground and holding his body in his arms, stroking his face, crying.

He said, "They killed him, they killed him…Druce."

And I just stood still, watching his grief, gone numb in my heart, or trying not to feel grief, because one day it would be me…it would be me

holding the body of someone I loved. It would happen one day to me and I looked up and saw the riders and the wains coming closer.

Still Arthur was standing there, and I wondered what was happening to him, because he was now different; something had changed and he was not moving, but bleeding down his face, and I walked over to join him, studying him. He was not with us, but somewhere else that was moving in his mind…visions? I did not know, but something was over him and I pulled on his arm to come under the Dragon; here we waited for those who were coming towards us. The strangest day; strange day of battle. Stillness descended; clouds over the sun, and a drop of light that brought a chill wind of death.

The wains stopped and an important looking man came over with two women following. Behind him was Taredd and his riders and people from Venta, women to help with the wounded and men to help clear the field of our dead. The important looking man came and stood looking at us, as if we were bred from devils, and I saw now what he must have seen in us; young warriors sprayed with blood.

It was on my face and Gwydre's, and Cai still down on his knees, the rest gathered. And Arthur, dark blood dripping from his face, standing, saying nothing. The man introduced himself; he was Atticos ap Verica, king of the Atrebates. And I could not believe he had brought his wife and daughter out to meet us right here on this bloody battlefield, with us steaming and blood splattered, with our Supreme Commander wandering in places unknown, hardly seeing this king before him; this man of great importance, who would one day come to support us as our land's protectors.

I heard King Atticos say to an aide, "This is Britain's great commander, heir of Ambrosius? This idiot-boy, and this is his army? A bunch of broken youths?"

And I answered him in anger, "Youths who destroy Saxons, and Arthur is no idiot-boy. Take a look around you, sir. Without us, these dead-men Saxons would have sacked your city, slaughtered your family. We are fighting for you."

"And that is why I came out here to meet you," he answered me. "To greet you who fight for us, to honour you. Who are you, lad?"

"Bedwyr ap Pedrawg, Prince of Dogfeiling. I am Gododdin and Arthur's lieutenant and foster-brother."

"Well met, Prince Bedwyr. You speak well. But you heard my words. I am stunned, for this is a massacre. This is not a good place for women, I know, but we want to meet your Commander…if he can speak now."

Atticos then gave Arthur a long look of interest and wonder, and I told him, "He's taken a head wound. I have to get his helmet off."

"I will help you," the king said.

When I went and took off Arthur's helmet for him, I found a deep wound on his forehead, saw that the Saxon who had attacked him had chopped a piece out of his helmet, and the metal had chinked inward and gashed his forehead; it would need stitching when we got back to city-Calleva, for the wound was still bleeding. But King Atticos insisted that we all return to Venta Belgarum with him.

Arthur refused, he said, "Back to Calleva, we have all our doctors there, and our billets. It would be better for the men to go back to what they know."

Atticos looked about to protest, but I stepped in, explaining, "This is not the moment for visits to your city, Lord Atticos, please understand, Arthur has just led a massive battle and taken a head wound. He also has falling-sickness, which takes his reason sometimes. Please, when this is all over, we will go to your city. Not now."

Atticos nodded, and Arthur went off to get our men ready to ride back to Calleva. We moved then into a long afternoon of clearing the field, and stripping the dead of their valuables. I found from out of the mass of dead men, only ten lost on our own side. I could not believe it.

I couldn't believe this day.

I said to Atticos as he walked at my side, "I know this is not a good first meeting, my lord."

"But you are a good lieutenant, so I will take your word. I would like to escort you back to Calleva and stay with Master Rhodri. I know him well, and I do want to know your Arthur better than this first meeting. Terrible. Maybe I blundered in at the wrong moment. I have never fought a battle such as this, and you are all so very young."

So we rode back to Calleva Atrebatum, taking the wains that King Atticos had brought with him to carry our wounded and dead. And Atticos himself escorted us, with his wife and daughter, who all this time had stood in the background, both women looking afraid…afraid of us.

I rode close to Arthur's side, because he still seemed not himself, and his wound began to bleed again as he went, dripping off his chin and splashing his saddle; he kept wiping the blood away from his eye and dropping his head, as if something was attacking him still.

I did not think he even knew what had happened this day, because he looked at me and said, "Who is that woman riding behind me? Where did she come from?"

"There are two of them, mother and daughter. The wife and daughter of Atticos Verica. You know, the king of the Atrebates. You just met him."

He glanced back at the woman riding behind him, gave her a long searching look, then back at me, saying, "King of the Atrebates, aye? But his wife is a bit flush, Bedwyr, don't you think?" and he made a thrust with his hips.

"Do not start, you moon-blasted idiot! She's married to a king and old enough to be your mother. You cannot lay everything in a skirt."

"I can, and I will," he said back.

This unbelievable day seemed never-ending to me, and Arthur was giving eyes to King Atticos's wife, not even glancing at his beautiful young daughter. Whatever had happened to him on that battlefield, it had unhinged his head…

51: THE KISS

WHEN we got back to Calleva, the whole town was up and in a high state of excitement. The people knew we were coming home victorious, and when we rode in through the gates, everything around us erupted fast.

Flags flying, women running with gifts to Master Rhodri's house, men cheering, and the late afternoon sun shining down in long beams through the clouds that parted, and it was all too chaotic to even find the road to the stables. We were surrounded and hailed as heroes, golden-aged heroes, and the blood on us meant nothing to those we fought for, not unless it was the blood of our enemies.

Rhodri and his sons, their eyes watched us with more than awe, but adulation, rapt to be near us, staring at Arthur as if he had been born in the blood of a god; reverence, veneration and devotion, it was all there on their faces…all watching me with the same looks as I took Arthur through to the doctor to get his forehead stitched.

Later that night with Rhodri's family, with King Atticos of the Atrebates and his wife, Lady Arwen, and one of his three daughters, Princess Meghan, and our unit captains, with little Robyn standing at Arthur's side and staring at him as if he had suddenly reappeared after disappearing for many years, with me telling everyone about the battle and how Gwydre had saved our Commander's life by trying to chop off a Saxon's head, killing the last Saxon standing, and Arthur listening to me as if he had not even been there himself, after all this, we went to the east-gate taberna to get roaring drunk.

The whole town had fallen into a raging party, and the taberna, tiny in size was packed full with our warriors, almost all of us. But not Arthur, who had to stay behind with Rhodri and Atticos and be a good boy and talk to his elders nicely. And not Cai, who was banished somewhere, or else had banished himself, still ashamed to join us for his crimes. Yet the rest of us, free to drink, sing and dance and look for loose girls.

We packed around the bar, the barrels of ale and started a drinking competition even before it could grow fully dark, and it was a pity Cai was not here, because he knew the best drinking songs, the best rutting-songs, and so on, but we had to make do with Royri Angen, who sang in a far better voice, and I told everyone what a great warrior Gwydre was, he who had saved our leader from losing his head to a Saxon who looked like a troll who looked like a goblin with flesh-rot, and all through this, Gwydre stood and watched me with a mix of sorrow and something else in his eyes.

Women and serving girls ran everywhere, and I wished more than ever that Arthur could be with us now, but he was even more distant from us in his Command; he must be important, must be seen to be important, not seen as an eighteen-year-old youth, out rutting with young maids.

No, not him; and as the night went on, I drank like I could and found a seat at the bench next to Val, who looked so drunk he was sinking away from me and under the table. I pulled him back up again and told him to hold his ale better than this, for he was disappointing me and I challenged him to down a tankard in one.

He told me to bugger off.

"Nice of you," I answered and looked up to see Royri Angen start to show us how to dance; that is, how he thinks they dance at home in Hibernia. As someone played a drum and another played a flute, Royri

began a rampaging dance that looked as if he had hot rocks in his breeches, burning his balls; everyone roared with laughter as his legs went in the opposite direction to the top of his body.

I was drunk enough to think his arms were swirling in wild circles; I glared at him and drank more ale. Now I laughed and laughed; this Gael was killing me!

Val noticed me laughing and yelled out, “Here you men! The Fox is laughing!”

And everyone cheered me to the roof.

Royri carried on dancing like a flushed lunatic and a woman who may have been the bar-keep’s wife started singing.

A brilliant night.

And it went on like this for ages, and through it all, Gwydre stood near a door that went out into a dark back courtyard and watched me with his sorrowing eyes. It was so late now that a lot of the men had gone out into the warm summer night to carrying on drinking outside, or to find a place where they could fall into the grass and sleep. And I sat still at the bench with Val. Things were beginning to quiet, as we realised how spent we were from the day’s battle, how we had survived it with only ten men taken from us. One of them Druce, Gwydre’s friend.

I looked at Gwydre now, and Val nudged me, whispered to me, “You know he’s carrying a love-light for you, don’t you, our Fox?”

“Not me. For Druce.”

“No, it is you. He is in love with you, our Fox. See the way he looks at you? I call that love. He does it all the time when you are not looking.”

I did not want to hear this, but I couldn’t stop looking at Gwydre as he stared so much at me, so lost without his friend he was.

I caught my gaze with his; he held me, his eyes a soft blue-grey, and as I sat, Val got up and said, “I’m going…cannot stand another moment of this…boy-love…” He left me, taking a group of our men with him.

No one was left now save myself and Gwydre, with Royri dead asleep with his head in his arms on the bench; some others flat out on their backs in various corners, the barkeep himself gone and all seemed stilled and silent. My ale was all but gone, just a mouthful left and I sat back against the wall in the corner and closed my eyes.

I thought I was asleep, but I felt someone come and sit next to me, he picked up my right arm and put it around his shoulders, moving in close to me. Here he laid his head on my chest, and I felt him shaking in tears, his sorrow, Gwydre. Crying next to me, softly though, and I could not turn him away, I could not even think to turn him away. And as he softly cried, I caressed his head, his blond hair. He had been waiting all night for this, and I moved my fingers through his hair, stroking his pain.

"Gwydre, we all lose someone, we will all lose someone we love."

But he answered, "I love you."

"No, you don't. You're young, we both are; it is not unusual for young warriors to need each other, even love each other."

He pulled back and looked at me, my arm still around him and I held him close, held him tight, felt him watching my face, searching my eyes. And I looked at him, so much smaller than myself. When standing, his head reached only to my chin, small and powerful a warrior as any.

He had saved Arthur's life.

I looked into him, no ordinary boy this one. He was a boy made man in the Clan Bear where he belonged; and his heat, his body close to mine, the way he looked at me, the way he touched the corner of my right eye, and I let him, because he was exploring the shape of my eyes, the fold of skin in the corner of my eye, making me different from others.

I was barely aware of how I lowered my head to his lips and kissed him, and he sent me falling out of control, because I kissed him deep and long, deep into his mouth and he seemed to die under my kiss, moaning with pleasure…he tasted like no girl I had ever kissed, not even Caryn, because Gwydre had the strength of man running all through him, running all through me. I could not release him, so I kissed him till I wanted him; wanted him so badly I had to pull away. I pulled away, shocked, picked up the last of my ale, drank it, forced down the confusion growing in my mind and left, got up and left him, walked out into the lane outside the taberna. I turned down the lane, walking back to Rhodri's house, torn up inside and backing myself into corners.

I could not remember how I got home, couldn't remember how I found my way into our room, only remembered standing in the darkness with moonlight coming through the window, and watching Arthur as he slept naked on top of his pallet under the light of the moon, his arm out of

bed and dangling on the floor, his right leg bound with bandages, his black hair over his face and him so beautiful…beautiful as the midnight sea and just as deep. I stood and stared at him sleeping, naked, unafraid, and I felt riven…

52: BEDWYR, GWYDRE, or ARNA

I must have dropped sometime very late and fell into exhausted dreams, waking only for the burial of our dead—a sunset burial the following evening; sweet, rested in the place where they lay their dead in city-Calleva, westward with the sun. It was beautiful, sad, sorrowing, final, though with a strong sense of peace and release.

Before they were gone forever, Arthur touched each of his dead warriors over their hearts and bowed his head to their loss.

Buried with all the honour we could give them, us living, standing in full battle-gear and our swords drawn point down. So beautiful in the sunset, I cried, cried when Gwydre fell on his knees when his friend went into the ground, because it was like all things were being broken and shattered. Man by man, slowly over time, till it would be me, and I wondered what the peace of death would be like.

I cried silent tears as Gwydre sobbed and Arthur stood over him, reached down and touched his shoulder. Gwydre looked up at him, looked at him for a long searching moment. A long look, because I knew there was a thousand reasons for living in Arthur's dark eyes.

And Gwydre came to his feet and it was over, men to the grave and the rest of us…back to a quiet supper, and as we walked through to the apple garden in Rhodri's house, Arthur said to me, "Twice now Gwydre's distinguished himself in battle. He saved my life yesterday. Could have been me going into the ground. I want to reward him."

I agreed. And together we went to supper.

During the night it rained, not heavy, but a light rain, washing everything fresh and rich and clean, and we sat out in the apple garden the following morn; a beautiful morn. Here we waited for the Greek doctor, Master Nicomede Nikolaidhis, to come and rebind Arthur's wounded leg before we left Calleva for the long ride and border patrol on the way back to Caer Cadwy.

Earlier that same morning, King Atticos Verica and his wife and daughter had left after lavishing us with gifts for our successful defence of their city, and Atticos swore to uphold Arthur's Command and support our warriors in battle, and on into all future conflicts. Arthur in turn swore to face these conflicts with commitment and duty to his command. We all knew that the defence of the Island of Britannia was now fully and firmly in Arthur's hands. He had won the north as Pendragon, and he had won the south as dux of battles. Dux Bellorum and Magister Militum. And as I watched him now, him wearing naught but a shirt and short breeches, sitting in the garden on a chair, rocking his legs back and forth in his impatience, I loved him. I smiled and laughed.

"What's so funny?" he said.

"You are."

He looked at me. "What have I done?"

"You have got them all, all these older men, by their balls. Slaughterer of Saxons, Defender of Britain, one moment you're an awe-filled leader, next moment you are a boy picking at your scabs, I find that funny."

"I'm wounded. I cut my knee; it's only a small scab." He pointed at a tiny scratch on his knee and I burst out laughing. I looked up and saw someone walking through the garden. It was Gwydre.

He came marching up and stopped before us, giving a salute.

"You wanted to see me, Commander," he said. He glanced at me, held my gaze for a moment so brief it was near unnoticeable.

Arthur stood up and pulled Gwydre close, hugged him and said, "You saved my life and I want to thank you." He dug into the pocket of his jacket that hung over the back of his chair and pulled out a thin yet finely worked gold torc. "I want you to have this; wear it all the time, as it marks you as a member of the inner Clan, close to my heart and higher in status than you are now. I want you to work close with Bedwyr, on the battlefield as his defender."

Arthur then put the torc around Gwydre's neck, and Gwydre stood back, looking at him with amazement, or wonder.

"Thank you, sir," he stammered and gave me another glance.

I nodded to him.

Arthur then sat back down in his chair and complained, "Where's that bloody doctor? I want to get the troop on the road. Gwydre, go and find the

doctor, tell him to come to me now."

"Yes, Commander," and Gwydre saluted, turned, and as he went, he gave me another glance, a hot glance this time and he broke into a wide smile and left. And as soon as he left, Arthur gave me a long and interesting stare.

"What?" I said to him.

"I think that boy is carrying a torch for you, brother."

I never answered, only grunted and went off to pack my gear.

In the end, we did not leave Calleva till after midday. All mounted and ready to ride, we waited; we saw Master Rhodri coming towards us with his two sons, at last giving them over to us to join our army. They would ride back to Cadwy with us, coming with us this very day.

Arthur and Rhodri shook hands, and little Robyn began to sob. Rhodri had to hold her back, because not only were her brothers leaving her, but Arthur as well, the love of her life.

The Supreme Commander was off his horse yet again; kissed her, and she cried and wailed, but Arthur had to leave. Up again now on horseback, he called for us to ride. And with all the townspeople out to wave farewell, we left their city in a mass, trotting down the main street and out of the west gate and took the road homeward.

We were down a whole unit, and Arthur wanted to rebuild what Cai had lost before we could ride out again in the coming weeks. He also wanted to wait for Medraut and Gareth to re-join us at Cadwy before making another move against the Saxons. And because Gwydre had been elevated to the inner Clan and my defender, he rode just behind me. Then as our columns moved into riding formation, the sun shone over us.

Augustus already on us, and I realised that only a year ago, Arthur had married Rhonwen, but she was gone now, and as I rode forward into the west, I also realised he had been Supreme Commander for a mere four months, and in this time, he had overthrown his father, taken the Pendragonship, then led us to four major victorious battles. I could barely grasp it and hold it still in my head. I glanced at Arthur now; himself riding next to me and stripped of his battle-gear, for how he loved the sun, how it tanned him golden brown.

He must have noticed me watching him, because he called across to me, "Shall we ride straight to Aquae Sulis, or south to Cadwy?"

“Why don’t you just go home? You’re wounded.”

Arthur answered, “Home then to Cadwy.”

It took three days to make the ride back; we did some scouting on the way, but the land was quiet and rested under the summer sun. And it felt good to ride up the road towards the high south-west gates of Caer Cadwy and through, the Dragon banners flying each side of the gate-heads. The Dumnonians were already calling this place the Stronghold of the Bear, and it felt even better to see everyone running out to greet us, calling, “The Clan is home! They are home!”

All around us the hilltop was alive with builders, still working on the construction of the roundhouses that would surround the hall. A few Roman style villas built in wood for the higher-ranking warriors were rising fast, and there were women everywhere.

We all went filing into the hall, seeing that Arthur’s beloved girls had not been idle while we had been gone; more new tapestries hung around the walls, more clay and bronze lamps and torches, beautifully designed woven tablecloths to hang over the table tops, set with beautiful red-ware and silver platters and glass Roman goblets, and through it all as I came in, I looked for Arna and couldn’t see her anywhere.

I dumped my gear and went to join Lady Elin, here with a group of Efa’s friends, all staring at us, delighted, Essylt near swooning that Arthur was home, and he had kissed her, so she could not take her eyes off him.

She said aloud, “I swear, Efa, doesn’t he get more and more gorgeous every day?”

“Aye, he is beautiful. And look at our Prince Bedwyr! Come, my sweetheart, give me a kiss.”

I went over to her, kissed her lips and she beamed at us, then said, “I suppose you all want feeding?”

Arthur told her, “We have brought a mass of provisions from city-Calleva. Master Rhodri, the magistrate there, loaded us with cakes and buns made by his brilliant daughter, who cooks better than all of you women put together.”

“Insults!” Efa cried and Essylt giggled. They went off to help us unpack and set food and drink on the table.

As soon as they were gone, Arthur turned to me and whispered, “Where’s Arna?”

"I told you, I'm not having her anymore."

"You're a saint with women, aren't you?" and he was gone outside to see to his men…

That night brought the customary and required homecoming victory feast, and all the women agreed that little Robyn's cooking was magnificent.

But before eating, it was Arthur who went hunting for Arna himself. He found her out in one of the roundhouses, where she had been hiding. He brought her in and sat her down next to me and gave me a glare.

I could have strangled him, and I snarled at him, but I did not want to see Arna looking so sad and hanging her head beside me. We sat hardly speaking all night, and by the end of the evening when Arthur was throwing all the warriors out, because he couldn't wait to take Efa to his room and poke her raw, I had said only a few words to Arna—how are you?

And, "I meant what I said to you before we left. I cannot see you anymore. It's over."

She did not reply, just hung her head and looked at her platter of untouched food, but after a while she said, "I hate you."

And that was that. She loved me, she hated me.

I picked up a tankard of ale, drank, and when the hall was all but empty save for a few inner members of the Clan, one of Lady Efa's friends sat down by the fireside and started to sing us some songs.

I had heard Royri Angen sing in his fine male voice, but this woman could have made angels weep, she could have carved open the hearts of the most savage Saxon and have them coming back for more. She stunned us all to silence, and when the lights fell low and the fire died, the crying sorrow of her voice and her words brought home to us the losses we had left behind on Britain's battlefields.

She sang about the end of summer, the coming of winter and the death of a great hero. So sweet and pain-filled was her song that I heard someone crying.

I turned. Gwydre, sitting on the opposite bench with his heart broken, breaking out to show us all the terrible depths that grief could take us. Still the woman sang and Gwydre gave in to his pain and cried. I looked around the hall. In the dim light, Arthur had his head down, and I knew what he was feeling: twenty men killed by Cai, and the others lost in war. And I did

not know why this singer had to make us cry, but she did. I got up and went and sat next to Gwydre, put an arm around him, tried to soothe him with a few words, words of the living.

The songs ended and the night was over and Arthur got up and came over to us; said, “Gwydre, don’t ever think you are alone, don’t ever think that. You are home now, and safe.”

And as he left us, taking Efa to sleep with him, I found Gwydre a place in one of the roundhouses outside, and before I left him, he gripped my arm and held me back. He wanted me. He wanted me to follow him into the roundhouse; only I stood still and looked into his eyes. He was suffering, and he wanted me to comfort him on our own journey to the grave. I looked at him, and his hand held my arm, his fingers tight around me. He pleaded with me in his look, and I saw myself doing again what I had done with him back in that Calleva inn…that kiss…

I shook my head at him, no, and walked back to my room in the darkness, seeing the guards pacing, silhouetted against the night stars above me on the battlement walls. The Dragon banners flapped in the wind and everything felt stilled and sweet with night-time summer scents. It was quiet and we were safe…

53: THE SNAKE is HERE

MANY days of hard training went by.

And I personally trained Sandedd and Pedr ap Rhodri, while Arthur rebuilt Cai’s unit and sent out scouts to patrol the outer reaches of our lands. We waited for Medraut to come.

Every night there was a small feast, songs, music, poetry, and board-games and dice. Every night, Arthur fell in closer and closer with the women, flirting with them till even Elin began to melt.

I watched all this, the way he looked at them, and how they in turn could barely take their eyes off him. With them was Arna. And through the nights, I spent time with Gwydre, feeling close to him, and lost from Arna. And many of my new recruits, we watched as Arna sat at work embroidering a standard sized banner with a fox-head emblem—for me. To try and win me back, and it broke my heart that there was nothing she could do to save herself with me. And she did exquisite work, and I watched her.

She pretended to ignore me, but she could not control her desire to stare at me when she thought I was not aware of her. I slept alone.

Nearing a fortnight after we had been back at Caer Cadwy, I woke one morn to find Arthur leaving for a trip to Lindinis. Needing to visit the men there and station some troops, he also took the girls with him. "They want to go shopping," he told me, standing at the hall door and watching Essylt and Arna gathering their things to go with him.

A small wain waited outside to carry the girls.

"I want you to stay in charge here," Arthur told me. "We might not be back tonight. But you know what it's like, shopping with women…" he laughed, maybe thinking it a jest to take girls with him on patrol.

"Just keep your hands out from under their skirts," I said. "You'll get back a lot quicker that way."

The girls were now ready to leave, all excited and laughing, calling goodbye to me as they climbed up into the wain, driven by Val. Arthur, fully armed, up on his horse, trotted down to the gate, which opened on his command, and they were all gone for the day, leaving me in charge.

I worked for most of the day before going back to the hall around late afternoon, utterly spent and worn out. Lady Efa was home to help as always, bringing me some food and drink. And I sat still at the bench in the cool of the hall, which seemed to be cool no matter how hot it was outside. And as I sat, dozing for a moment, I heard a call and horn blast from the gate-tower.

A warrior came running in and told me, "Riders approaching. White Snake. It's Lord Medraut ap Lot from the north and he has a war-host with him, my prince."

Oh goddess. Medraut.

He was back, and for some reason, my blood ran cold.

I looked at Efa. "Beware lady," I warned her. "The Snake is here, you will have to organise food for his men."

I got up, finding my heart beating fast as I strapped on my sword and walked down to the gate-tower and climbed to the top; from here I saw him coming. It was Medraut all right. I could see his White Snake standard high overhead and coming towards us now.

"Open the gates!" I ordered the gatekeepers, and they pulled open the two massive gates, and in he rode with a war-host of fifty Gododdin, the

Gododdin Guard. Around him our Clan were gathering, greeting his arrival. I came down from the tower and pushed through the men, and as I looked, I saw no sign of Uki Wolf-leg or even Gareth coming in with him. But when Medraut saw me, he broke into a wide grin.

He grabbed me hard and crushed me against him, saying, "Where is he? How bloody rude of him not to be here to greet me. Arthur, where are you!" he called out, already seeming half mad to me.

"Good timing, Medraut," I told him as I walked him back to the hall. "He left just this morning for Lindinis; might not be back till tomorrow."

"And where in the cauldron of hell is Lindinis?" he answered, staring at me as I took him inside; here he stopped with his men around him, looking the place up and down and screwing up his face. "So this is what the Dumnonians call a hall, is it? Don't they know how to build? Did the Romans not teach them anything?"

His men laughed.

Medraut looked around some more, fixed on the Red Dragon banner on the wall, the Pendragon's Chair, the great lamp holder hanging over his head, the tapestries. Lady Efa and her women now coming in with food and drink and setting it down on the table-tops for him and his men. Efa curtsied to him, the other women too. Once this was done, I invited the Gododdin to eat and drink with me. I sat down at my place behind the head-table and Medraut stood and stared at me.

He said, "I have something for you," and he went right back outside again, went to his horse as it still stood waiting to be stabled, came back in carrying a sack. To me, anything carried in a sack was ill news, and I was right. What Medraut did next shored it with me that he was cracked as a broken plate.

He dumped the sack on the tabletop before me and said, "For you."

I did not touch it, because I knew him too well, so I just sat and stared at him while his men set about eating and drinking, all talking together.

"All right," he said, and opened the sack and dumped a dead fox right in front of me, right on top of the tablecloth, where it lay with its tongue protruding from its mouth. My first feeling was to jump for his throat, to drag him outside and beat him to bloody raw meat.

I clenched my fists, but fought down the violence that rose up inside me as fast as striking lightning. It took all my strength not to kill him in

front of his men, but I was in charge of the caer, and to do such a thing was unthinkable. Medraut was unthinkable…despicable…mad.

"Don't you like it?" he said. "I killed it for you."

I looked at the poor dead thing; a beautiful creature, its coat still shining and red-brown. It could not have been dead for long.

As I stroked it to see if it was still warm, I came to my feet and Medraut's men laughed again.

I said to him, low over the tabletop, "One day, I will stick my dagger right down your throat. Snake, what made you do this? What possessed you to kill this fox, and dump it in front of me, right on the very day you first come back to the Clan? Are you mad?"

"I thought of you," he said. "I thought you would like the pelt. Though you cannot do much with only one. I trapped it when we were hunting for hares, it was caught in our trap, and so I put it out of its misery and brought it to you. When did you say Arthur would be back? I never came all this way just to admire this gorgeous hall."

At last he took his helmet off, and his hair, streaked blonde and almost white, gave him a look of angelic beauty, and I wondered for the thousandth time how anything so angelic could be so evil. Suddenly I felt sorry for him, for the things that made him this way.

"Get something to eat," I told him.

"Did you fight Saxons? I was told you were fighting Saxons. You needed my help, I come, and what do I find? The lot of you on holiday."

He walked away then and sat down with his men and started to eat.

I picked the fox up and took it outside, and with it in my hands, I then noticed something else. I looked at its paws, its legs…there were no marks on its body that I could see at all, no signs that it had been in a trap. Foxes caught in snares will fight to the death to escape and would be wounded around their paws in their struggle, but this one was unmarked.

I searched through its fur for hidden signs of its killing, but found nothing. "Little brother, what did he do to you?" I took its body over behind the cook-house and dug a hole and buried it, telling him, "I'll have revenge for this. Don't worry, I'll avenge you one day."

I patted down the soil and went back into the hall, thinking I was the Fox, and one day, I would trap the Snake…and it was a near hellish night. Arthur did not come back with the women and I was forced to entertain the

Snake and his men alone, though I had to admit, as the night went on, Medraut softened and he began to tell me what was going on back in the North. I told him about the Saxon wars out from city-Calleva; he and his warriors sat around, listening to me tell the tale, all of them impressed.

But I had to tell him about Cai, and Medraut's look turned dark again. He never connected with Cai, thought him a blundering idiot who only stood up to life because of his powerful body, his great strength and height, his ability to fight like a one-man storm.

"Disobedient whelp of a bitch," he said of Cai. "He got all those men killed? He should have been executed for that. In the north, we would have killed him for that, wouldn't we, boys?"

All to a man they agreed with him.

I said, "Where is Uki? And Gareth?"

"They are both in Aquae Sulis. Uki wasn't strong enough to make it here today, so I left him in Sulis with Gareth to look after him. They will come either tomorrow, or the next day." Then he mumbled to me, "Jupiter's balls, I miss Arthur. Fox, come outside with me a moment. I want to say something to you in private."

Go outside with the Snake? I had to trust him and so I led him out the back, out by the cook-house.

Cold in the shadows, he said straight away, "I'm sorry for what I did, you know, with the dead fox. I'm really sorry I did that now. And I lied to you. I didn't kill it at all. I found it dead on the side of the road. It was just lying there as we passed, and for some reason, I felt sorry for it and picked it up. I don't know why I did it. I wish I had not done it. I do a lot of things I wish I had never done, but I cannot control it. I'm better when Arthur is around me…sorry."

I felt his words were sincere; I softened, said to him, "I'm sorry too. I'm sorry you are so twisted. Why don't you trust us to help you?"

He moved closer to me, right in close and I stood my ground.

He whispered, "Things did not go so well in the north. I haven't told you it all yet. And I tell you something else; Arthur will bleed when he finds out, when I tell him. And remember that Selgovae assassin who tried to kill him? I had that one for supper every night and you wouldn't believe how far I took him to get information out of him. But he's dead now. I killed him in the end. I had to."

“Medraut, what information did he have?”

“He led us almost to Cynan Aurelius, though we never caught him, he ran every time we got near, but I know Arthur will go for him again when we get back north in September. I have to invite Arthur formally to his father’s ridiculous wedding at the end of September.”

Aye, Uthyr was getting married and this meant another long ride into the far north, and I said, “If we have to ride all that way again, Arthur will make use of it and hunt for Aurelius himself.”

“He will when I tell him what I know.” The Snake then smiled; a smile of sick pleasure. He let his eyes travel up and down my body, studying me, moving in close, saying to my face, “Let’s go back inside now…before I take you up behind the cook-house and poke you wide open. Curse you, Fox, you are so delicious,” and he licked his lips at me.

I told him to go shaft a goat instead, and walked back into the hall, ready to organise places for the new arrivals to sleep, leaving Medraut standing behind, looking at me with his eyes blazing…

Early next morn I climbed up to the gate-tower, looking out for Arthur’s return. A fine morning, with mists hanging low around the base of the hill, and this morning felt cooler than others; maybe autumn was on its way. I figured that if Arthur had left Lindinis at dawn, he would be back very soon. I heard then a call, and Medraut climbed up to the tower to join me. He said nothing to me; he only stood and stared at me, stared at me till I turned to him and stared back. He smiled.

I winked at him before turning away, and here at last, I saw Arthur coming up the turn. I said, “Your cousin returns. Open the gates!”

Once more the gates opened and Arthur came riding in fast.

And as he came through, Medraut called out to him, “Hoi! Silurian!”

“Medraut!” Arthur called up to him. “I had a feeling you were here. Get down here now!”

Medraut went bounding down the stairs and out, and they were in each other’s arms in a moment, hugging till the wain came through with the women. Essylt saw her brother and cried out to him, jumped out of the carriage and threw herself at him.

Medraut picked her up and she wrapped her legs around his hips; he spun her around and they kissed each other like lovers. I went down to join them and we all walked together into the hall.

I had held breakfast off till their arrival home and it was now all ready, the Gododdin coming to their feet when Arthur came in. We sat together at the head-table and Medraut told his story over breakfast.

"Hold up, cousin, you will not like this," he said. "You wanted me to bring Princess Indec back here with me, didn't you? And you can see she's not here. She won't be here, ever. You are a fool, cousin, if you think I'm going to risk my own life to steal your cunts off their husbands for you. Forget her."

Arthur sat holding back his emotions.

Medraut went on; "She's married now. You know that. She married Hueil ap Caw, and not only that, but the Caws have been harbouring Cynan Aurelius. There was nothing we could do to find him. The girl is gone forever and you cannot get her back. She's a Caw now."

Arthur told him, "I'll get her back."

"No you won't. It will cause a war between Garwy's people and the Caws. Do you want that to happen? This marriage gives a kind of peace, an alliance between Lord Garwy and Hueil ap Caw. You will not interfere in this, Arthur, just because you once slept with her. Leave Indec where she is. It's best for all of us. Swear it to me now."

Arthur did not answer and Medraut carried on, "They are a big clan, all of them brothers and cousins to a man and they won't accept you as Pendragon or Supreme Commander if you go blundering around in their territory and stealing their women. Half of them don't recognise you even now; they say you are a foreign usurper."

"I've heard that one before," Arthur said. "And Aurelius will use the rebel side of the Caws to rise against me."

"And now your father wants you to go back and attend his wedding; September the Thirtieth day. I have the official invitation here somewhere. And don't think you can go wandering off after the wedding, surprising the Caws in an attack, because they know you are coming. They know about Uthyr's wedding, and so, they will know you will be back in the North."

"Then I won't give them what they expect. If I have to go to my father's wedding, I hope he's remembered to invite my entire army as well as me. Because I'm taking them all with me."

Medraut looked at Arthur hard, then sat back in his chair. "The Caws are scared witless of you after what you did to the Picts," he said. "They

froth and brag about their own power, but under it all, they know what you are capable of. Still, it's possible that Aurelius will try to raise an army of his own, joining with the Picts against you. This is not good, Arthur, this is the start of something evil. And I know evil when I see it."

Hearing this, again I felt the cold chill Medraut brought with him, that northern chill, so cold where he came from, and the news he brought with him was even colder. I looked for Arthur's reaction, saw the set of his jaw, and the black fire in his eyes was up and burning again.

He then looked at me, and I said to him, "How many fronts can you fight on? The Saxons all up and down the east and southern coasts, and now this in the north? You are just one man to defend a dozen growing fronts of war. How can you do all this and stay winning?"

"The Caws have to be put down," he answered me, "and that means fighting on many fronts. I have the Gododdin. I have the Cornovii. I have the Selgovae, I have the Dumnonians, and I'm working on the Durotriges and the Atrebates through Master Rhodri of Calleva and his king, Atticos Verica. I have a well-trained army that knows its job and can fight in their sleep. What do the Caws have? A failed leader and an untrained clan of wild-men who ride hill ponies."

"And what of the Dal Riada?" Medraut threw in another problem. "What if they join up with the Picts? I predict that Cynan Aurelius will elude you from now till forever, because he is a coward and he runs from every conflict, fleeing into the hills till he can finally exhaust you. Think of it. Is it all worth it?"

Silence. The entire hall had fallen silent.

A gust of cool wind blew in through the open door and it felt like a dark omen of coming doom…was it all worth it?

Arthur said, "Medraut, if I don't do what I do, the Saxons will have you, you and Aurelius and the Caws, and the Dal Riada as well. They will have this land from one end to the other, they will cut us up like meat and our people will perish long before we have had the chance to change them."

He stood up then from the table and said, "Gododdin Guard, you have never fought with me against the Saxons, but you came for this very thing. The Gododdin birth some of the greatest fighters in our land. Bedwyr, my foster-brother here is one of you. And you know what he will do in battle; I don't even have to say it. But I will give you war."

He then left us, walking out into the early sunshine, leaving me sitting with Medraut. Here his men all stared at me. Most of them had no idea I was one of them, and so now, they showed me greater respect, not laughing at me like they had done the day before. One by one they got up and came over to me and shook my hand, calling me brother.

54: THE FOX's FIRST GREAT LOSS

AND when this was all over, I went outside, where I found Arthur standing and looking away into some vast distance I could not see, for surely he could see the future? And it was dark and became darker again, darker than the walls of a grave falling in on me.

He would take the Gododdin out to show his power ever growing before the Saxons, but we stood and watched the gatekeepers running to open the gates, letting in an errand-rider, and even though the rider was not one of ours, he carried with him a familiar and trusted emblem on his spear tip; the White Stag banner of Dogfeiling. My home.

Arthur and I walked out to meet this messenger—just a boy. He jumped off his horse, saluted Arthur before digging into his bag and handing him a sealed letter.

"An important script for you, my lord. Tis from Prince Bedwyr's uncle, Lord Tannan."

Arthur took the letter with a frown, and told the rider to go inside the hall and get something to eat and drink. And I frowned with him—my uncle, writing to Arthur?

I moved to see as he pulled the seal open and read the letter…here I saw his face change. He looked deadly serious, and when he turned to me, his eyes showed only pain. He searched my face, holding me in pain.

I said, "What is it? Why does my uncle write to you and not me?"

He took hold of me and led me back inside, dragged me down to the partition door and we went through, him leading me up the stairs to his private room, and here, with me feeling already stunned and in fear, he turned to me, pushed me down onto his bed.

He sat in the chair at my side and said straight out, "This letter…it is from your Uncle Tannan. Fox, your father has died."

At first, I did not really hear what he said, or fathom it. There was a mistake. "What do you mean?"

He told me, gently, “Your father died. It says he died in his sleep after being ill for a long time. And your uncle wants you to go home and pay respects to your father…you have to go home.”

I did not believe what he was saying to me.

But he hung his head, and whenever Arthur did this, it meant something was very wrong. Wrong, a misspelled word in the letter?

I asked him again, “You read it wrong. How can he be dead? He was well and fit the last time we saw him, when he took the coins…read it again!”

I grew angry, and I wanted him to check his facts before telling me such ugly things. But the sorrow was all too clear on his face when he picked the letter up and pointed out the words in Latin.

“Your father is dead. And you have to go home and be with your family, your uncle needs you with him. He wants you. He’s sent for you. I’ll raise an escort to go with you. You cannot travel those roads alone, not back northward. I’m sorry, Fox, I am sorry.”

I felt now the truth of it, and it snapped me in half like a dry twig. Everything inside me gave way, a landslide slipping into darkness, and yet I could not fathom it. “How can he be dead? He was well, well and fit the last time we saw him, how can he be dead, Arthur, tell me!”

He took hold of me, gripped my shoulders and held me still.

I said, “I cannot accept it, I won’t accept it! It’s not true. I won’t believe it! This isn’t happening…is it? It’s not true.”

The landslide slipped even lower and it took me with it. I pulled out of his grip and stood up, finding my legs gave way and I dropped back down again. And this time there were tears on his face…crying for me…making me break like thrown glass.

He pulled me to him, held me tight, but no matter how hard he held me, supported me, I could not cry, I could only fall. I could not cry because I did not believe my father was dead. It was some foul jest. I could not lose my father, I could not see him gone, I could never believe he would go from me, I could not see my family die around me and leave me lost in the wilds of this terrible bleak heart of mine.

Instead, I felt Arthur holding me, gripping me tight and I heard him say, “You are not lost…I won’t let you get lost. I won’t ever see you lost

again. I won't allow it. I'm here, I'm still your brother, and you are not lost."

How did he know I felt lost? Stripped of everything? Stripped and thrown out, lost, lost. I could not move, but I felt him, there was a strength in him beyond anything imaginable. What was he made of? Were all Silurians like him? Or was Arthur one in a hundred thousand? How had he survived when all his world was gone? No wonder he fought so hard to live.

He made me live.

He told me, "Stay here, stay in my room today. You know you are relieved of duty. I'll organise for your journey home. You can leave tomorrow. Don't stay and make it worse. But stay here for the day and I'll make sure you are taken care of. Believe me."

And even though he knew I couldn't read Latin well, he gave me the letter, and then he got up and left me alone.

All day I was alone. I could still hear the sounds from outside and down in the hall, a world of living as I fell deeper into darkness and grief… a grief I could not release. A maid brought me lunch, but I refused to eat. I heard Arthur's voice when he spoke. I heard Medraut. And Essylt and Arna. Sometime, I undressed down to my short breeches and got under the covers of his bed and just lay, staring up at the ceiling. I may have fallen asleep, or dozed, or thought of sleeping, not knowing how tired I really was, and when it fell darker with coming sunset, I cried…

My father was dead. I loved him, all my life he had been my friend, not just a father. I still felt a deep love for him. Something had ended inside me. The same maid came up again and took my uneaten lunch away, then later returned with supper. I failed to eat that too, though I drank some warmed wine as the hall lights were lit below. I could see the light waving and flickering along the ceiling arches and beams. I heard the noise of the inner Clan coming in for their meals, to drink and sing till it was time for sleep. From it all I was isolated and I did not care.

Later again I stopped crying and went numb and cold, feeling naught but a heavy leaden ache in my chest.

I fell asleep…

And woke late when Arthur came in.

He shook me awake and said, "It's all set for tomorrow. You are leaving with your men. Gwydre's going with you."

“Not him!” I turned over. “Not Gwydre.”

“Why not? He’s your right-hand man. Your protector. Why wouldn’t you take him?”

To this I could not answer, so I lay still in his bed and watched him sit down next to me. I went to get up, but he grabbed hold of me and pulled me back against him, put his arms around me from behind and held me to his chest.

Said into my ear, “Why not Gwydre?”

“He…I don’t know. I don’t think he’s up to riding all that way. He’s grieving too. Druce. His friend Druce was killed. Do I have to take him back to another death?”

“Then take him as far as the crossroads, then stand him at Deva. I want you to go there and wait for me when I come north in September. There’s no reason for you to ride back here and then back north again. Wait for me at Deva.”

I did not answer and I closed my eyes; a deep sense of peace came over me then, and I began to slip back to sleep, a rested place, his arms around me, feeling his strength, his breathing, deep and slow. The lamps dimmed. I cried and Arthur knew it. He began stroking me, stroking my chest and my arm, and I felt him run deep through my body.

In the dim light, I turned over and faced him, and I looked deep, taking all of him in with my eyes.

He said, “I’m sorry your father is gone; but we are all going to the grave. And if that’s so, isn’t it better to go after first going to the mountaintop? If we are going to die, isn’t it better to take all that life offers while we live? Don’t let death defeat you before you die.”

Lamplight flickered over his face.

His eyes were dark and alive and black like ebony.

He looked at me and said, “Fox, I’m going to take you out of this. Take you to the highest place in the land. I’m going to take you, and keep you, because I am Arthur. Do you hear me? You know what this means. It means I’m going to the mountaintop and I’m taking you with me. It means we will never die. Understand me?”

“I understand. You are immortal. Arthur…you might die in my arms, but you are immortal even now. I see it in your eyes. Immortality.”

He then got up and told me, “Try and sleep. I’ll be here if you wake, if you need me. But I want you to stay right here, you will sleep better here. See you in the morning,” and I watched him leave, because he had others to take care of as well as me, and he left and I wanted him back…but he did not come, and I slept with his words in my head…I am going to the mountaintop and I’m taking you with me…

55: LOVE UNTAKEN

I rode home to Gwynedd with an escort of six riders, Gwydre with me. We rode fully armed and flying the Red Dragon. It was a long, long ride, first up through Aquae Sulis where we picked up provisions and moved on. The days were warm, not hot, the summer heat finally beginning to break as we went north. When we reached the crossroads that would lead me up into the mountains of Dogfeiling, I stopped.

Here I told my warriors, “This is where we part. You cannot come with me. Make your way to Deva now and stay there till I come for you. Report to the general there; you will be billeted well in Deva.”

They all saluted me, all save Gwydre.

He said, “My prince, I think you should at least take one man with you. Take me.”

“I know these roads well. This is my homeland, and I’m armed enough to fight if bandits attack me. But I swear, I won’t be. Do not disobey me, Gwydre. Go with the others to Deva. The time will pass quickly. The captain there will put you to work.” I saluted them one more time and turned my horse’s head towards the pass-road up into the hills.

So my men moved out, leaving Gwydre sitting and watching me ride away. I gave him a long look before heeling hard into my horse’s sides and moving up the road and out of sight. High into the mountains it was fresh and beautiful.

Rain came, though only a light drizzle, like a thick fog and I loved it, loved the cool mountain air and the road home to Dogfeiling, to a home without my father and I could not imagine life without my father. Nothing made sense without him, and as I rode through the quiet mist-shrouded forest, I gave way to tears and allowed them to run with the rain on my face. I was going home to my family villa, and by the time I came close to the

familiar roads towards my mountain village, the truth then of my father's loss truly hit me harder.

When I reached the hill and came over the other side, there it was, first villa at the top of the hill, surrounded by its low wall and gardens. I heeled harder and galloped my horse right past and down the hill to my uncle's hall by the lake. Here I reined in and jumped off, and I was at his door, banging for him to let me in; he pulled the door open and I fell into his arms.

"Bedwyr, it is all right, my lad, it's all right; he died peacefully in rest and sleep, without suffering. He whispered your name when he passed."

In my uncle's arms, I broke down, collapsed, and he lowered me into a chair fireside, and his wife, Lady Una, brought me hot food and drink, none of which I could touch. My father had whispered my name as he passed. My uncle sat near me and took my hands; myself wet from the rain and trembling in pain, he said to me, "He loved you. We love you. You are a hero in these parts. Everyone speaks of you and my brother died knowing you are a hero, loyal to Arthur, Britain's champion warrior. No greater gift can a son give to his father than to be a loyal man to his commander. My brother died happy, Bedwyr, he died happy."

I dragged the tears from my face and studied him…such a strong, powerful man…nodding to me, aye, he died in peace and happy.

"Take something to eat and drink now, lad. Then after, you can come and see his grave. There we will pray and pay our respects."

By the fireside, I noticed I was still wearing my battle-gear and carrying my shield, that my aunt then took away and put down on a chest under the window. I looked at it, sitting there, stilled. I had gone to war with that shield, and it flashed into my head that Arthur would be riding out again with the Clan Bear, this time taking Medraut with him, showing the Gododdin Guard the Saxon threat, and what if I came back to another death? A far more devastating death?

But then a hot drink of beef broth was in my hand, and I forced these wild notions aside, sat still and quiet and allowed the peace of my uncle's hall to fill me. I stayed with Tannan and his wife and did not go back to my own villa where my father had died. And over the days that followed, I heard no word from the outside world, no word from Cadwy, the only word was my father. Dead for over a month of time before I had even heard about

it…for I had been far away at war with Arthur and no one could find me to bring me the news.

My father's funeral rites had long taken place, and he was in the ground eight weeks by the time I stood in grief at his graveside. His illness had been long, and I had suspected there was something wrong with him that time in Maia, when he had blessed me and Arthur together before taking our coins to Dinas Emrys. I had suspected back then he was ill and did not admit it to myself…so much I did not admit to myself…

Every day at sunset I visited his grave.

The end had come quickly, despite the long illness he and my uncle had concealed from me, and every day that went by, my uncle had to reassure me that my father had died peacefully, without pain or suffering. And it was here at his grave every sunset that I finally came to know he had died happy as Tannan said he did.

The grave lay high on the hillside, overlooking the lake, where the setting sun fell between the arms of the mountains and shone down onto the water…so beautiful a place it alone could make a grown man weep. I wept on my knees, and vowed that one day I too would be buried by this lake. Sometimes it rained misty with a wind blowing and sweeping over the water and it rippled like the scales of a dragon in the sunset, red, and when I kissed the ground my father was buried under, I came to my feet and went back with my uncle and his wife to their hall for supper.

They treated me with great respect, even though I had told them I would not be standing to take my father's place as chieftain of Dogfeiling.

I believed I had a greater role to play in Arthur's army, to be a prince for Britain and not just for Gwynedd. My place in Dogfeiling, I would pass to my cousin Lucan, Tannan's eldest son. My uncle agreed, said he would forward the nomination of Lucan to high chieftain when the time came. And for this, I would not stay to take part. I had other work to do, work that was well known throughout Gwynedd. A point of conflict with many of the men here; that I, as a prince of Dogfeiling had chosen to fight with the Silurian Arthur against the Saxons, and not for my own kinsmen against the Gaels.

My only solution was to give Lucan ap Tannan the right to bid for chieftain, leaving me free to fight for my foster-brother, as I had been doing for so long by now, I could not fathom why some men in these parts still held it as such a disgrace. For I had won them renown as a hero from

Gwynedd, and for this, no one had supported me more than my father. But after the long time of official mourning, my uncle suggested it was time I went back into my family home and faced where my father had died. Not once during my stay had I stepped inside my own villa, now fully my own.

Augustus neared its end and it seemed an endless summer, but signs of autumn began touching the mountains and it grew ever more beautiful and peaceful. Leagues and leagues from the horror of the battlefield. And I could face only one night alone in this villa on the hillside, for the very next day, I planned to ride back to Deva.

Then taking my horse and all my gear, I walked up the long hill to the top, took my horse around the back to the stables and remembered, from here Arthur and Medraut had stripped themselves naked and went riding out into the icy rain. I laughed as I brushed down my horse and got him some feed, I filled the water trough.

After collecting some wood that was stacked in the stable, I took it through the back door, down the corridor and out into the main room, where I stacked the logs by the fire, ready to burn. Una had given me enough food for a week let alone one night, all of which I dumped on the table and looked around. The big Roman couch was still there under the window, still covered in deerskins. The big cooking pot still hung over the fire on its bar, the shelves filled with pots and plates and goblets. All of my father's belongings were packed away in a chest in the rear guest bedroom, and I decided to leave them there. Maybe another day I would come back and claim them.

I went and opened the front door and looked out, where I saw the mountains glowing in the early afternoon light; away to the west the sun moved to lower and disappear behind them. To my right, the road out of town went uphill and into the forest that ran thick over the hills in the east. Beyond the hills the land fell down towards the plains of Deva.

From the front step of my door I could see the head of the lake, glinting in the setting sun, and I was convinced beyond all doubt now that my father was truly happy and in peace. Who needed to go to heaven when they lay buried in a place like this? Around me it was paradise itself. The air so clear it sang when I looked through it and out at the red lowering sun. I sat down on the front doorstep and looked at the land before me.

I prayed, “Goddess, if I die in battle, please let me be brought home here and buried by the lake…please let it be so…no other place on earth will take my broken bones.”

My grief now was almost gone, leaving me with a sense of sad happiness. I smiled to myself and dropped my head to the sun, the lake bursting into a brilliant silver, like a polished sword when held up to full sunlight. With the sun dipping away, the air chilled.

Soon I would have to light the fire. But I could not move from the beauty before me, sunset in the mountains, and I sat still on the doorstep, and looked behind, back into the house. And remembered the very first time…the very first day I met Arthur.

Lord Darfod had come riding up to our villa door, and with him was a dark-haired boy on a pony, bringing us a gift from the Old Gods as Darfod had told us back then. And I had been sad that day too, because my own pony had just died and I was as miserable as a wet cat. I remember our first meeting, because Arthur had a black mark on his face, that is his left eye was bruised and swollen and I thought this was the way he always looked. I learned later on that it was a black-eye given to him by his father…back then though, that first time, I thought it was the way Arthur always looked. He was seven and I was eight. And his eye was black because his father loved to beat him.

With the sun gone down, I lifted my head to a familiar sound. Horse’s hooves on the road and I looked up and saw a rider come over the lip of the hill. He stopped when he saw me sitting out on the doorstep.

We stared at each other a moment and he heeled down closer to me, stopped before me and said, “I had to come. I know you ordered me to stay in Deva, but you have been gone so long and Arthur did say I was to watch over you. Who do I obey?”

“First him, then me,” I told him.

“I couldn’t disobey you in front of the others; it would have undermined your authority. So I gave you a fortnight. Now I’ve come.”

“Gwydre, you fool, I’m leaving for Deva tomorrow! You came all this way for nothing.”

But I told him to go down around the back of the house and stable his horse. And as he went round the back, a strange unease took hold of me. First I had felt good, now something else; unease it was, a mild fear, and

when Gwydre came back again to the front of the house, he stood watching me, maybe waiting to be invited inside. I did not want him in my house, but of course, I had to invite him in. I could not be so rude as to make him sleep in my uncle's hall. Tannan would not understand and he would be disgusted if I refused hospitality to one of my own warriors.

So Gwydre came inside with me and I closed the front door on the cold air sweeping in from the north, watched as he set his gear down on the floor and took off his helmet, his riding gloves. I took his shield and put it next to mine. Here we stood, looking at each other.

Gwydre smiled in a nervous way, saying, "It's cold."

"You light the fire and I'll get you something to eat. I've got masses of food, more than I can ever eat alone."

"I'm sorry to walk in on you, my lord, on your grief."

"Just light the fire."

He obeyed me, and for a moment I watched him.

First he took off his cloak before setting about to strike a spark from the flint-stone, then setting it to the kindling I had already built up. He made me feel strange as I watched him, so I moved away and set out some food on the red-ware platters; rye bread, goat's cheese, oatcakes, wine, and mochyn broth in a pot that would have to go over the fire to warm. I did all this, and then sat in my chair at the table, still watching him, watching his movements. Small he was, like a boy, with blond hair and a face that was not as beautiful as Medraut, but like him in some ways.

I could not believe Gwydre had come to me, and he made me angry that he had. It was not his place to come riding into my domain and trying to look after me as if I was a helpless girl, but I kept my anger out of view. The fire began to take, and he stood up and faced me, moved two steps towards me, but I got up and backed away from him. "If you want to stay here, you can sleep by the fireside; you cannot use the guest room, as it's packed full of my father's old possessions all over the bed. Now sit down and get something to eat."

He did as I told him; he sat at the table as I dropped some logs on the fire, then moved to light the lamps, as it grew dark in the room.

I put the pot of broth on to warm over the fire, and stood looking at him looking at me. He said, "I wanted to say sorry about your father. I hope you are—"

“Do not say it. I’ve come to terms with his loss now. But what about you? You and Druce.”

This he did not answer, just looked miserable.

So we ate together by the fireside and it grew darker. We drank all the wine and went to start on another flagon as he told me about his life, how he came from a strange family of all men. He told me he was raised by men, that the men of his family did everything women did, because they had to, because all their women had died. Some from illness, others in childbirth, his mother in childbirth and he was raised by his father, uncle and brothers without a woman in sight; he told it all with a great deal of delight and pride and love.

“We are all from Cernow. I grew up by the sea and saw the Gael raiders with my own eyes when I was a boy. I’m still a boy I know, but I fight so well because I had naught but warriors to raise me.”

He dropped his voice lower, and came closer to me over the tabletop, whispering, “Warriors who could weave like women, who could cook like women, who could make clothes like women; they tried to pretend they didn’t do women’s work, but everyone knew it of course, because all our own women were dead, so who else did they think would do the weaving and bread-making?”

“Why did they not find new women?”

“Because of the family curse. Every woman who came into our household died. My brothers gave up in the end and just did it all themselves. I love them so much. But I am not allowed to talk about the weaving.”

I burst out laughing, he said it so seriously.

“Gwydre,” I told him, “you should be proud of such a family.”

“I am, but I’m still not allowed to talk about the weaving.”

“You just told me.”

“I could tell you anything. I could…I could—”

“Could you do anything for me?”

“I would run to the moon and back, carrying a dead horse.”

Again he made me laugh. I said, “Put some more wood on the fire. It’s bloody cold tonight. Autumn’s here already.”

He did as I said, piled up the wood and got the fire burning like a furnace, stripped off his tunic in the heat of it, then turned towards me,

moved close and touched my face, caressed my face, my hair and once again touched my eyes, traced with a finger.

He knelt between my parted legs.

"I would fight bare-handed all the Saxons in the entire world for you," he said, and I saw the love in him now. And everything I did not want to feel, he made me feel. He ran his hands into my hair, and I begged inside my head not to let this happen.

I wanted to kiss him, like that night in the taberna, and yet I grabbed him hard towards me. I held him in place, feeling passion building inside me. Gwydre, fallen for the wrong warrior he had. I knew he would take everything and anything I gave him.

I told him, "You have to understand me. You cannot have me, but I know what you feel. I know what it feels like to not have the one you love. I know what it feels like. So never tempt me again, because I will break you in two, and you will die broken-hearted because of me. I cannot do this, Gwydre, I cannot."

But I had already broken him, and he cried sweet tears that ran into his lips. He was desperately in love with me and I could not hurt him anymore.

I held his face in my hands as he begged me, "Just one night with you…please…just one night, one night, and I will never come near you again, please, please, love me one night…that is all I want."

His pleading was so deep…he was breaking me down, and I moved forward and touched his lips with mine, and told him, "No, it's deadly to do this. Because if you have one night, you will want more and more. It's best not to have it at all. If you can sleep next to me and not touch me, then you will know the feeling."

"I will. I will. I will sleep with you and not touch you, just one night."

"No, it's too cruel. Too cruel a thing to do."

And so I got up and gathered my things, went into my parent's old room and dropped the bar on the door, locking him out…

56: THE FOX TRACKS THE BEAR

BY the following evening we were camped back in Deva. There I stayed only one night, and the next morn, rode down to Viroconium.

I had decided to return there to engage more with the new recruits in training. I wanted to recruit some of the older ones into my own unit and take them back with me to Deva and wait there for Arthur to come at the end of the month.

And all the way to Viroconium, I kept Gwydre at my side, and he was my obedient soldier. I understood him and all that he felt. It was me who he did not understand. So once again in Viroconium, Master Caan barracked me and my men in our old rooms, giving us the best pallets in the barrack where Arthur and I had grown up as warriors-in-training.

I knew this place so well I could find whatever I wanted to get myself back into training.

Then every day for a fortnight, I joined the new boys out on the training ground, the main program consisting of learning to ride and fight with weapons at the same time, to ride and wield a sword or spear while controlling a horse, some to learn to shoot arrows from horseback while galloping past the target.

This was where I found the best young warriors, and I chose them myself, offered them places in my unit if they would come to Deva and swear allegiance to Arthur, something they would do without even needing to be asked. Arthur's fame as Supreme Commander was exceptional and he was the reason why these boys were here at all. To join Arthur. To see him in the flesh, as none of them had ever laid eyes on him, only heard of him.

To them, Arthur was a living god and they loved me all the more for being the Fox. I picked ten brilliant young warriors, though all untested in battle, all sixteen years old, and I showed them how to cast a javelin my way, showed them how to mount a horse at a run, watched them ride while holding the reins and a shield at once.

Here I picked out one lone left-hander and gave him extra tuition. There was another named Corryn who could shoot arrows from horseback at thrown targets and bring them down near perfect every time. I wanted him in our army at once.

Then one night, Caan came to see me, sat with me in my barrack room and said, "Bedwyr, there are reports coming in that Arthur is at war, east of Deva. My Wonder-boy is at it again."

I looked at him, and said, "Tell me about it. All of it."

“South of the Arbus-water, there are many Saxons in that area, I believe.”

“War?”

“Travellers saying a big battle out that way, and maybe more to come.”

“Then I have to go and join him. Tell me the roads to take.”

“Go back to Deva with your new boys and wait for Arthur there.”

“Sit back and wait? What would it look like for the Fox to sit back and wait when my brother is at war, my Supreme Commander? How would this make me look in front of my new boys? I’m going and I’m taking them with me. Tell me the roads to take.”

“It’s a long, long way across to the Arbus-water. And from what I’ve heard, he’s deep in Saxon lands. So audacious he is!”

My heart skipped and stopped. “Deep in?”

“Hundreds of leagues from here. There would be no guarantee you would even find him, or else you will miss each other as he comes back to Deva.”

“Do you have maps?”

“None of that territory. Leave it to Arthur. He will do it. I know him and he will do it.”

But I couldn’t bear not to be with Arthur myself, so I decided I would ride to Deva in the morning, and I told Caan this and he finally accepted it. He left me, shaking his head as he went.

I next gave orders for the men to bunk down for the night and be ready to leave first in the morning. I never slept much all night, and was up before the horn call to rise at dawn. Here I went down to the cook-house to order an early breakfast, then I kicked everyone out of bed and made them move, the new boys so excited they ran everywhere, saying farewell to old friends.

After breakfast we were on the road again, back to Deva.

It was now mid-September, and in a fortnight’s time, Arthur was due in Luguvalos for his father’s wedding. But for now, he was still at war, and as soon as I rode in through the gates of Deva, I wasted no time looking for the mapmakers and asking them for the quickest route to the Arbus-water. None of them would give me one of their precious maps to take with me, nor would they sell me one, so I had to try and memorise the route, just as

Arthur would have done. So I studied the maps for an hour, and then went to billet my men and get them fed.

I took all my new boys with me the following dawn, maybe it was wrong to take raw recruits into war with Saxons, but I made the decision and they came. Twenty riders in all.

The Arbus-water was on the far east coast, not far from our first battle as new warriors to the field, where Arthur had taken his head wound that gave him epilepsia. Back here again—a huge estuary and river leading inland where the Saxons can bring in their keels. I took the most direct roads east that I could find. I guessed Arthur would cut across country after his battles, making it the shortest way for his exhausted troops homeward.

I took the lads two solid days riding east, where we stopped at a small town, burning alive with news of a huge battle, that the Bear of Britain had passed this way with his army following. I hammered the townsmen for more information, finding the battle was south and nowhere near the river Arbus, as I first thought—that the Clan had passed only a few leagues south from where I now was.

The townsmen told me to ride west and south. So after picking up more supplies, I had the lads up and moving out again bloody fast. I could only be a day behind Arthur now, and everywhere we rode, people of those parts came out and waved, cheered us on, many of them pointing the way to go.

We rode all through the day, bringing our horses close to their limits. We ran on into sunset, and as we did, I glanced ahead of me, the tail end of the Clan Bear. I had come up behind them; here the scouts saw me coming and they galloped forward, ready to warn Arthur that a band of riders was approaching him from the rear.

I had not seen him for six weeks, and when I came close, I stopped my men and waited for him in respect of his command. And he came when the army stopped, came with riders to support him. He came with the Dragon flying over him, with Medraut, with Dafin and Irfan, shields up and flying draco standards.

Arthur came forward and stopped, staring at me from a distance.

Sweet goddess! I was sure now he was more powerful than ever before, because what I saw took my breath away. Arthur—he was power

itself, charged, sparking like a sword in the making, searing like a lava of molten metal that forges a sword in its casting.

Behind him, his warriors waited, banners flying in the wind, all of them alive and themselves burning to be with him. He had taken them into battle and he had won yet again; invincible Cai had called him, and he was a genius of battle, blessed by Britannia, and he watched me a moment longer. I turned to my men and told them to stand where they were. I rode forward, not hurrying, and I took off my helmet as I came, carrying my spear with the fox-head pennant that Arna had stitched for me. I rode right up to him, stopped at his side and saluted him. He looked at me, deep into me, then over at the troop I had brought with me.

Medraut was with him; he smiled at me, though I could tell by his look that he thought I was a moon-blasted fool for riding all this way and not staying in base at Deva. Bastard.

"Make camp!" Arthur called now to the troop leaders, and the warriors began pulling out to build a camp for the night.

I beckoned to my men and they rode up to join me.

Then Arthur spoke to me, "You heard I was at war and came to reinforce me, as is your duty. Thank you for coming, Prince Bedwyr." And he bowed and saluted me, formal before the army. Saying, "Who are these new men?"

"Commander, I brought them for you from Viroconium. They came to fight for you."

So I introduce each new warrior, and each one rode forward on his name, bowed to Arthur, saluted, and gave their pledges of allegiance. Sworn to serve the Red Dragon, sworn to serve Arthur as Supreme Commander of Armies. They were now his, and they looked at him in the way all young men did, with fascination, awe, trepidation, some his own age, here meeting the highest warrior in the land and they bowed to him before moving on. For these new boys, it was their first real test on campaign, and they formed camp in their unit, horses picketed between each unit, with the unit captains stationed in the centre of each camp, where flew the unit standard.

They made camp with me watching them, and when it was all done to perfection, we lit our fire and ate supper from our own provisions.

And when I was getting ready to have them bed down for the night, Arthur came over to see me; that is, he came to meet his new recruits on a

more personal level, not so formal now.

He went to each boy and shook his hand, one by one, finding out which nations they were from, their clans and alliances, and the boys were overwhelmed to meet him on such grounds. They looked at him with awe. One of the boys then asked him about the battle he had just fought.

"Let's save that tale for when we get back to Deva," he answered. "Everyone there will want to know and I cannot tell it more than once. Go to sleep now; these battles are not over yet."

He said goodnight to me and left us.

We all camped down for some sleep, and as we did, I told the lads to stand firm if their first battle was to come the following day…

I woke at dawn with the call to rise. I got up and stood watching the men around me before getting myself ready to ride. As I did, I saw other riders leaving camp and heading fast back the way I had come the day before, moving as if they were on a mission.

Leading the riders was Gareth, back with us now, and riding out as a scouting party with his cousin, Brendon Ro. Dawn began breaking in the east and the sky streaked red, mists on the ground and the coming chill of autumn beginning to touch the land. The army was up and moving, eating from packed provisions. I turned to see Arthur walking towards me, buckling on his sword.

When he came into camp, all the boys stopped and saluted him.

He came and told me, "Today I have a meeting with Octha Hengist-son. We have been tracking the survivors of his war-host, those who fled the field from our last battle; they are not too far away. We are moving north to halt them near the river Arbus. Gareth has just gone out to keep a watch over them, so we should come to battle sometime today."

I said to him, "I knew there was a reason why I had to come and join you and not wait in Deva. You need me to fight for you. And what about my new boys? They are not up to full engagements with Saxons just yet."

"Don't worry. I won't put them in positions of danger. They can act as routers and pick up fleeing Saxons."

He walked off again, going to speak to the recruits, and I had to admit, I found it funny the way they all died of awe whenever Arthur spoke to them face to face, explaining to them exactly what they had to do this day. So it was set, and when the time came, we mounted our horses and

wheeled into the south and rode for three leagues out from where Arthur's last battle had taken place. From there we passed on, following where the fleeing Saxons had last been seen. And as we rode, the day seemed strange to me, with an odd sultry feel on the wind, as if summer was at war with autumn. It was too warm for mid-September, and when the sun broke through the grey-white clouds it felt unnaturally hot.

Still we rode on through a high land at a slow pace for the entire morning, and once we had reached a high plain, Arthur ordered, "Halt!"

We halted and fell into our units of attack, for this was the place where Arthur planned to meet with Gareth, who would come in and tell him where the Saxons were now.

We waited for hours, got off our horses and walked around for a while, moving our saddle sore legs. We rested, our horses grazed, we lay out on the grass and had some more breakfast.

Just before mid-day, Gareth came riding over the hills and stopped, calling, "They are coming, Commander! They have turned back for you, we goaded them all the way and they have turned back for us. Two hundred of them and moving fast. They will be here in less than an hour if they keep on the run like they are."

Arthur then told Gareth to gather his men and join with the rear-guard, as whenever Gareth was not riding as a scout he fought in Cai's unit, commanded still by Howell ap Berth. Cai was not even with us.

Arthur called to all of us as he rode our lines, "Take your battle formations! No movement. No charge till I say." Back along the lines he came till he reached me, rode up to my new boys, ordering them, "Whatever happens, stay out of the main battle as I told you. Wait for your orders from Prince Bedwyr."

He wheeled away again and joined his own unit, flanked by Dafin and Irfan, Medraut's unit on his right, and Val's on his left. I moved my boys back to the rear and out of the line of attack; here they would stand and come in only on my order. I rode forward alone and joined with Arthur on his left-hand side.

We waited for the Saxons to come to battle.

We waited and the sun burned down, a midday sun now.

We waited and heard them coming before we saw them, heard their roaring battle chants.

“Hold your lines!” Arthur called.

The enemy chanting came closer, and the sound lifted the hair on my neck and my horse shied. I pulled him in. The chanting became a roar, closer, and there they were, charging towards us in a huge unruly mass.

“Hold!”

Our horses began shying, and the Gododdin began drumming their swords and spears against their shields, answering the Saxon threat with our own. “Left and right flank separate!” Arthur called.

We split our troop and opened a gap between us, me and Arthur went left with Val, while Medraut went right, and again we stopped, halted on the high land that swept open all around us. We held still, the Saxons came closer, roaring as they came on. A cry went out from their leaders and they all dropped down into a shield-wall and lowered their spears towards us. Their shields locked tight, with their taller men behind the shields, holding their spears to impale our horses if we charged.

But Arthur did not order a charge.

To me he seemed unconcerned and confident to go into this stinking mass of Saxons. And here they began a long deep song of some kind, something that sounded like a battle-song of defiance and bravery. Their spears never wavered, their shield-wall locked tight and impenetrable.

Still Arthur did nothing, though he pulled out and rode alone across the edge of the field and spoke to his unit captains, they saluted him and he rode back and took up his central position again. We all sat out on the field with no battle and the sun hammering down on us, with the weak sultry wind flapping our banners and standards. Our horses tossed their heads. Clouds moved over the sun, covering us in shadow as the Saxons sang their deep songs of defiance, still with their shields locked tight, their spears down and aimed for our hearts.

And we sat there. The enemy looked at us and we looked at them and we did not charge them.

We waited out under the sun and did nothing.

I said, “How long will you keep this up, Arthur?”

“All day if I have to. It makes no difference to me how long they sit out there, holding their shields in place with the sun burning down on them, and no water to drink. I intend to leave them like this till they break their formations.”

So we waited some more.

And we had to endure.

We had to force them to break their shield-wall and we did it by not attacking, but leaving them to swelter within their own stinking mass. We had water carried with us, and we drank in front of them.

The sun moved and time passed and Arthur saw me hurting. Heat was his element and it never bothered him.

It killed me. I said to him, “Why not send in some archers to help break them up?”

He looked towards the Saxons; their shield-wall was beginning to waver, the men unable to keep on holding up their shields in a defensive position, unable to keep standing in the sun with their spears locked forward, and some of them were fighting with each other over what to do about it. They could see we had no intention of charging them. It was now well after midday and we had been out for one full watch; we were near our own end.

“Give me another hour,” Arthur said. “Can you take that?”

“No more than that.”

So I took in a breath and sat up straight. I pulled a javelin from its case on my saddle and held it ready to cast. The Saxons were really beginning to struggle now, as the sun had turned to shine down directly in their faces, in their eyes.

This then was what Arthur had been waiting for.

He called, “Horse archers, attack right flank! Right flank only!”

At last!

The archers galloped out fast, drew their bows, cocked their arrows, and as they filed by the Saxon right flank, they let fly directly into them and over the shield-wall at their tallest men, who were more exposed. We sat and watched Saxons falling dead into their own men. Arrowed through their heads, necks, chests and upper arms.

They went down in a crop and fell over the men holding up the shield-wall. Again and again the archers rode past, firing freely at will, with the rest of us sitting back and watching the enemy fall. When the Saxons realised they had to do something or continue to see themselves shot down, a single voice cried out from amongst them, but still they fought and wavered, then Arthur moved.

“Units, wheel into the west and line up facing them!”

The entire mass of us moved westward, turned back to face the Saxons in a long line, broken into our units and again setting up to wait. This manoeuvre meant the Saxons, if they wanted to keep presenting us with a solid barrier, would have to move their front line to face us.

And they did, and when they did, they fell apart like a broken wall, giving themselves the relief they so wanted, to make good on this battle, and as I sat, clutching my javelin and ready to fight, I saw them begin to run at us in a human charge. They charged against us, a wall of horses! They came at us screaming, spears and shields, and they hated us like a poisonous death for doing this to them.

They roared and came on and when they did, Arthur called, “Retreat! Retreat! Units retreat!”

And this was what we did in the face of a wild horde of charging madmen. We turned our horses’ heads and retreated in a run westward, where behind us we could hear the Saxons roaring even louder, following, wanting blood, they had come all this way to answer Arthur’s challenge to battle and we were running away!

They were forced to chase us, some hurling their spears, some threw their knives, great knives with one side of the blade curved and deadly, so deadly if aimed well and close enough could split a skull and embed itself in a man’s brains. But our helmets held off such attacks, and as we rode away, Arthur began to laugh, we rode like fools towards the setting sun and he laughed!

I glanced behind. “They are still coming at us!”

“Keep riding!”

Out before us the land began to dip and we came to a sudden drop in the ground. That is, we came to the top of a steep hillside and we went right over the edge and down into a wide deep hollow, where on all sides save the west it was walled in with hills. But the hollow itself was wide and as our horses came thundering down the hillside in a mass, we rode on before Arthur halted us and here we turned in our units for our stand. The sun was gathering shadows before us and the wind picked up, blowing eastward and masking the sound of the Saxon charge.

But we saw them.

They came in their war-host to the top of the hill and the men in front stopped and looked down, while those behind barrelled directly into the ones in front and pushed them right over the lip. Many of them fell head-first and rolled downhill; a hill that was not steep or high enough to cause death by falling, but enough to have them down, and with their brothers roaring over the top and straight over them, they kept on coming for us, their war-host broken and split in disarray. Here we charged them before they could yet again form a shield-wall.

We smacked them down in our charge and rode right through them, hacking and cutting, and the first thing I did was cut off a Saxon's hand above his wrist as he tried to grab my horse's head and pull me down. I hacked down as many as I could before wheeling back to the new boys. I told them to hide out in the rear and only attack if a Saxon threatened them. They showed their fear. Never having even seen a Saxon before, they sat eager and desperate to obey me.

I turned from them and rode back in, seeing the slaughter as Howell's men had cut many off from their brothers; he was pushing them back towards a small river that ran behind us. The battle, finally at the end of the day, was a mass slaughter and needed nothing more than concentrated killing.

Constant charge, retreat, regroup, and charge again, over and over till the main mass stood and fought man against man, because the Saxons, no matter what faced them, they would always fight to the death and never leave their lord if he still stood to fight. It was a great dishonour to them to flee while their lord still stood, as it was with us.

And when the sun began to dip below the horizon, it fell cold in the hollow. By now there was only a mere handful of them left standing. We surrounded them and we knew we would have to kill them all because they would not flee or leave the field and run. Medraut did this final slaughter. A killer by nature, he and his men rode in and hacked them to pieces, leaving their bodies chopped like meat for the ravens to feast on when we had all gone home, once again victorious.

After the Snake had finished his work, and it was all over, I sat for a long time on my horse and did not move, but breathed down my revulsion and exhaustion…the day was done, the enemy was dead, our men and

horses spent, and we all slept out in the cold that night, only paces away from the Saxon dead. I slept with Gwydre at my side…

And then, when the sun rose again in the morning, we made our way home, taking our wounded and dead with us. It took another two days to get back to Deva, and we never reached there till after dark. We stayed four days to rest and gather provisions before riding out of Deva's gates, an army on the march, and once again heading north to Luguvalos to attend a wedding…

57: NO WELCOME from UTHYR

AUTUMN touched the land deep in these parts of Rheged; the south may still be hot, but riding north again in late September showed us the turning colour of the forests, red and beautiful, quiet, rested.

A hundred and fifty mounted warriors moving through the early morning mists and I saw a fox dashing fast undercover out of our way.

I looked over at Medraut, fox-killer, who was happy to be heading northward, home for him.

The journey back to Luguvalos took another three days, we did not hurry and we patrolled the land on some days as we went, Arthur sending out scouting parties, once sending me and my new recruits, though we found nothing of interest.

The nights were quiet and cold and when we reached the outskirts of Luguvalos, it was a repeat of our journey out to Cadwy.

The Pendragon was back, and the people knew it and they lined the road as they did before, only they were more overjoyed than ever before, because there was no place in Britain where news of Arthur's victories could not reach. So as we came up the road, the Red Dragon flew high and its wings opened in the wind, and we trotted our horses through the cheering crowds, up the road towards the walled fort, seeing a smaller Dragon banner flying from its roof.

As we rode in through the open gates, Arthur heeled on his horse ahead of us. And I sensed he was feeling the desire to see his father again, he could not hide it any longer. But what we found here hammered everything down yet again. Standing at the head of the stairs at the main doors to the hall was the woman who was to be Uthyr's new wife, Lady Deirdre. And she was alone. No Uthyr and no Lot.

When we reined in at the foot of the stairs, we were met by Uthyr's stewards, but not Uthyr himself and it was a huge insult for him not to be here in person to greet the arrival of his son and Pendragon home. Arthur sat still on his horse, staring at Lady Deirdre, who now came down the stairs to meet him.

And as I pulled in at his side, I heard her say to him, "Welcome my lords! Welcome, Arthur, welcome back."

She smiled sweetly and Arthur bowed to her, and asked, "Where is my father?"

Deirdre looked uncomfortable, flushed red, and she tried to hide it with a show of warm welcomes, saying, "Please, all of you, dismount and leave your horses to our keepers, come inside! There is food and drink and a warm fire."

As I looked around, I saw that everything was well ordered. Plenty of grooms to look after our horses, plenty of servants to help us with our gear, to fetch and carry, and when we dismounted and entered the hall, I saw that it was improved since the last time we were here. But no Uthyr. No Lot. Only women to run here and there and make us welcome. Under different circumstances, Arthur would have loved nothing more than women to fuss over him. Only now he stood in the middle of the hall with us, his warriors of the Clan Bear surrounding him and scowled.

He looked almost pale with anger and disappointment.

Deirdre came forward and explained, wringing her hands. "Arthur, I am so sorry your father is not here to greet you."

"Why isn't he here?"

"He went back to Camboglanna a few weeks ago and has not come back. I have been running the hall. When the scouts reported you coming, I…well, I did all this. Uthyr and Lot…I cannot explain them."

And she blushed and bowed her head, and this was when Arthur pulled her into his arms and held her.

He said, "You run this place better than he does. Maybe I should have a woman in charge of the North. Women never let me down."

Arthur then glanced at Medraut, and the Snake paled like a ghost. To not have his uncle and father home to greet the return of the Pendragon to Luguvalos was an outrageous insult, a slap in the face to a son who had infinitely outstripped his father in power.

“I’ll kill them for this,” Medraut swore. “I’ll make sure they are both humiliated publicly. He’s not only insulted us, but all the Gododdin who fight for you.”

“Don’t break your balls over my father. Or yours. Let me deal with them.” Arthur turned next to face us all and said, “If Uthyr cannot be here to do his duty to us, then we will take Lady Deirdre here instead, she’s the one to answer to. Forget Uthyr!”

We cheered this decision and Deirdre relaxed and smiled and showed us where we would sleep.

The inner Clan would sleep in the hall, while Arthur and I would take the room that used to be Medraut’s.

We went through to this room, and with the door closed, Arthur threw his helmet down on the bed and stripped off his sword like a wild man and threw it down hard, stopped and breathed.

I stood watching him, took my gear off slowly, carefully, because he was watching me with his black eyes on fire.

He came close and said, “Why do I get the feeling I’ve walked into a trap?”

I did not like what he said, and I answered, “What trap?”

“Am I that half-witted, or am I learning to be suspicious like you say I should? Not to be so trusting. I trusted Uthyr. Look,” and he showed me the ring on his finger. “I’m still wearing the bloody ring he gave me when we left. To me, rings are symbols of trust. Would he try to ambush me while I’m here, to have me walk into a trap?”

I understood now what he was saying; a wedding invitation, his father’s own wedding, harmless enough, but in the months since we had been gone, could Uthyr have organised an attack to overthrow his son?

“Who would fight against you?” I told him. “Not the Selgovae. Not the Gododdin. There’s only the Caw Clan, and the Picts, and they all hate each other. They hate Uthyr even more. Who would rise against you under Uthyr?”

Arthur listened to my words and I honestly believed he was at last learning to be suspicious, and it was wildly against his trusting nature.

“What do you think, really?” he asked. “Could he be plotting against me?”

“I don’t sense anything like that,” I assured him. I put a hand on his shoulder. “We have got enough forces here to fight if we have to, but it won’t happen. There’s no one here who would fight you other than the Caws and I cannot see them joining up with your father. I think you are the one being suspicious this time.”

“Then it’s just Uthyr being Uthyr. I should think his head would be bigger than a full moon by now to know his own son is invincible and springs from his own loins. Even so, I want the troops alert and ready for battle at any time.”

I said, “Let me talk to Medraut for you. He of all people should know what’s going on around here.” I then left him; left him to plot a way out of any possible ambush or surprise attack.

58: MEETING MORGEN

LADY Deirdre had organised the welcome home feast for that evening, and with the long-benches full with warriors and women, servants everywhere rushing to wait on us, with Arthur, myself and Medraut seated in the central position as the highest ranked warriors in the hall, it was then that Uthyr decided to make his entrance.

Arthur came to his feet when his father marched in, came out from behind the table, and Uthyr, much to my surprise, threw himself at his son, grabbed him in a hard embrace and crushed his bones, bones to bones; this brought a deep murmur from our assembled warriors.

But Arthur stood still and did not respond, though he allowed his father to hug him.

“I am so sorry I was not here to greet you, son! So sorry! Oh, I have heard all about your wars, every one of them, you won them all, did you not? Let me see you.”

To say that Uthyr was overjoyed seemed a dim-witted thing. I thought he looked head-struck.

He turned to all of us and cried, “Welcome back to the Clan Bear! I hear my son has brought you fame and victory, time and again! Nothing misses me, even so far north. Word comes even from the south. King of Battles they call my son!”

Aye, Uthyr was head-struck. And as I watched him, I believed, heard and saw now that he truly loved his son, not only loved him, but adored

him. It was real love, real adoration. There would be no ambush or surprise attack, I knew it. And Arthur? The change in his father must have shocked him, because Uthyr stood and stared at him, speechless. A loving father was something Arthur was not used to.

All he said was, “Why did you bring me all this way and then not bother to be here to greet me?” His anger came out now, and Uthyr backed away. Arthur went on, speaking fast, “What were you doing? You left Lady Deirdre here to do everything alone, what if the fort had been attacked? How could she as a woman alone defend it? She said you have been gone for weeks. Explain it to me!”

Everyone had again fallen silent, watching.

Uthyr deeply embarrassed, he stopped and looked over at Deirdre and she hung her head.

Arthur said, “Go and sit next to her.”

Then he stood for a moment watching them, and saying nothing more, he came back to his place at the table. Uthyr found his own place at Deirdre’s side and everything normal began again.

I looked at Arthur and he whispered to me, “They had a fight and she threw him out, unbelievable, isn’t it? She must be one all-mighty woman to keep Uthyr out of his own fort for weeks.” He laughed.

When I looked down the table at Uthyr and his bride-to-be, he was not talking to her and she sat staring at her meal.

“Do you think the wedding is off?” I said.

“She wouldn’t let it. It’s on.” He gave his father and his new stepmother a long hot look. Neither of them noticed, and it was all silent, till the side-door opened and two newcomers came in. The two newcomers caught Arthur’s attention at once. Two beautiful girls, who looked like sisters.

They came into the hall and Uthyr jumped up to greet them, brought them over to his son at the head-table, and told him, “Arthur, please meet the ladies Morgen and Cadi, younger sisters of Lady Deirdre, all soon to be your sisters.”

Arthur came out from behind the table and greeted the two girls each with a kiss, they kissed him back, curtsied to him and stood staring at him, both of them flushed, trapped, enthralled by their new soon-to-be brother. Uthyr laughed at them.

Said, “They are speechless! I can tell you, Arthur, this is not natural for these two, speechlessness. Would you ladies care to sit with my son for the rest of the night?”

“Yes! Yes!” one of them said, eager and smiling. The smaller one, all eyes and breasts.

So Arthur led them back to where we were sitting at the head-table, and when they were seated, one next to me, he introduced me, then pointed out others of his Clan and all the two girls did was stare at him. Here I watched them succumb, and as the night went on, I watched them swoon and laugh, and knew that sometime soon Arthur would try to lay them, one by one, or both at once. I made a bet with myself over it and smiled at Lady Morgen, who was on my left, and she looked at me, tore herself away from Arthur and looked at me.

“Lieutenant Bedwyr, and a prince. Where are you from?”

“Gwynedd, I am the prince of Dogfeiling.”

“You are from two places? And where are they?”

Her eyes were dark.

“Armorica,” I said.

“And where is that?”

“Europa.”

“And where is that?” She laughed.

“In Rome.”

“You are from three places! And Rome!”

“I fought lions there.”

And her eyes flashed in the lamplight.

Both these girls were beautiful, more so than their older sister, Deirdre. Both had long red hair, and with light grey eyes, full sweet lips and big breasts; Morgen was taller than Cadi, more forward, more the beauty, and she looked at me before realising I was giving her stories.

She said to me, “You are Gododdin and from Rome. And very handsome. You see, save for Medraut the Angel Boy, the other boys here are ugly. You and Arthur are so handsome, we do not get to see such men around here, do we Cadi?” She nudged her sister, but the sister would not answer because she was in a faint whenever Arthur looked at her with his deep dark eyes, so fatal.

And I could always tell when women were on the prowl for husbands. I could tell it because both Morgen and Cadi were older than us and they were desperate. I guessed they were nearing their mid-twenties, jealous maybe that their older sister had finally snared a husband in Lord Uthyr, and what better way than to hunt for his son's unmarried warriors? This was what I thought as Morgen asked me what each one of our warriors marital status was.

She fixed on Gwydre for a moment, saying, "He is lovely. And who is that one?"

"That's Gareth, but his cousin, Brendon, is better looking than him. He's outside on duty."

And despite the fact she was beautiful, I got bored with her and excused myself from her attentions and left the table, as we were now breaking for the night, and I went to get another mug of ale. I kept out of the way for a while and joined up with Gwydre outside, for I could talk to him now with ease, and he treated me with respect and duty. Only his eyes gave away his feelings.

Later, after I dismissed him, I went back inside when the night was over and found Uthyr in discussion with his son. The two girls were gone. When Arthur saw me, he beckoned me to join him, and sitting down at his side, I listened to Uthyr giving out his boring wedding plans, but all the time Arthur kept shifting in his seat and looking over his shoulder.

"Three days from now I will be married again," Uthyr said. "The first woman I have loved since I lost your mother. And each time you come back, I am reminded of her, my Igrain."

"Do not tell me. I don't want to hear it," Arthur warned him.

Uthyr nodded.

He was drunk.

And he smacked his hand down on the table and said, "Oh, now listen…something special. Day after my wedding day, I have arranged for something special."

Both Arthur and I gave him a blank look, and he explained, "I have arranged for games to be held out on the training field. Games. Everyone is coming. Horse-races, wrestling matches, mock battles, maybe a hunt if there is time, oh, and javelin throwing competitions. Would you like this? Tell me you will stay for the games, and not run back south."

When Uthyr had said ‘javelin throwing competitions’, Arthur looked at me, a slow smile touching his lips.

“Javelin throwing?” he nudged me, then told his father, “You know I have the best javelin thrower in Britain sitting next to me right now, don’t you? Can we make profit out of this? Will there be prizes for the winners?”

“Of course there will be betting,” Uthyr answered, studying me. “He is the best you have?”

“His javelins fly like eagles, and just as far.” Arthur put an arm around my shoulders and hugged me to him. “The best of the best.”

“I was not giving prizes, Arthur. I do not have the resources for that. It is for the prestige…and something else…there is more to this you know. But I wanted it as a surprise for you.”

“I don’t like your surprises, Uthyr.”

Uthyr turned now into an old scarred warrior who hung his head in shame. “No, you would not like my surprises.”

“What is it now?” Arthur sighed, and fidgeted on his arse again.

“Well, son, I was hoping that the winners of the competitions, you would personally take them into your army. If they prove worthy. Some of them are expecting this.”

Arthur looked ready to split his father’s head in half and he said, “You bastard old wolf…” He looked at me, said, “That’s how he’s roped them into this without rewards as prizes…he’s used me to get them to come to his games.” Back at Uthyr. “You offered places in my army for the winners… why? Do you think I want my army full of lice-blown bothie-boys who gobble horses?”

I said, “You are riding on your son’s fame, Uthyr? We are not a travelling show of entertainers from Rome. We are the Clan Bear.”

“You boys are jumping ahead of yourselves,” he growled at us. “Most of them coming are Selgovae…you need them in your army, boy! Listen to me. I am not stupid, and I am not riding on my son’s fame,” he glared at me. “It is more than that. I have invited the Dal Riada, and this time they will not let me down. If the games are successful, with your help, after this our alliances with the Dal Riadans will be high, so high they will turn away from the Picts as allies.”

“Are games enough to win the Dal Riadans?” Arthur said. “That is, if my warriors enter these competitions, I won’t allow them to deliberately

lose to make the Gaels look good. I won't allow Bedwyr to throw if you want him to lose. He will throw to win."

Uthyr looked beaten. He said, "Just a few games?"

"None. I will not compromise my warriors. Never. I'll never compromise! This is the Clan Bear and we are the best in Britain and you want me to lose to invading Gaels? Never." Arthur cooled, taking deep breaths. "I want them to know we cannot be beaten. They have to know this, because if they think, even on a small scale, that my warriors can be beaten, do you think they will hesitate to join with the Picts against me? No, they won't."

Tension. Quiet. It was getting late. Arthur stood up, looked at his father, told him, "The Fox will win the javelin competitions. And me? Give me gaming matches, Black Raven," and putting a hand on his father's shoulder, he then moved away to sleep, saying, "And thank you so much, Father, for the warm welcome home."

I was just about to get up and follow on, but damn his old bones, Uthyr held me back. He made me sit back down; here he kept me for another hour, wanting to know every detail of his son's nature, so much Uthyr did not know about his own son. He wanted to know how Arthur fought his battles, who were our main Saxon opponents, what was it that Arthur did to make his warriors love him, to want to die for him, on and on till I had to stop him. Stop him even more, as he kept on giving me a strange evil-eyed look.

I told him, "I'll liaise with him for you if you let me go now." And I got up and he offered me his hand, shook my hand in the way of warriors and said, "I admire you and your loyalty. Good-night, Fox, son of Pedrawg…" and so saying, he gave a low laugh to himself.

I did not like the way he said this, or his laugh. He made my skin crawl, so I gave him a weak nod, then went down the corridor to our room, opened the door…and groaned. But I did not walk out again. I had been expecting this. I walked right in and stood over them, all three of them. They had stripped all the bedding off the pallets, mine included, piled the mattresses, the bolsters and the skins on the floor by the little fireplace, and there they were, the two sisters, with Arthur sleeping bone naked between them. Morgen behind him with her arm around him, Cadi with her head against his chest.

This then was why he had been so restless earlier and kept looking over his shoulder, desperate to get away from his father, so he could have these two women at once. I stood over them and watched them sleeping, then reached down and snatched up my blankets and bolster, moved over to my pallet and fell on it, rolled up tight to keep warm and tried to sleep. I drifted in and out of sleep for the rest of the night, keeping my back on the lovers on the floor, for how many women did Arthur need?

All at once?

I closed my eyes; fell asleep till the old pain in my left shoulder woke me early, still hours before dawn, though the pain was not as bad as when I was first wounded. It only hurt if I slept on it in one position for a long time, but when I woke, I heard someone talking. It was Morgen. By far the more beautiful of the two sisters, she was long and lean and seductive. Arthur was on her, poking his cock in her. Through the early morning darkness I could both see and hear him having her.

I could hear what she was saying to him in gasps as he thrust into her, "I would love a new little brother like you." She sighed, like a sweet pain inside her. "A new brother to have me whenever I want him." Again her sigh. "Take me, have me whenever you want me, Arthur please!"

She cried aloud and he tried to soothe her, "Shhh…"

"I want you to take me back with you when you leave," she told him. "You can have me whenever you want me, lover, oh, you feel so good, brother."

Her words and how she said them made my skin crawl, in the same way Medraut sometimes could make me feel, as if something cold had slid down my backbone. I sensed in this girl a clinging darkness, for surely she was well named after the Dark Goddess, Morgen? And to me, Arthur seemed unable to defend himself against women; he loved them and wanted them and never questioned them. Trusting. If he trusted his men, he trusted women even more, but Morgen's words crawled up my back, and I saw her wrap her long legs around him as he thrust into her harder.

"Take me back with you when you go…" she begged him. "I hate it here and Cadi drives me mad, she never leaves me a moment's peace; oh, please do that again, that again, here…"

A deeper moan this time. I stayed still, pretending to sleep, but listening to her whispering voice.

“Deirdre keeps us locked away, won’t let us have any boys, take me away from her and Cadi, take me, have me, I want you always. Arthur, you are so beautiful.”

“Morgen, be quiet will you?” he said, and his desire got animal wild and when he finished himself inside her, I tried to go back to sleep…

And when I woke again after dawn, I found I was alone in the room with the two sisters. Arthur had already gone and I jumped out of bed and hurried to get dressed. When I turned to go, I saw Morgen sitting up awake, her legs sprawled wide open, herself watching me with an unflinching stare; a stare of intense malice. The essence of her came over me fast and intense. Maybe I was so used to Medraut’s darkness that I could recognise it in others when I saw it, and as I turned to leave the room, Morgen gave me a long beautiful smile. I slammed the door on her and headed out into the hall, sure now I had to warn Arthur about her…

59: UNDER the TREE

I found him with Lady Deirdre, waiting for breakfast to be served. No one was around save some male servants lighting the fire and laying the table for breakfast. The wolf-hounds were still here, and Arthur was sitting at the table, stroking one of them as it licked his hand. He seemed happy enough, and Deirdre stood at his side, smiling at him.

When I came over to join him, he said to me right away, “Guess what?”

I answered, “I want to talk to you…in private.”

“No, just guess what.”

“Do not be dumb with me. I want to talk to you.”

He looked as if I had hurt his feelings and he came to his feet.

He said to me, “You're too thick in your skull to guess it anyway. Not in a thousand years.”

“All right, I know I’m thick in my skull, so you can tell me, but I cannot promise you I will hear it; thick skull, you know.”

I tapped my head.

“Fox, I’m going to have a sister or brother. Lady Deirdre’s pregnant. My own real brother or sister.”

This was powerful news to him and I gave in. He was too bloody happy to hurt, so I hugged him, said, “A real family now. But they won’t be

Silurians, so?"

He shrugged at me, and turned to Deirdre and gave her a kiss.

She turned to leave us alone, and when she had gone, I came out and said what I wanted to say, "Arthur, I have to warn you about Morgen—"

"I already know."

"What?"

"I already know. Deirdre warned me about her this morning. Said Morgen is jealous through to her heart. Jealous of men and the power of men. Deirdre said because of that, Morgen would fix on me the most, because I have the most power. Morgen's even jealous of the way men cannot be forced into pregnancies, things like that."

And even though he had said my skull was thick, I thought about what he had just told me.

I answered, "She is named after the Dark Goddess, Morgen herself; she has the same way about her as Medraut—that darkness. Don't go with her; don't let her seduce you again. Keep away from her, that's my warning. Do not meddle with dark goddesses, Arthur."

He held my gaze as more servants now came in, laying out the morning feast, and when Uthyr came through to join us, we talked mostly about the wedding and his games, where I had to confess that my throwing arm was still painful and stiff and I might not be able to win the javelin competition. Arthur dismissed my doubts without concern.

His trust in me was immense and I wondered if I could live up to his ideals of me as his champion. No, all I had to do was put in some practice. I would have to practice and do it right. And it was Arthur himself who took me out to throw my javelins at the hills.

We rode alone for some leagues into the north, seeking for a place to play, and I said to him, "What are you really up to, Commander?"

"Nothing! Only tomorrow is Uthyr's wedding, the day after are his games. You won't get a chance to practice. See over there, the flat land? You throw those javelins and I'll fetch them back for you. Try it?"

"I'll try," and we both rode over to where the land was flat before a few rising hills.

Off my horse, I pulled one of my javelins from its case on my saddle. The day started to warm, so I took off my tunic and moved out to throw. Taking a run-up that was not too fast, I hurled the javelin out in my usual

left-handed style, and it launched like a bird, it flew so far and high it winged right over Arthur's head, and he never even moved as it flew towards him. He just sat on his horse and watched it sail overhead, and he let out a yell to help it fly.

"Do that again!" he cried at me.

I did.

After the javelin had launched, I felt a nick of pain in my shoulder, down the bone from the joint, but not bad enough to stop me from throwing. I took the second javelin and did the same, a short run-up and flung it out in a beautiful arc, this time even better than the first and I laughed, delighted that I could still throw even after my terrible wounding.

"Brilliant!" Arthur called.

The case only carried three javelins, and just as I was about to throw the last, Arthur called to me, "Throw that one with your right hand!"

"I will!"

I followed my usual pattern and threw it right-handed and the whole thing fell apart, the javelin flashed off somewhere to the far left, and I just stood thinking how in all hell-fire did that happen?

I watched as Arthur rode his horse out to pick the javelins up and bring them back to me.

When he came up, I said to him, "What did I do wrong with that last throw?"

"You threw it cock-handed, of course."

"But I am cock-handed," I reminded him.

"Look here, you want another try? Try all three right-handed," and he gave me the javelins and I tried again. The first went the same way, the second went nearly straight, and I hit the mark with the third.

When Arthur came back again with the javelins, I told him, "If you want me to win, I'll have to throw left-handed. It's either that or lose. Why do you want me to throw with my right?"

"Because I think you can use both hands with training. You are one of those men who can use both hands equally, you favour your left, but you can use your right just as well. You don't believe me, do you?"

"My right hand is wild."

"Only because it's never dawned on you to use it, train it. Use it. Do what I tell you, lieutenant." He then looked up the hill towards the east and

I turned to see what he was looking at. Nothing. All I could see was a single tree on a hilltop behind us and nothing else.

"Race you up to that tree!" Arthur challenged me.

Then he left me standing, as if I could race him with javelins still in my hand, though I housed them fast, jumped up on my horse and heeled after him at full gallop. As I chased him, I sensed mischief in him, because this was Arthur when we were alone, when there was no troop, no soldiers, and no enemies to command his mind.

We galloped for a distance, heading uphill towards the tree and he gave another yell, urging on faster when I caught him up. Part way up the hillside, we began racing head to head, Arthur now pulling ahead of me, but he kept reining in so I could catch up, and when I came close, he yelled again and heeled on faster and we both reached the tree together, both reining in and jumping down and running for the tree, where we dived for the trunk. We had to touch the trunk of the tree, because whoever touched first was the winner, just like we did as boys at home. He touched in a dive just a second before me but I denied him his win.

"I touched first!"

"You did not! I was ahead of you the whole time." He breathed hard, watching me, seeing if I would give in. I told him, "No, you kept reining in, and then you lost your advantage, I touched first!"

It was custom to argue about it, just as we did as boys. Ten years before, we would have scrapped over it. Not true fighting, just scrapping, and I realised now that Arthur and I had never had a real fight. We scrapped like boys always did and loved each other all the more, and when we stopped arguing over who touched first, I stood breathing fast and saw him undoing the laces of his breeches and he pulled his prick and pissed a stream up the tree trunk; then he went higher, then higher again.

I stood watching him, he turned to me and said, "I like to mark out my territory," and laughed and finished, saying, "You wouldn't believe how long I've been holding that, since before breakfast."

"Should have gone before you left, then, aye?"

"Can't mark out my territory if I go, can I?"

He fell down into the grass on the opposite side of the tree. Leaving our horses to graze, I joined him on the grass under the shade of the

branches. Arthur looked up into the sky, told me, “This is the last of the summer sun, after this it’ll grow weaker.”

He pulled off his shirt and bare-chested, he moved out into the sunlight and laid down, turned his face to the sun and closed his eyes.

“Love the sun, don’t you?” I said, still sitting in the shade.

“Worship it, it can never get hot enough for me,” and he opened his arms out to the last of its summer power.

The tree trunk was wide and I moved under to lean against it; here I watched Arthur worshipping the sun.

He would take all his clothes off if he could and go naked before the world. I looked out over the rolling hills, listened to the wind through the grasses and the branches overhead. Peaceful. Undisturbed peace.

High on a hillside and watching the land lying under the sun, sweet wind, birds singing and nothing to hurt us. This was the first time we had sat alone on a hillside with no army around us for so long I could not remember when…

He rolled over onto his stomach and gave his back to the sun and when he did, I saw scratch marks all down his back; scratches from the two girls he had taken.

He said, “I wish we could camp out tonight. Out in the wilds. Remember how your mother used to rug us up and send us out into the forest alone? To face the night and the monsters from the lake. We faced that alone. Just me and you. Every fear we faced together.”

“And we hunted the water-monster, remember that? Stalking through the forest in hunt of something we never really saw, but we were ready to kill it if we saw it with naught but sharpened sticks.”

“Aye,” he laughed. “We scared each other more than anything we saw through the trees.”

“I was not afraid of anything when you were with me. Remember that night I chased you around the lake in the dark with my spear?”

“Every bit of it! Didn’t you get seen and thrashed for that?”

“My mother thought I was going to kill you, the moon-blasted woman.”

He came in from the sun to sit next to me against the tree, so close I could feel the sun’s warmth still on his skin. He fell against my shoulder,

rested against me, saying, “This is perfect. A perfect day. Is this the opposite of battle? Is this it? This one day? Is this all we get?”

“I hope not. But if this is the day, we better stay here for as long as we can and enjoy it. Though I bet Medraut won’t let us. He will send out scouts to find you if you’re not back soon.”

“I’m staying till sunset. If he likes it or not. It’s only a league back from here. I can think of things now. Think of a dozen different manoeuvres at once. Don’t know how I do it, but that’s the way it works inside my skull.”

“Arthur, stop thinking. I mean, look, naught but hills and sky and wind. And over there, away to the east, a flock of hill-sheep, so don’t spoil it with your plotting. Be still.”

But he fidgeted, sat up and rocked back and forth before resting against me again, and I had to stop him. I took hold of his shoulder tight and held him still. “Stop, sit still and breathe.” Under my fingers I could feel how taut he was. “Can’t you rest?”

“In my grave; isn’t that what the old warriors always say? In my grave…” He laid down again, stretched out under the shade, falling silent and staying still, breathing like I told him, stilling himself. He closed his eyes. We were silent for a long time, Arthur lying in a dream, while I watched as the clouds drifted across the pale blue sky.

I leant deeper against the tree and gave in to the moment of our freedom. And here I was, accusing him of not resting when it was me who could never achieve a moment of unguarded peace.

So I studied the horizons; watched the sheep moving downhill in their quiet grazing, saw the shadows from the clouds sweeping up and over the hills and flying from view. And I felt I could doze like a shepherd-boy who was supposed to be watching over his flock.

Long sweet moments swept over us, and our horses grazed further downhill, though were still in sight. And when I looked back at Arthur now, I was sure he had fallen asleep, in the way a child could fall asleep in a moment, untroubled, made by goddesses who had filled him full of all the things women love. And when I looked at him sleeping like this, open, trusting, I moved closer to him and touched his hand in mine. He did not move, but sighed…

Yet after a moment more he sat up again, stared away into the distance and said, “You know, we cannot really stay till sunset. We have to go back or else they will all be out looking for me. And you, Gwydre will come looking for you; he is your warrior and he will look for you in all the places where men look for each other, in that way of secret love. I know. I know all about it.”

He turned to look at me again, his words in the air around him, around me and in my flesh and blood.

But what did Arthur see in me?

He said, “I have to go home, I cannot stay here. I have to be there when Essylt arrives, she should arrive soon.”

“Essylt is coming? You never said.”

“She’s Uthyr’s favourite, she has to come. Wouldn’t allow her brother to go home and not herself to see her uncle married. I should be there to welcome her. Don’t want to be like Uthyr and not be there.”

“Don’t go…not yet. Stay here with me just a little longer.”

He looked at me again, all the time searching into me.

He said, “I want to stay,” and he held my neck and caressed me. “I want you all to myself, but this is not my life. Bedwyr…I…”

He was going to say something more to me, but instead, he pulled away and stood up.

He said, “Come on, let’s go and get the horses.”

So our perfect moment ended and we rode back to Luguvalos at a fast trot, and reached there just as a troop of Gareth’s scouts came out of the gates to look for us…

60: HURTING ARTHUR

UTHYR’S wedding day.

Guests began arriving after breakfast and had to be entertained; the Druid who was going to marry them arrived from some outlying place and he smelled of the sea.

Even the hulking wolf-dogs had their coats brushed and it was Arthur who brushed them, begging them to behave themselves as he did.

“Stand still will you, you big flea-sack. How can I make you look good if you keep on licking my hand?”

I laughed at him.

The women spent hours fixing their hair and clothes, the servants spent just as long making food. Musicians arrived, then King Garwy Hir of the Selgovae with his family–but not poor Indec–and some of his better warriors, who were here to stay for the next day's games. And as the hall began filling up and the excitement built, I escaped by taking my unit out to skirt up and over the nearby hills, just in case.

Arthur had warned me earlier this morning that it would be a good day for our enemies to launch a surprise attack, though without the surprise. He was more than ready if the Picts or the Caws decided we would all be too busy getting married to expect them. So Gareth took his troop towards the west and I took mine towards the east, planning to get back for the start of the ceremony at mid-afternoon.

We rode north of the Wall as far as Camboglanna, further north again where we had fought the Picts, and I looked out in that direction and saw nothing. I sent my boys out even further again to run a quick scout of the land, while me and Gwydre sat side by side on horseback, alone, waiting for them to return.

And when I looked at him, I saw he wore the slim gold torc Arthur had given him, he wore it with pride. His eyes on mine, he could never conceal the way he felt, but he never spoke a word about it. I looked at him and gave him something that made him smile.

I couldn't help but reach over for him, hugged him with my left arm and said, "You hound me, but never say a word. This makes you perfect in my eyes."

"I love your eyes."

I liked being with him, it was true. I liked the way he made me feel. I liked him. In every direction I looked there was naught but wild hills and wild desire. Desire. What did it mean? What did anything mean in this wild world? Our savage land? This place where a man could lose his life in a moment, a week or a day, all of it gone to a Saxon's blade or a Pictish arrow?

I looked at Gwydre and knew I could see him die when next we rode to battle, and he was only a boy, and he could die. And I could die. And the battle would rage on over me and around me and nothing mattered where we rode alone, wild and windswept. I watched the hills and the colours shifting under the clouds, breaking my heart.

Breaking my mind, because Gwydre was watching me and he reached out and touched my hand as the wild wind blew between us.

I let my hand drop; I let my fingers twine around his. Grey clouds swept over us, casting the hills in shadows, casting me into wild anguish and unbridled desire. And it was only through luck that I saw my recruits riding out of the darkness beyond and come into view, saving me. Things just end. They end, and I moved my horse down to meet them, where they told me the land was clear in every direction they could see.

Then I took them home.

We got back just before the wedding was due to start; stabled our horses, and when I came out, ready to go and change, I found Medraut striding towards me. He came up to me, all dressed up and looking brilliant, and demanded, "Where is he?"

"What are you barking about now? Where's who?"

"Arthur, you bone-head. Where is he? We have been looking for him for ages. He's supposed to be helping his father and the bloody ceremony's about to start, but none of us can find him. Isn't he with you?"

"No. Why would Arthur be riding out with my unit now? Find him yourself." And I strode off back into the hall to get changed, and found Essylt standing outside the door of our room.

She took hold of my arm and whispered, "If you are looking for Arthur, I think he's with Morgen. Bedwyr, please, I know where they are, but I'm too scared to go and find him…behind the hall on the far northern side, there is a small room for storage. Arthur and me used to hide there as children when we did not want Medraut to find us. I know that's where they are. Will you go and stop him? Bring him back?"

"Better than that," I told her, "I'll thump him blue for you."

I did not know why, but her news made me see red.

Damn him, damn him and his untamed prick! He just could not keep his prick down for longer than a hour, and I could hear Uthyr raging out in the hall for his son, calling him every foul name under the sun and this was bad; reconciliation between father and son was about to break down, so I gave Essylt's hand a squeeze and went down the corridor, down the back steps and walked up the hill towards the rear of the hall.

And even though the grounds were packed with people and guards, the northern side was clear and quiet, where they kept the stables and the

washhouses.

No one was around and I turned the corner, saw the little storehouse tacked onto the side of the building and I pushed open the door. They were there. Morgen all over him.

I took hold of her arms, and pulled her off him; she screamed something foul at me and I pushed her outside. She turned and jumped at me, trying like a wildcat to scratch open my face, but I blocked her hand and punched her so hard she staggered back and fell on her arse, screaming. I punched her hard to her face, and I did not care, all I felt was blind rage. I felt Arthur grab hold of my shoulder, and I turned and struck him a one-handed punch as hard as I could into his stomach.

I hit him with all my power as a warrior, so hard and fast he went over in a gasped cry that caught in his throat. I was just about to finish him with another final punch, but stopped.

I pulled my fist back, and suddenly I understood in horror what I had just done, what I was about to do.

I was about to hammer him down to the ground, but I stopped, pulled back, shocked, trembling. Arthur was still down on his knees, holding his stomach and looking up at me, himself shocked. Behind us, Morgen began screaming abuse at me; there was blood on her face from my punch. She screamed so loudly that guards started running from around the corners. I ordered the men to stand back, but they pulled Arthur to his feet, all of them looking at me, with Morgen screaming that I was an assassin and she turned and ran away.

"Let go of me," Arthur ordered the guards and they stepped aside. He righted himself, and the look he gave me now burned through my skull to my brains and out the other side.

He was still breathing hard and he said to the guards, "Go back to your duties. It's all right; you know he's no assassin."

They saluted him, and looking bewildered, went back to their posts. I stood where I was, feeling my hands shaking. My whole body shook. And when Arthur turned to face me, I did not stop. I attacked him again.

"You just cannot control yourself, can you?" and my rage was on the tip of violence again. "You can keep this land of ours safe from Saxons, but you just cannot keep your hands off those cheap women, and that one is dangerous. You were warned about her! Women are your weakness and your downfall! You will go down!"

"You put me down," he said to me.

He grabbed me hard by my tunic and pulled me close; he was about to hit me, but he stopped. He only shoved me hard aside, and went walking back to the hall.

And I did stand aside, for he had pushed me away as if I was naught but rubbish to him now, yet he restrained himself from hitting me. Arthur had restrained himself where I could not. For the first time in our lives, I had hit him in jealousy and in violence.

So I stood where I was for a long time, shocked by how easy I had fallen to violence against him, how easy it came to me. Everything inside me shook with suppressed violence still.

Morgen, she was bad to her bones. Then swallowing my pain, I went back to witness Arthur's father married to Morgen's older sister. I witnessed

this. I stood again as Arthur's second on his left and Medraut on his right. Uthyr's favoured witnesses to the foolishness of marriage, all without his brother Lot, who had not come back to Luguvalos for the wedding. And there, Lady Deirdre and her maids frocked up like make-believe goddesses. The bride and groom draped in garlands and Uthyr, I believed I would find him looking ridiculous, but he looked immense, even handsome, dressed in leggings and a plain kilt with a wide leather belt over a fine embroidered shirt, his hair long and braided.

He played his part like a king. The druid made words that in truth were meaningless, and when the garlands were wrapped around their hands to seal their Fate together, they drank from a single golden goblet, and Arthur looked at me, a long searching and questioning look.

It was over and his father was married. Arthur had a new mother and sisters and everyone hugged and kissed everyone else. Even Medraut made a show of being delighted to see Deirdre and her mad sisters into his family. Only now we would have to endure an entire evening of celebrations, and all I wanted to do was escape yet again, but I was forced to stay and eat and drink. I drank.

I drank instead of eat and listen to Uthyr making speeches.

Standing back from the mass of celebrations, I tried to stay noble in the face of what I had done to Arthur, so I concentrated on the music. Magic music. But I left when Uthyr began to make speeches about his marriage, I pushed through the crowd, and outside, down into the courtyard, here I stalked around, trying to clear my thoughts, trying to fathom why I had so easily fallen into rage. Jealous and insane, I had hurt my best friend…

I stayed outside for a long time, till a guard came and called for me, telling me that Arthur wanted to see me. I went, my heart in my mouth. I knocked on his door, he called for me to come in, guards parted for me and I went inside, and shut the door. I looked at him, he was sitting on the edge of his bed, he looked pale; he nodded for me to sit down.

So I sat on the chair in front of the tiny brazier in the fireplace, while back outside the party played on; the musicians playing on, the singers taking the roof off. Arthur did not speak to me, he just looked at me. And I looked at him.

Outside, I heard the magical voice of Royri Angen singing his awesome songs of beauty, after which the celebrations seemed to grow

louder and more raucous. Dancing, singing, drinking, and I sat and watched the little flames in the grate and felt Arthur watching me.

Then he gave a deep groan of pain.

He sat up straighter and turned to me, saying husky and deep, “Fox, I need something to drink. I’ve got a massive pain in my head. I cannot see out of my right eye.”

“You want me to go get you a drink? I will…” but as I said this, someone knocked on the door and I got up and opened it, finding Essylt standing there. I let her in and closed the door again.

She went to Arthur’s side and sat down beside him, studying him with love. She stroked his face, a small hand, soft and delicate. They said nothing. She lowered her lips to his and kissed him once, gently.

“I need something sweet to drink,” he whispered to her.

“I will go.”

After I let her out again, I sat back down and continued to study the fire, put a few more logs on to burn. Arthur moved to sit up against the wall and when he did, he gave another deep groan and lifted up his shirt, touched his stomach just under his ribs on the left side. There was a black bruise, cuts, he looked at me. Pale he was, suffering I could see, a look of something broken inside him.

The heavy rings I wore on my left hand had ripped his skin, as he wore only a light shirt when I had punched him and now a wound was swollen and discolouring on his side.

He breathed hard and said, “You have never hit me before, never, not you…what happened?”

All I did was sit. But I couldn’t stay seated. I got up and went to look at the bruise, a nasty wound.

I sat down at his side, told him, “It hurts me to see you giving your love away to those who do not deserve it. You are worth so much more. Give your love to those who love you, who are worthy, not some cheap…” I was stopped by his look, hard, and yet hurt. But I went on, “Don’t do it, Arthur, don’t go with those cheap bitches. Give your love to those who are worthy, who love you.”

“Like you. You love me. You are in love with me, and you always have been; it’s the source of all your pain and troublemaking. Your love for

the warriors of this land, your love for me, but you cannot see it or admit it. I know it, I see it. And you want me to love you…and only you."

Hearing him say this killed me; I groaned and looked away.

But he went on, "Fox, yesterday we thought it was perfect. Yesterday, it was a dream and I was dreaming and you were the best thing in my life. You have always been my heart; but now you attack me as if you have to punish me for not loving you in the way you want. Is this love of yours going to destroy us? Because if it is…you and I…we have to finish."

"No!" I could not bear any more of his words, his truth; he was killing me as easily as slipping a knife into my heart. And I was saved by a knock at the door. I got up again and opened it, finding Essylt returned and carrying a large tankard in one hand and mugs in the other. I let her in and she put the things down on the little table at the foot of his bed.

"I have warmed some milk and put honey in it," she told him. "Do you want some now, my love?"

"A full mug, please."

So she poured the honeyed milk and gave it to him and he drank it in one long swallow, sighed and said, "That's an awful noise out there."

"It's terrible," Essylt agreed with him. "Your headache is bad."

She went and sat at his side and caressed his face and hair and again kissed him. They gave each other sweet long kisses and it was as if I no longer existed. It was his girls he loved. And I was nothing to him but a menace. A liability, as Cai always said I was.

But Essylt stood up and said to me, "Bedwyr, please, unlace my dress."

The back of her dress was laced in long bows and I pulled them open for her, not questioning her moves, feeling desolate inside. And when her dress fell to the floor, she stood only in her shift, then got into bed beside him and I knew I had to leave. I could not sleep here this night, and for a moment I watched her lie down beside him and put her head on his chest. He stroked through her beautiful long blonde hair and I knew that he was finally going to take Essylt into his heart, to take her fully. To take a woman who was not a witch out to rip him down and suck him dry. Essylt loved him truly and I knew that. She was worthy.

So I left them alone. And when I went back out into the hall, I found the party wild and wood-smoke filled the hall. And I felt dead inside. I

looked at the guests enjoying their night, and walked away, out of the main doors again and went and sat on the steps with men and women all around me, dancing outside to the music, drinking, laughing.

I wondered, where in all of this was I going to sleep? So I stayed only to listen to the music. Gwydre came over to see me. He did not speak, he stood near and I was happy for this, for him to stand near me and not speak. Though I turned and looked at him, I smiled at him and said, "I've lost my lodging. Arthur kicked me out."

"Why, my lord?"

"He's got a woman with him tonight."

"I see." He gave me a long hot look, leaning on the railing.

He said, "I know where you can sleep, my lord."

"You do?"

"Follow me and I will show you."

So I followed him, and he led me out of the fort grounds, through the main gates where the guards let us pass.

He took me down the road towards the old hut where the wounded were housed after the Pictish battle.

He told me as we went, "I have the room at the end of the hut. I have the only room, though there's no door, it's just a tiny room with a cot and mattress. The usual. You can have the room, my lord. I hear you are going in the competitions tomorrow."

"I am. Javelin throws."

We reached the hut and went inside.

There were already sleeping men there in a row and his room was at the far end, tiny like he said with no door, just a heavy horse-blanket for privacy.

I went straight in and stopped, looked at Gwydre standing in the doorway, holding open the blanket. All the men outside were asleep, those who were not invited to Uthyr's wedding or his party, those who manned the camps around Luguvalos, sleeping, snoring, and Gwydre looked lost. Lost. I knew that feeling. Knew it well.

I went to him; saw the longing in his eyes as he looked at me through the darkness. I stroked his face and he sighed. He put his arms around me and he was warm, the warrior in him hiding the soft love of a boy, sweet and strong.

I whispered to him, “I’m sorry, you cannot have me, and I cannot have you. It’s wrong, isn’t it?”

He nodded, sad, yet trying to understand. “Why is it wrong?”

“We are men, both of us.”

“You love another,” he said.

I stroked through his hair, told him to go; he pulled out of my arms and moved down the row of sleeping men to the first bunk by the door. He fell down on it and I turned back into his room. I slept alone on his bed. I slept and I slept, dead in my thoughts…

61: ARTHUR’s LOVE from the SEA

FIRST day of October, and when I woke on the morning of Uthyr’s games, I woke knowing the true pain I had given Arthur when I had hit him. Maybe it had stirred awake in my sleep. But I knew it when I woke, that I had hurt him on a far deeper level than he showed, a level more than physical…

I got up and left the hut. Gwydre had already gone and the other men were stirring. Outside it was cold, and still dark, though just beginning to dawn light and fresh. As I walked up the road to the fort, I saw Sandedd and Pedr, our new boys, walking towards me and each carrying a mass of javelins over their shoulders.

I stopped them. “What’s going on?”

“For the competitions,” Pedr told me. “We have to stack them up on the field down the road for later. Lord Uthyr said to get it all ready, though the javelin throws won’t start till the afternoon, so there’s plenty of time to practice!”

They went walking off into the growing light as I carried on up to the hall. And as I came closer, I saw the gates opening and a unit of Uthyr’s soldiers rode out and headed west.

The gatekeepers let me through. I went up the steps to the main doors, finding them guarded by Dafin and Irfan, who were growing to become favourites of mine, two separate men with exactly the same face.

Irfan said to me, “Get on in there, Fox, you have to join the roll of competitors and choose which sports you are going in today.”

They opened the doors and I went inside. Mess everywhere, servants running around to clear up, everyone in a hurry, save Medraut, who sat

cross-legged on top of the long-table, eating something from a bowl. And Arthur…watching me come in. He did not speak to me. With him was someone I had not seen for ages. My beautiful Arial!

As soon as she saw me, she cried out, “Bedwyr! My sweetheart!” and she ran to me and crushed me in a mighty hug, pulled me over to the table, where Arthur was standing, plucking on one of the musician’s harps, he plucked at the strings and played it well. He turned and looked at me, turned away again, plucked the strings once more before putting the harp down on the table. Arial cried to everyone present, “I slept with these two boys all through last winter! Such wonderful lovers,” and she tried hugging us both at once.

I kissed her cheek and said, “When did you arrive?”

“Last night, but you were gone off somewhere, it’s so good to see you both again.” Though her face fell when she noticed that Arthur was ignoring me and that I had not spoken to him.

“Is something wrong?” she said, low. “Trouble between you two I hope not.” Cold pain ran through me when she said this, deep into my heart. I could not answer her and Arthur moved away, he went down to the side-door and was gone. I stood watching him go. I knew I couldn’t let this happen, but Medraut told me to write my name on the competition rolls that were spread out on the far end of the table.

I had to sign up for which sports I wanted to compete in. I moved to take a look at the lists, everything written in Latin.

I said to Medraut, “Where were Uthyr’s soldiers going?”

“To meet the Dal Riadans. You cannot read this list can you? If I help you, will you tell me what’s gone wrong with you and Arthur? It’s not natural to see you two broken. You love each other so much, it’s heart-warming to see. And filthy; don’t you understand this, Fox? Sodomite love will get you beaten, castrated, hung up and violated, understand me, I know.”

“Stop needling me! Just show me where the javelin lists are.”

He came over to me, stood at my side and looked at me. “What’s gone wrong?”

“Don’t offer me your false sympathy.”

“False is it? There’s nothing false about me. I offer everyone equal and savage honesty. They hate me for it. This isn’t false. What’s gone

wrong?"

I looked into his eyes, green, beautiful. Could I trust him, tell him?

He would only abuse it if I did. "That's between Arthur and me. Show me the javelin lists, please."

"Here and here, this one is for distance throwing, and this one for target. You will win them both. I've bet on you to win both. Big stakes too. Don't let me down, Fox."

He put a hand on my shoulder and squeezed.

Almost I gave in to him, but I signed my name in both lists and said, "It will have to be very big stakes. I'm a sure win, am I not?"

"There are unknown forces arriving with the Dal Riadans; who knows what skills they have? They could even-out the score. They also play a game with clubs and a ball, so brutal they sometimes fight to the death over it. Just don't sign up for that. They should be here soon, so watch out for them, all right?"

As he said this, the side-door opened and Arthur came back into the hall with his father, both of them dressed in their battle-gear.

I stood where I was.

Though Arthur stopped and came over to me, saying, "You need to change into your gear. The Dal Riadans will be here soon and we have to look impressive to greet them. Uthyr's orders. He's got me obeying his orders now. Such charm he has," and he turned and went back to join with his father.

Not long after, we waited for our visitors, lined on the steps outside the fort and down the road to the gate, all of the Clan Bear and Uthyr's warriors together. All of us dressed in full armour.

Uthyr stood outside the main doors, with Arthur opposite him, myself and Medraut too, and we did look impressive, though Uthyr eyed his son and asked him, "Where is the chain-mail I gave you? You should be wearing it now, boy."

I saw the familiar slow burn that Arthur could control; he answered, "I left it at home."

"Well, that Roman lorica you are wearing now is fine enough," Uthyr nodded, "and you keep it well polished and looked after. You look a prince. But you should wear the chain-mail. I hope you have not sold it off."

"It's at home."

Uthyr nodded again, a tight smile on his lips.

We waited and the sky greyed as a cool wind came over us, and with the wind came a horn blast, the Dal Riadans were coming.

And whenever we heard the sound of a war-horn blowing, it meant nothing to us but the approach of enemies, a call to battle. Every one of us stiffened and stood up straighter. Arthur's hand went to his sword.

Again Uthyr smiled at him, said, "And what would you do now if the Dal Riadans attacked us rather than greet us? You are ready for battle now, are you not, my son? I can see it in your eyes."

The cold wind whipped against us, the Red Dragon banners strained to fly free, while inside the hall the women were dressed in their finest and waiting to greet their strange new guests.

"Here they come!" Uthyr warned us.

We all looked towards the gates and saw a long procession of strangers, most walking, some riding ponies, coming towards us up the road, flying their own banners and flanked by Uthyr's warriors on horseback. And as they came closer, I could see the Dal Riadans were no threat to us. None of them wore armour, none of them had warhorses and none of them even had helmets on their heads.

They came like Picts, carrying small round shields, long wild hair and moustaches, plaid cloaks lined with fur, hands and arms stuffed with gold and wristbands, the men in front wearing torcs. These front men also wore swords and daggers on their belts. Just inside the hall doors waited Royri Angen, Dal Riadan himself to greet his kinsmen and interpret for us. Yet it proved unnecessary, as when the front men walked up the steps to meet us, one stepped out, an awesome redhead who turned out to speak good British. Though the moment fell tense as he looked at us, his eyes taking a flashed look at Arthur's sword.

"I want the High King of the British," he said.

Uthyr looked confused and Arthur stepped forward. "You want me," he said. "I am Arthur of the Britons, and this is my father, Lord Uthyr Pendragon. Here in these lands, I am known as Arthur Pendragon."

He bowed to the man, and the Gael answered by taking Arthur's hands, both of them in his. "I am Conary mac Noll," he said. "My cousin is King Fearghus mor mac Erc, who begs to send his apologies for not coming to the Pendragon's games, he has many problems at home. And you, Arthur,

are High King here in this land," he looked around at us all, "and leader of a fine army! We are afraid of you!" he laughed and added, "I have a problem too, should we go inside so I can tell you?"

Arthur led the man inside and I swear, Uthyr did not like it when the Dal Riadan called his son, High King. The visitors then filed by us and I took a closer look at them, wild, it was true, proud and defiant, deadly to come against. A lot of the men were shorter in stature than us and wore long shirts to their knees that were hitched up under wide belts.

Some were bare-chested and wore leather strapping across their chests with daggers around the belts. Their cloaks were rough-woven and had collars of fur. Some were skin-branded, and compared to us and our high armour, our British-made swords and our intense military training, the Dal Riadans were more like ancient folk who were savage and untamed, who would fight their enemies as a chaotic screaming mass like the Picts.

Once they had all filed inside, the women set to work in serving them a late breakfast, where everyone tried hard to be warm and welcoming, to fathom each other's native speech, with only Royri and the man Conary to interpret, where misunderstandings could easily ruin the day. Though as I stood guard by the door, I could see the respect they gave to Arthur, as they believed him to be High King. They did not seem to understand the difference between High King and Supreme Commander of Armies, for it was all the same to them and it worked.

Arthur came over to me with Conary mac Noll and said, "Some of them are missing. They are down on the coast by Maia and Uthyr wants me to ride down there and find the missing Dal Riadans. You and Medraut are coming too. Go and get your unit and I'll meet you outside."

I held his gaze, saluted him and went to gather my men, saddle our horses, ready to ride. The sky began to cloud over and it looked as if it might rain as we headed down to the coastal town of Maia. So we travelled fast on, my recruits following behind as Arthur rode in front with the Dal Riadan, Conary. It seemed a ship of their folk had docked down at Maia and one of the passengers had gone missing; a girl who was related somehow to the Clan of Fearghus, their king, and therefore she was very important.

Uthyr had decided it should be his equally important son, High King, who would go and find her. I gleaned all this information from Medraut, who rode with me, and he would have to go and notice that Arthur not only

wouldn't speak to me, but he wouldn't look at me either. But it was not an imperious ignoring, it was hurt, it was suffering, as if he could not look at me without showing pain rather than dislike for my bad actions. So we rode this way down to the coast where my father had stayed before he left to take the coins back to Dinas Emrys that time.

And we arrived at the little port to find the Dal Riadans disembarked and waiting in a knot, and when they saw Conary, they ran to him and spoke in low voices.

Conary told us, "The girl has gone off for a walk as she did not like being at sea. Went somewhere around the coastline here," and he pointed westward. "It is a great shame to us to have the British High King out searching for a girl." He added, "Though she is the daughter of Fearghus' youngest brother, she is very important, our princess."

"My men will find her, Conary, things like this are not beneath us, understand this," Arthur assured him. He then dispatched my unit around the coast westward, and as I turned to go with Gwydre, Arthur gripped my shoulder and held me back.

"You can come with me," he said.

I saluted him and we went to get our horses, and mounting, we turned together along the coast and rode for a distance where we found a walking track that went down to the beach; here the wind whipped up and we left our horses on the grass by the shore.

Just before we took to the track, I stopped him. "Arthur…please let me speak. I am so sorry for what I did. I'm giving you my heart into your hands, I am sorry. And I understand now why what I did hurt you so much. To be abused by the one you love."

"Just like Uthyr did," he answered. His anger lashed out at me, "And you were the one person I always trusted to never do that to me! And now you have. I cannot believe you would be like him, you of all the men I love. You, the Fox, I feel betrayed, and I cannot take this from you again."

"Again?"

"Aye, again…it's the one thing I cannot take."

He stood with the wind blowing his hair around his face. The hurt was still inside him, inside me. For a long time he studied me, then he gripped the back of my neck like he always did.

He said, close to me, “When you deserted the army, you deserted me. I felt it as a betrayal…no, I know it wasn’t, I know you couldn’t help what you did, but back then…to me, it was a betrayal and it hurt so bad, I wanted to die; but I know now it was no betrayal, but you keep repeating this pain —if you love me so much that you think you can abuse me for it, where do we go from here?”

I was ready to break, when he spoke about my desertion.

I was breaking. I begged him, “Arthur, can you not hear what I’m saying to you now? What I did, I cannot defend. I am bad, so please tell me, are you breaking with me now?”

“After the games, I want you to go back to Cadwy. I want you to escort Essylt home. You can take your unit and go back without me. Because, Fox, you were not just going to punch me once, you were going to finish me. Punch me in my face; I saw your fist raised to do that to me. You can go back with Essylt and support Cai, he’s there all alone. I have to find this girl now,” and he turned away from me, finished.

He went down the track to the beach.

I watched him go; stood on the track, and I could not even feel my heart beating. Everything in me stopped, the wheel stopped turning. All I felt now was the cold of the wind, the sound of the sea and the gulls crying my pain. Great fear touched me. Was I losing him? Losing him because I was so bad inside? Arthur was leaving me, and in that moment I knew the truth of abandonment and rejection.

So I followed after him, and when I reached the shallow beach, I could see him already in the distance, I did not chase him, I left him to his search. Away down to my left, I saw some of my lads walking, searching for the missing Dal Riadan girl.

I looked right, nothing. Arthur had gone.

The tide was out and I walked towards the sea and looked at the horizon. A weird feeling was in the air, on the wind and when a gust from the north-west blew against me, this was when the wave of agony hit me. It hit like a twisting knife in my guts and I almost dropped to my knees.

But I held myself upright, knowing that if I dropped now I might never get up again. Gulls and sea, the weak waves of an out-tide, the wind from the sea and the grey sky with a break where a shaft of sunlight beamed

through, I turned and went back up the track to the grassland and waited with the horses beside me.

And still the clouds were breaking apart and the sun returned, bringing with it a glow across the land and the sky. Time had stopped, and I felt as if I had accepted death without a fight. But then I heard voices. People coming up the track from the beach. First Conary mac Noll, then a girl, the missing girl, and Arthur behind her. And when they reached me, Conary gave the girl a dressing down in their own tongue. He even wagged his finger at her and she gave a small flinch and glanced at me standing there.

She then looked at Arthur and she looked at him, looked at him as if she had lost herself somewhere inside him, not lost on this beach. Of course a girl like her would go missing, because a girl like her was free of all those around her. I could feel it in her even before I knew who she was. And she was the Princess Isleen of the Dal Riadan Clan of Fearghus mor mac Erc, their king. A luminous girl who made Essylt look dull beside her. Isleen, one of those souls who walked the earth like Arthur did, pulsing suns and powerful personalities who glowed and outshone everyone around them. They spun and they flew and they took themselves to the mountaintop. They would walk into the future, shining and hot. She stood beside him and looked into his face without turning her head or seeing anyone else. And Arthur looked at her and never saw anyone else, as if they had slipped into a private place, a secret place all of their own and all in a rush.

They could not even speak to each other, or fathom what each was saying, and yet here they were, already speaking in their own personal language. I could see this too, because I knew it, had lived with the allure of Arthur since I was eight years old, and I knew it now in Isleen…

62: WINNING the GAMES

SO we escorted the missing girl back to Luguvalos; here she was formally introduced to Lord Uthyr and Lady Deirdre as Princess Isleen of the Dal Riadans, come as King Fearghus' representative, to act as a goddess to bless her Dal Riadan warriors as they joined our games.

Everyone looked at her, Isleen, radiant, yet simple in a plain dress, her thick dark blonde hair loose, her shoes naught but thin leather ankle boots. No jewellery. Her body was slim and tall for a girl, and she was without any

kind of womanly breasts, and that made me wonder how old she was. She looked like a tall thirteen-year-old girl-child, though her lips were woman-full and her eyes were long and grey, framed by dark eyebrows, a noble nose and jaw that made her strong and womanly both at the same time.

And when I looked at Essylt, she knew as I did. Isleen and Arthur, they could not take their eyes off each other. I looked at Essylt and she looked at me, great distress, great pain, mad-like agony inside her.

I moved over and sat next to her at the head-table, and I gripped her hand beneath. She was frozen.

Lord Uthyr then stood up and announced his games to start.

Outside, the sky stayed clouded, but it did not rain.

All the competitors moved down to the fields, high with noise. There was an area set aside for those of us who were highest ranked, with seats under a small pavilion for watching the games—the Dal Riadan guests were going to give us a display of their powerful ballgame, and I admit, it was brilliant. An unhindered display of raw skill, fast, angry, two teams chasing themselves insane with a club to nail a ball into its goal.

They ran fast as hounds, hit as hard as fighting warriors on the battlefield, aimed the ball with accuracy, and Medraut, standing next to me in the crowd, loved it. The men played stripped to the waist, wearing only kilts, some with their hair long and free around their shoulders.

One Dal Riadan in particular came crashing into the crowd, and struck the ball like an arrow firing down the field, so powerful it flew like a Roman ballistic shot.

Medraut said to me over the noise of the crowd, “What is wrong with you, brother? You are pale. Not sick I hope? The javelins are next.”

“No, it’s the wrestling matches.”

“No, it’s the javelins, do not try and get out of it. If you tell me what’s wrong, I can help you.”

A group of ball-players almost charged into us as we spoke, smashing sticks, falling into the spectators and pushed back again onto the field, where they ran down the ball. One of them shot the ball high into the air and down to the goal. The crowd screamed in delight and cheering. The game seemed to be over, as all the Dal Raidans now went running to their players as they left the field.

And when I turned, I saw Arthur walking back to the hall with the girl Isleen, his father and new stepmother with him, for the gaming board matches were due to start, and I wanted to watch, but Medraut hauled me away towards the javelin field, a growing crowd moving away with us.

Medraut was right, the javelin matches were starting, and when I arrived on the scene, the Clan Bear came down in a mass to watch me.

As I looked around the field for my opponents, I saw most of them were Selgovae, I saw Lord Garwy in the crowd, his sons, and a small number of Gododdin and one lone Dal Riadan, all tall and thin—a walking bag of bones.

All my brothers were around me, telling me what to do, how to do it and what way to move. Gwydre stood near, watching me with something like adoration. Irfan came and tied a band around my forehead to keep my hair out of my eyes, with Val giving my left shoulder a sudden massage, and my heart starting to pound because they were jeering me up. Medraut helped me off with my tunic as we threw stripped to the waist like the ball-players, and when I turned to look for the javelin stack near my position on the field, I saw Arthur coming back again, moving up behind the Clan and joining them there, just another spectator for all his high status, and the Clan treated him like a lost brother returned rather than the Supreme Commander.

Then I was on the field in a rank of seven throwers, where I was second last. We would throw one after the other, three rounds of three throws. And when the crowd had started up its cheering and calling, the official start began and the first man moved out, threw his javelin, then man two, then man three, four, five, and me.

The crowd hushed and I felt the hush like a weight, moved out, gave my run and launched my javelin, and when it left my hand the entire crowd gave out a huge sigh of amazement. Oh, my goddess! It flew and it flew and it flew way beyond the rest before diving for the earth at least twenty paces beyond the furthest thrower before me.

The crowd fell silent, stunned, then they erupted like a single scream and I stood still, gave a laugh of surprise and walked back as the poor sod beside me threw his; he then walked off the field in disgust, saying, “I’m not throwing against you.”

Already one man dropped out.

And the Clan went wild! Arthur stood still in quiet thought. I tried not to look at him or him at me. The others crowded me, all of them enrapt as the next round began after the judges had marked our javelin places with coloured stones; my colour was red. The other competitors looked at me with spite; they would kill me if they could.

Throw two.

Out went the first man, the tall Dal Riadan and his throw had improved on his first. Down the line to me, and I threw a repeat of my first, still beating my closest rival, the bony Dal Riadan.

Again the crowd hushed, then roared and the Clan was on me.

Val cried at me, "Take the third! Take the third! Go one better each time, we know you can do it, Fox, do it!"

"You are our boy," Medraut reminded me.

Throw three.

The stakes went up and when my turn came again, I threw from some place inside me that came like a dream and winged the javelin like an eagle and it outstripped the first magic throw and I almost fell over in sheer wonder at my own power. I had outstripped myself. And it scared me. How did I do such a thing? Where did the power come from, when my shoulder was still wounded?

Everyone could see what I was doing, everyone in the crowd could see it, and I hushed them again. The other men in the race did not stand a chance and they knew it. They glared at me and the Dal Riadan gave me a long penetrating stare that could have stripped the life out of a charging bull. I gave the stare right back to him.

We broke for a short rest before the next game. Clan all around me and the crowd grew even larger, word had gone out that something extraordinary was happening down on the javelin field. Uthyr turned up, then the entire Dal Riadan ball-playing team, nearly all of the wrestlers from the other field, even the horse-riders who were soon to start their horse-races, one of which was Gareth. He stayed to watch me kill my opponents dead on the field.

All of them drawn to me and asking me questions, whether I had been blessed by some god or goddess of the heavens, or was it because I was left-handed and this gave me secret powers?

It got so bad, Arthur was forced to step in and pull them off me. “He cannot do this if you are all hanging off his arm,” he said. He ordered them back and they went, giving me room to breathe.

I looked at him.

He said, “I know you will win.” And moved away again.

Once more we lined up, and this time we took up different positions on the field. I was first in line and this meant I had to throw to set the mark. And it had to be good. The wind was picking up, the sky greying over again, a touch of autumn air, cold, yet I was hot.

So hot I threw all three throws of the final round without room for my opponents to even come near. Each throw winged like a bird; the third and final launch took the extreme length of the field. I died when I saw the javelin flying far ahead of all my other throws—it did not seem to be dropping and it kept its head up longer and further, where the wait for it to drop seemed an age. And when it came down?

I had thrown the entire length of the field and no one in the history of javelin competition in the land had ever done that. Only I had done it now. And I was a hero, even to my Dal Riadan opponent.

When he came over to pummel my shoulder and shout at me in the Gael that I was his hero, told to me by Royri Angen, this was when I felt a touch on my arm and I turned.

“Champion,” Arthur said. “All that I thought you were. I have to play the board matches now. See you tonight. Tonight, in the hall.” And once again he left me, gone to his own realm of the mind.

But then, of course, I also won the target throws, and the Clan lifted me up to the sky and everything in my life was free to be had, and when they dropped me back down to earth again, all those who were competing in other matches came over to touch my hands and rub my luck and power off onto themselves. I think I touched a hundred other men, even the Dal Riadans, who thought I could control the weather, as the rain held off and the horse-races began. I gave Gareth all the luck I had, I think, and went with Medraut to watch Arthur slam the Black Raven matches.

The Snake led me with his arm around my neck, saying, “Tell me, tell me what’s wrong. I won’t have anyone hurting my Fox. You are my hero now, I fancy you even more after that brilliant display of sheer unbridled power. You thrashed them! Thrashed them!” Every time he said this, he

poked me in my ribs and laughed. “And I think you are going to be overall champion of the entire games. They cannot go past you for that. No one has ever done what you did just now, ever!”

At last, my bleak heart gave in and I laughed. I laughed and enjoyed the whole bloody thing, because I was a champion. And I had a right to enjoy it. I never asked for it, it came to me, so I took it now into my heart.

“You should smile more!” Medraut told me. “Handsome as a wild warrior you are when you smile.”

Up in the hall, we found a gaming match in progress.

Black Raven it was, played on a round board, and the mood was so different to the playing fields. Tense. Quiet. Studied.

Arthur played a man of the Gododdin, a brawny man who looked like a wrestler. Those who could stand the quiet and be quiet themselves stood to watch, a few women there, including the Princess Isleen.

And I knew it would not matter to Arthur whether it was quiet or not, he could play through a riot and still not lose concentration. He could read a scroll, write letters and play seven different games on many other boards all at once, and when he saw me and Medraut come in, he made a move and the old wrestler gave himself away with a nod of approval.

The game was over in moments.

The wrestler snorted and looked at Arthur with a cocked eyebrow, then they shook hands over the board and another challenger took his place. Uthyr was there with Lady Deirdre, and we joined them at the head-table. Down the far end from the matches, I watched as Arthur defeated everyone who came through the door. Each man who got beaten, Uthyr laughed at, which I did not think was good diplomatic behaviour, but this was what he did, and for it, Arthur gave him a black stare.

Once again his dark eyes took hold of Isleen, sitting nearby on a stool, her shoes off and wiggling her toes. They never smiled at each other, it was just glances, looks, giving me the notion that they were speaking to each other without words.

I never saw them speak at all. I did not see him speak to her all afternoon through the matches, or during breaks, and when the matches were over, Arthur was Black Raven champion as I was champion javelin thrower. We all moved outside to watch Gareth finish his races, though he

came in second to a skinny boy from Garwy's village. He carried his loss well. All of us then moving over to see Howell compete in the wrestling.

So the day wore on, and it blew up colder and I knew the rain wouldn't hold off for much longer, and when it started to pour down a moment later, everyone scattered for their homes, huts and villages, the Clan going up into the hall, where yet another celebration would start in honour of the game champions…

Night came and there were more people in the hall now than the night before, the high ranking Dal Riadans were with us, and after supper, I saw Arthur in deep discussions with Conary mac Noll and other Dal Riadans, Royri as well, while the Princess Isleen moved amongst her warriors, and as the musicians started to play, she danced with some of them lads in a curious and beautiful dance.

It was hard not to stare at her, so different a girl I had ever seen, not in any way more beautiful than our own women, but alluring, the way she wore her hair free of braids or bindings, falling full around her face and shoulders, her breast-less chest, the way she looked at men with a secret force in her eyes. I came close to her that night, when at midnight, the overall games champion was chosen from out of all of us winners.

And it was me.

Even though Medraut had warned it could be me, I did not believe him. My heart pounded fast and I got goose-flesh when they called my name aloud through the hall, standing as I was with the other champions. I was called before the head-table.

And with Arthur, his father, and the Princess Isleen, and with everyone watching, she presented me with a large beautifully carved box. When she opened it for me, inside was a prize that came from the Dal Riadan Clan of Fearghus, a gift to the British champion and a sign of goodwill from them to us. Inside the box, inlaid on deep red material, first a fine gold torc, and a beautiful goblet, all gold, pressed with three rubies on the drinking edge.

Isleen presented it to me with sweet words I could not fathom.

"From the Dal Riadan king to the British champion. And in honour of British generosity in taking Dal Riadan clans into their lands as allies, not enemies. To you, Bedwyr ap Pedrawg, Prince of the Gododdin, games champion," translated Conary mac Noll, and when this was heard said, a

mighty roaring cheer touched me, for all the men around me were Gododdin. And to have me, a Gododdin champion was perfect.

I felt overwhelmed, robbed of words to reply, and when I tore my gaze away from the rich beauty of my prize, I looked up.

It was Arthur I looked at, because he was watching me from a distance I had never known before between us, yet he gave me a look of dark admiration, and I said, "I do not know myself a champion, but Dal Riadan generosity has made me such."

And I bowed to Isleen as Conary translated my pathetic words. Isleen in return gave me a small curtsy, and the celebration was on. Everyone surrounded me, their hero. Once again Medraut rescued me; he was more than aware now that something was seriously wrong between Arthur and me. He showed concern about it and pulled me aside to have my valuable prize locked up in the big chest he kept in his room, the room that Arthur had shared with Essylt.

He took me into this room and shut the door and dropped the bar.

"All right, Fox, even though you are the most randy and beautiful creature I have ever seen, I am not going to jump on you now. Here, give me that prize. It must be worth a Rex's fortune. You realise what a powerful gift this is to receive? As it touches all of us, not just you."

"Of course I bloody know it! You think me a half-wit?"

I was angry again. He knelt and unlocked the chest behind the door and put the box inside; dropped the lid and locked it again, standing up and looking at me. "Tell me what's going on with you and Arthur. I know something's wrong. I've never seen him like this with you before, ever."

I stepped right into his face. "I am not prepared to discuss it with anyone, not even you."

"Thanks for your trust."

"Why should I trust a snake?"

"Because I am your snake. To others, I'm a killer, but to you, I'm all yours and Arthur's. If you want me to help you, I can."

"Can you make time go backwards, can you stop me hurting the one I love the most? Can you take away my aggression and change it, control it for me?"

"So that's it. You used your aggression against him. Very stupid you are after all. What did you do?"

“I hit him. I hit him in anger and violence, and…jealousy. And I’ve never done that before, not to Arthur.” I found I could not hold it in. I had to tell someone, and that someone was Medraut. I had to go on. “I found him with that witch girl, Morgen, when you said he was missing. He was with her and he was hurting Essylt.”

“He was hurting you.”

“He goes with any girl who offers it to him. He cannot, he cannot stop it; he hurts those who love him when he does that. He’s a whore himself.”

Medraut laughed at me; “He’s a loaded youth with a rampant cock, that’s what he is, just like we are too. When did you become so moral? It’s only rutting. Let him have his girls; doesn’t he fight hard enough for it? Who are you to judge him? So bloody virtuous you are.” He gave me his famous snarl. “And you hit him for that? Not even I would do something like that.”

I wanted to get out of this room, for everything he said was true.

His savage honesty.

I turned away from him and began packing some of my gear into my saddlebags that lay still on the pallet I was supposed to sleep on.

I said with my back to him, “He’s sending me away. I have to escort your sister back to Cadwy, probably tomorrow or the next. Why don’t you come with me? You can tell me all about myself on the long ride back.”

Medraut did not answer; he stayed quiet and I turned back to him.

“What is it? Come on, tell me.”

“I cannot go with you,” he said, almost sorrowfully. “I’m going with Arthur.”

“What do you mean?”

“After all this is over, he’s taking some of our Gododdin up into the territories where the Caws are. It’s as dangerous as walking alone and unarmed into a Saxon long-house full of their warriors, but he’s going and he’s taking me with him.”

“No, he cannot do this without me! He cannot do this to me.” Desperation overtook me. “Why would Arthur do this when he said he wouldn’t?”

But Medraut answered it, “You know Arthur…and he needs me to help track Aurelius.”

So Arthur was leaving me behind, to send me home to Caer Cadwy in escort of a girl, safe, while he took a far more dangerous road into the land of the Caws. He had just ripped out the heart of me, and my sense of being his champion, his lieutenant, his brother, his one true friend…I lost again, and I turned and let myself out of the room, leaving Medraut standing where he was.

63: THE CHAMPION SENT HOME

TWO days later I was set and ready to escort Essylt back to Cadwy.

With me were my own men, Val and his unit, Gareth and his scouts, and Howell and his unit to ride as rear-guard, though it would be unlikely that anyone would attack warriors of the Clan Bear on British territory, but Arthur would not allow us to travel alone; he had given over half our force to take back with me.

Essylt cried like a little girl on his chest as she said farewell, kissing his face and he kissed her back and helped her up into the carriage.

He said to her, "Fox will look after you, you know that."

I sat on my horse, all packed up for travel, the Dal Riadan prize they had given me locked away in a chest at the rear of the wain, though I was wearing the torc, as they wanted to see me wearing it as a hero they could talk about at home when they left to go back to Hibernia. But I waited in the early morning sun for Arthur to pull away from Essylt, and when he did, he mounted his horse and rode part away down the road with her.

I took my unit in the lead, the wains in the centre, Val and Gareth, then Howell bringing up the rear, and when we had gone so far, Arthur rode up to me and pulled me off the road, telling Gwydre to carry on without me, for they were moving slowly and I would easily catch them up later. He led me to the side of the road and under some trees; here we sat side by side to watch the men heading south.

After a moment of tense silence, he said, "I don't plan on being long in Caw territory, a fortnight, no more. If we don't find anything important, I'll come straight home, hopefully by the start of November." He looked at me. "You and Val have to hold Cadwy for me."

"And if there are Saxon attacks?"

“No unnecessary risks; do not think you can take them if they outnumber you. Don’t do what Cai did.”

“I’m not Cai. And you know I’m no battle leader. This is your job.”

“I know my job, and you have Valarius with you.”

“We need you at Cadwy, not roaming around in the northern wild-lands.”

The tail end of our escort had since gone into the distance and we were alone.

Arthur looked down the road; said, “I cannot be everywhere at once. What’s the point of securing the front door while leaving the back one unlocked? And you forget, brother, that I have the killer of my wife to bring to justice.”

“My apologies. I will do as you want me; you have my loyalty unto my death. I am no betrayer.”

We sat together in a feeling of hard tension.

All till he said, “Fox, please, sometimes I will have to delegate command to others and I have work unfinished here. I won’t be gone long.”

I answered, “For what I did, will you let me say sorry again? Will you understand now…how much I’m hurting for what I did to you? Don’t send me away without forgiving me.”

“You have to find yourself a girl,” was all he said. “Because once you find the right woman—”

“Stop it! What I did will never happen again. I swear it, you have my word. I lost control, because you are such a bloody whore. Why don’t you marry Essylt? She’s worthy of you.”

“To Medraut, I’ve told him over and over I am not marrying his sister, now I have to tell it to you too. Essylt knows this. We have discussed it, her and me. I am not marrying her. She is a sister to me, and I do not want to marry my sister.”

“Then stop cocking her,” I said to him.

“I do not cock her, I kiss her, hold her, but I’ve never put my cock in her. She is a virgin still, and I will not be the one to take her maidenhead. She is my sister, and I will not marry her.”

And when I thought everything was at its darkest, when my heart was broken, that look came in his eyes again, that look of boyish mischief, and he smiled at me and said, “I’m going to marry the Princess Isleen.”

I nearly fell off my horse when he said this. “You are ribbing me, right? You don’t even know her, you haven’t even spoken to her. What are you barking about now?”

“Just take care of Essylt. And I’m not ribbing you or barking. I am going to marry Isleen. Only she doesn’t know it yet. She’s unbelievably fascinating, fascinating, excruciatingly fascinating,” and he fell silent, maybe dreaming of her even now.

“So she’s fascinating,” I told him.

“Go and join your men,” he ordered me when he came back into the real world and we parted; he turned his horse’s head hard.

His horse reared and he called, “See you, Fox!” and he went galloping back up the road towards the fort and was gone out of sight.

I sat for a moment, looking after him. He had stunned me. Isleen, aye…did they not fall in love the moment they saw each other? From the search on the beach, they fell in love. I then moved out, heeling my horse on hard to catch up with my men…

On the trip back, we stopped for a break at Deva, mostly to allow Essylt the time to bathe, to take care of her womanly needs; she went shopping and bought some material to make herself a new dress.

While she was busy, I took Uki Wolf-leg out of the infirmary, where he was still recovering from his wound from our battle against the Picts. I took him out because he begged me, and he was well enough now to travel back to Caer Cadwy. He rode with Essylt in the carriage; she looked after him, happy to have his company, as everyone loved Uki Wolf-leg.

And the ride from Luguvalos to Caer Cadwy in the Summer Country, one end of Britain to the other, seemed never-ending. I thought of Arthur alone in the wilds with Medraut the Snake, both of them hunting the madman, Cynan Aurelius, and a black sorrow had set on me by the time I sighted our hilltop fortress. Even now I was stunned by its height and power, where I could see the Red Dragon flying from the battlements and gate-towers.

And with the Pendragon himself absent, I led the men in through the gates, feeling lost without the rock and the stone who grounded me, though we were welcomed back joyfully by the women and men stationed here, especially the women, the wonderful Lady Efa who ran all of the household needs.

And Cai loping over towards me and roaring, “Where the bloody hell-fire have you been? It’s madness here. Where in all hell is Arthur? I need him! I have to mend this bloody feud between us.”

“Since when was it a feud? You know Arthur doesn’t bear grudges, can you not let me get in through the bloody gates before you come hounding me?”

“Well, where is he?” Cai said, lumbering along at my side as I lugged my horse gear into the hall; here I gave orders to Gwydre to billet our new recruits, unload the wain, stable and care for the horses and find out what the current status of the land was: any Saxon attacks since we had been gone.

I found Lord Darfod again absent, though Master Dlair was still here, and he told me that since the thrashing we gave the Saxons outside Venta, they had been quiet.

I also found that most of the houses had finally been completed around the hall, all ready to quarter our higher ranked Clan members. Cai had his own billet, though he would share it with Uki. So the following days saw me joining in the preparations for winter, storing food and feed for the horses. And with the women taking care of the household duties, we men set to building, fixing, mending, working with the new recruits, myself taking them through everything from ground-up, taking them out on fine days to learn the lay of the land and find their way around.

Just working. Trying to avoid Arna.

As she did well to ignore me. Though she did come to me once, to show me the fine embroidery work she was doing on another fox-head banner, and when she did, she made a point of pushing her breasts against my arm. I had a lot of trouble not taking notice of her then.

In truth, I had a lot of trouble trying to resist taking her to my bed, as I was cold and sick of sleeping alone, sick of not having anywhere to put my prick other than in my own hand. I was randy enough to start hunting for a new girl, like Arthur said I should; but there were none to be had, and even if, I did not really want them.

More days went by and the skies darkened. And with the darkening skies, came the sense inside me of unease, and I worked around the grounds, tense, breaking things, and almost got myself kicked in the chest by a bucking stallion as I tried to get him to stable.

I spent time with Uki and Gwydre, and Cai, who moaned and moaned about Arthur being away and not coming home, and this just made it all the worse in me. On quiet afternoons I stood guard on the battlements, or on the watchtower above the gates, growing desperate for Arthur to return. I was feeling him gone. We sang songs at night, played dice and Black Raven, or discussed the problem of the Caws.

Then one evening nearing the end of October, when Arthur was due home, the thing happened that I could feel coming. Some of King Gerren's scouts came in to say there had been Saxon raids to the east and some British villagers had been slaughtered. My guts sank.

What was I to do about it? We sat in discussion around the central fire that night, myself listening to Cai and Val saying we should stay away, as we did not have a full force to ride out to track down these Saxon marauders and destroy them.

"They have heard that Arthur is away and are taking advantage of his absence to strike while he's gone," Val said.

And Cai was still reluctant to fight, after what had happened to him the last time, and since then, he had made the decision to not attack Saxons without Arthur's orders. So Cai was even more uncertain about it now, for he would not do it. Neither would Val.

And old Master Dlair, who sat listening to us at the bench, said aloud, "Prince Bedwyr, you are Arthur's lieutenant, so you are the one to make the decisions and Arthur knows that, it goes without saying. He's testing you, my lad. Testing you all."

Everyone fell silent and looked at him.

He stood up and came before us, standing over our circle. Handsome still in his maturity, Dlair bore an air of knowing power.

He said, "So why do you follow him? You, Gareth. Why do you follow the Silurian?"

Gareth answered, "Because he wins."

"Is that all?"

"No! There's…there is something about him, an aura of power and, and something else I cannot name."

"They call it Charisma," Dlair answered. "An unnameable thing that is irresistible. Arthur has this by the wain-load."

He laughed and Gwydre spoke up, “Master Dlair, is it true Arthur was blessed by goddesses?”

“I believe so.”

“But how are we to know if what we do is right? None of us are Arthur!” Cai demanded.

“Cai,” Dlair answered him, “it is decision that Arthur will uphold.”

“No, you are wrong. I made a decision to attack Saxons and I failed hideously. I paid and Arthur demoted me.”

“You did not make a decision, Cai,” I reminded him. “You disobeyed direct orders. I’ll make a decision now. We ride out tomorrow after these Saxons.”

And even as I said this, a cold memory touched me, where I heard Arthur saying…sometimes I will have to delegate command to others…yet he never said who it would be to take command in his absence, did not name a specific leader, but of course it was to be me.

I looked at Val and he looked at me.

I said to him, “It’s our duty to defend the land against the Saxons. This is what we are trained for, it’s what we do, it’s why the people support us. Why the kings of Britain support us. We have to ride out and track these Saxons and finish them. The people expect it of us, or what else are we here for? And those of that village who were slaughtered? They will want to see the Clan Bear ride out to exact revenge. Val, you have to support me. I outrank you.”

Val came to his feet and faced me. “You do. The old forms are gone, new ones in place. But if you lead the Clan Bear out from Cadwy now, you are the one to lead the battle. We all take orders from you in Arthur’s absence.” He saluted me.

“Fox, don’t do what I did,” Cai broke in. “Don’t think you can do what Arthur does.”

“I do not think that, I’ve never had notions to do what he does. But I’m not going to attack greater forces than ours. We need to be seen doing our job more than just break Saxon forces.”

Everyone fell quiet, for I could not believe these men, my brothers, would even consider sitting back and not do their jobs. And their doubt filled me with dread. I knew I was no battle-leader, Arthur knew it. Yet he had left the weight of it on my shoulders.

But I never reckoned on Howell.

He stood up and told me, “You have the power, Bedwyr. But the weight of it should not all be yours.”

He turned then to the others and said strong and fierce, “This is our first testing as the Clan Bear without Arthur to lead us. Do we live up to his trust in us? And is this where we are all proved worthy, not just the Fox? Is this where we all see and know just how good Arthur really is and what we have in him? Because not one of us would be here now if it were not for him. We have to prove we are worthy of him, that he chose the right men to ride at his side. I will go.”

This speech secured them! And I looked at Howell with respect. Arthur was right to give him the command of Cai’s unit. And Cai hated it, as I saw hate for Howell in the way Cai stared at him now. But more and more of the Clan stood up and said they would join me. Gareth, Brendon Ro, Tegid, Sandedd, Owain, Coll, Taredd, Gwydre, with all my unit, all of them would ride out tomorrow and hunt for the Saxons who had murdered our fellow countrymen. It was our duty.

64: BACK to the SETTLEMENT

NOTHING felt more wrong than riding out as a fighting force without Arthur to lead us. With him everything felt right, in place, powerful and controlled. But without him, it felt insecure and almost out of control. How he exerted such power and control, how Arthur himself, just by being here in person, could make the Clan feel invincible and deadly was a thing so deep I could not put it into words.

But it struck me hard as myself and Val, together with Howell of the rear-guard, led what forces we had out of Cadwy and away to the east, where we rode for most of the day. I had decided to leave Cai behind to hold the caer, I also did not want him and Howell going at each other head to head, so Cai had to stay behind.

And he had accepted the role I gave him with a gracious salute.

Now riding the roads eastward, I felt a great hole where Arthur should be at my side, and curse it all, I even prayed to our goddess of battle that he would arrive from out of the north and rescue me; but no, he did not arrive. We were on our own.

Our saving was our years of intense training. Everyone knew their jobs and had done them so many times before, we could manage as a war-host without having to ask questions.

So we rode east to Calleva Atrebatum in a band of eighty riders, with some of Lord Gerren's men to show us where the last attacks had come from. And they were east of Calleva and when I heard them say where, I knew by instinct that the attacks were reprisals for how we had slaughtered the Saxons at the settlement where Arthur had been shot with the bolts. That settlement we should have gone back to and burned to the ground. It was a job we had failed to complete, and we would pay for it hard. First night out we camped just beyond Calleva itself, I did not want to go into the town, as town-life with its ale and women were distractions to the warriors and so I had them camp beyond in the field, a place where we could be ready to ride in a moment.

And it was here, around our night-time camp-fire that I told Howell and Valarius we had to return to the settlement and finish it. They both agreed, it was decided, and we got down to sleep early.

The following morn dawned cold and misty, with rain threatening, though it held off, and around breakfast, I told the men what we were going to do; ride back to the settlement, burn it down, then carry on northward in a scout of the country. If we found anything, we would only engage in battle if we could take them without huge losses to ourselves.

We were up then on our horses and pulling out on the road east; we rode for five leagues before taking the turn north to the settlement. Everything around us was stilled and quiet, that sense of foreboding gnawing inside me in the same way it had done the first time we were here. The forests were dark and brooded with evil spirits, the skies overcast and black, just like the time before and it all felt so wrong I almost aborted the mission, wanting to turn back for Calleva.

The road towards the settlement ran narrow and bordered both sides by forest, and we moved quickly, turning our horses to a fast trot. And when we broke out over the cleared ground before the palisaded walls of the settlement, it started to rain, though not heavy, bringing with it a cold wind.

The trees moved and it was deathly still when we pulled up before the closed gates. And when I moved over to our archers, ready for them to fire

the long-houses over the wall, I thought I heard a sound come from the trees to our left.

This was when I knew and I called to Howell, “Out! Ambush! Retreat! Take the road!” and as I cried my orders, a horde of bellowing Saxons fell on us from the trees both sides of the clearing.

They came fast as the wind, screaming, yelling, throwing spears and hurling throwing axes.

Straight away I pulled my horse back, taking my unit and Val’s with me, though I went north as the road south was already blocked by Saxons, but when I glanced over my shoulder and saw Howell and his men engaging the enemy, I knew I would have to ride back to pull him out, as he either did not hear me cry the retreat over the noise of the charging Saxons, or else he had ignored me in his desire to fight.

Then as we tried to push our way free of the horde, we fought those Saxons in front of us, and my horse bucked another behind him and I was free, riding with Val and Gwydre. Another glance over my shoulder and I saw three of my boys, horse archers, stop and turn back, firing arrows into those chasing us.

I stopped and called to them, “Retreat!” As I called out, a breakaway group of Saxons was on us, one of my lads turned to flee and got a spear in his back, he fell, dead. I charged forward and smacked the Saxon over his head with my sword and turned, finding Gwydre at my side. Just ahead of me, I saw another Saxon jump out and ram a spear deep into Gwydre’s left hip, almost unhorsing him; he slumped over his horse’s neck, and I rode in, pulled on its reins and galloped both him and myself out of the mess, up the road to safety. We stopped in an empty field; here I had Gwydre off his horse and gathered my boys. Gave orders.

“Taredd, take him now, take him with you and five others back to Calleva. Take him to Master Rhodri’s house, the magistrate. He will help you, has a good doctor there…Gwydre, hear me, I will get you out of here,” and saying this, seeing him pale, he passed out.

Val stood at my back, urging me, “We have to ride back to Howell and support him!”

“I know, we will. Go on Taredd! Do as I say, take Gwydre and ride fast, don’t stop for anything. Straight for Calleva.”

And I had to let them go, taking Gwydre with them, up on another's horse and riding away fast for city-Calleva, as me and Val turned the rest of our men back towards the settlement and Howell, thick in the mass of the Saxon ambush. And when we galloped into the clearing we charged straight for the Saxon rear; the horde had Howell's men fighting to defend themselves, some being pulled down off their horses and hacked. We charged directly into them and when they realised they were being cut down from behind, most of them turned and fled like jack-hares back into the forests on either side, leaving us turning this way and that.

I broke from the fight and rode for Howell; called to him, "Retreat! We have to retreat before they can regroup!"

This time he came, gathered his men and followed me and Val back down the south road for home, and as we came flying through, another Saxon charge came out from the trees on our left, not so many this time, but enough to cause a fight. We did not stop, down the road we thundered and slammed through the mass of them, killing as we pushed through, but one jumped out at me from the left and slashed his throwing knife down my left leg, slicing me open above my knee.

I turned my sword and smacked its pommel into the side of his head, turned it again and cracked his skull with the edge of the blade, fighting my way free. And I kept on riding, the rest of our troop galloping free behind me. We had escaped them and we kept on riding, heading for the road that turned west to Calleva.

It was a twenty Roman mile ride, and the wound in my leg gushed blood, I felt it hot, wet, sticky inside my armour, which had stopped the worst of the knife slash, and as I tried to hold the wound closed with my hand, I knew I had to stop and bind it before I bled to death.

I pulled in hard and fell off my horse and onto the ground; here another warrior came in, helping me, doing field aid, tying a neck scarf around my knee. I let him do his work, wondering in the back of my head, where was Arthur now? Why wasn't he here?

But I was pulled up again and back on my horse, off down the road, and by the time we finally reached Calleva, to Rhodri's house, I was raging with pain, though holding myself together enough to stay sitting up, sweating heavily and waiting for the doctor to come and stitch me like a pig

for the roasting. I was laid out in the back room of Rhodri's house, the one Arthur and I had shared that time when first here.

And Master Rhodri was at my side, saying, "Bedwyr, thank you for bringing the Clan. Those Saxons have come in from the north and have been causing problems all along the line of your last battles."

"Arthur will come and smash them," I told him, weak, my voice low.

"We could do with that boy now, aye?" he said, a long smile forming on his handsome face.

"He will come…and when he does…he'll—"

I couldn't say any more, not till the doctor, Master Nicomede came and tore off my armour and began cleaning my wound.

I heard him say, "You have lost a lot of blood. Rhodri, please, go and prepare some hot food for him now. And something to drink, here, put some of this henbane in it too."

And when I was alone with Nicomede, he said to me, "So, the Fox comes back and brings me more work to do. Your little friend with the spear thrust, very bad, might not survive…"

I groaned, cried, "Don't tell me that! He will survive and his name is Gwydre, you will make him live. Arh! Don't squeeze it, you moon-blasted idiot!" But he began digging around inside my wound with his bare fingers and I yelled and thrashed as he was killing me with pain.

Rhodri came back with his odd little daughter, Robyn, and they gave me food and drink and as this happened, Nicomede began stitching my wound. I shivered with pain, and was ready to pass out, but did not, and I fought the pain till the wound was wrapped, and it felt only a little better then. But I had to moan about it, and they covered me with blankets to shut me up, then building a fire in the brazier, bringing me more drink, and I stayed this way for another two whole days…

On the morning of the third day, I thought I was well enough now to travel back to Cadwy, taking Gwydre with me, who refused to stay in Calleva without me. If I was going back, so must he. We loaded him on a stretcher into the back of a wain and rolled on home.

Gwydre was still very ill, and Master Nicomede came with us, himself not wanting to leave his patient, duty-bound.

I admired him greatly for this.

I said farewell to Rhodri and shook his hands and he hugged me fast and waved to the Clan, went with us to the west gates to see us off. Then it began to scream with rain on the way back, pouring like a deluge, windy, horrible, and I hoped and prayed Arthur would be back or coming back soon. It was now some days before the start of November, the twenty-eighth day of October, and if he was not home when we got back, I would bloody well ride out and fetch him myself.

But my wounded leg was an agony, not as bad as my wounded shoulder had been, and that was hell-fire enough, but I could not ride a horse, so I went in the wain with Gwydre; here I watched him carefully.

He never took his eyes from my face and sometimes he squeezed my hand and put my fingers to his lips and kissed me gently, all the time with Nicomede looking on.

I leant close to the boy and told him, "I won't let you die, you know that." I stroked his hair out of his eyes and felt his fever, held his hand and that was enough to keep him alive till we reached the caer.

But in all this endless rocking and jarring in the carriage, I started to grieve; it came at me out of nowhere, like that Saxon ambush. We had lost seventeen men, and ten on Gerren's side.

One of the lost had been one of my new recruits, and he had been my young left-hander. But if I lost Gwydre, I knew it would cut me raw. I cared for him far more than I admitted and my throat locked tight, fighting back tears that came anyway and they washed down my face.

I broke for a moment and Nicomede put a strong hand on my shoulder, squeezed.

"Life and death," he said. "But death can be sweet when the pain of life is unbearable. I have seen men die who were long in pain and when they died, a sweet look of relief and peace comes over them. You can see it on their faces, peace, quiet, rest, no pain, no suffering, just peace. Bedwyr, the anticipation of death is far worse than death itself. Love those you are with while you live and have no care for those who judge you, for the judges do not have to live your life."

I did not know how to answer. I just cried, holding Gwydre's hand tight. So we reached Caer Cadwy at sunset and going up through the gates, we were welcomed home by the stationed men and women.

And Arthur was not back. I felt the pain of his absence even deeper now, like my weeping wound, though I put myself to work to forget, limping around the soggy ground to get my men billeted and the wounded into the main house outside the hall. Gwydre, I set him up with Uki and Cai, in their house, Master Nicomede with them.

I wanted all of the wounded in one house, so there would be no need to run back and forth to tend them. There were nine wounded, including Gwydre, and I moved them all into Cai's house and he moved out, giving his bed to a wounded brother.

All day it rained and the ground became a bog and we had to put down boards to walk on from the hall to the wounded. All the tracks bogged into mud and I was afraid that the sudden cold weather and rain would kill the wounded quicker than their wounds, and we had to keep the fires going in their house. Though on our first night back in the hall, I had to find out from Howell what went wrong, that is, why he never retreated when I ordered him. There was no blame to lay over it, an ambush was an ambush, but why had he not withdrawn when I ordered it? He told me he had not heard the call. Just that. And I had to accept it.

"What will Arthur say about this?" he asked me, concerned.

"It's not like what Cai did, is it? We made our decisions and were ambushed. But our luck was cursed; we lost a lot of men…" and I got up from the fireside and limped away to sleep, then woke the next day to more rain. A quick breakfast in the cold hall and I went to see Gwydre and found him lying still and white and breathing hard, he looked close to death.

I dropped down on the stool at his bedside and again took his hand.

"You are not going to die," I told him. "I know it's cold outside, freezing wet, but I'll be here."

He opened his eyes and looked at me.

"All I need," he whispered and closed his eyes again.

Truly now I began to fear for his life, and I sat where I was for a long time, watching him sleep. My vigil went on for another four days and I fell into despair; Gwydre sick enough to die and no sign of Arthur coming home. My wound was cleaned and dressed every day, Nicomede working with Master Dlair, and I was surprised to find the deep gash healing well and fast, no festering.

But still I could not walk straight, which only added to the laughter I caused those around me, who all thought I walked funny anyway; it still continued to rain. Despair began to pick around the edges of my strength, while at night, the Clan held me up and fed me warm ale and hot apple pies, made by Lady Efa, Arna, and the giant cook, Frying-pan.

No Arthur.

Something had happened to him; him going up there alone into Caw country. I could not bear his absence a moment longer, such cold suffering, aching inside as the wind whipped up and still it rained. Gwydre and the other wounded stayed still in their beds and they did not die. I sat with him most days, as he drew strength from my presence, and not one person failed to notice the way he looked at me.

Nicomede whispered low to me as he tended the wounded, "There is an infection in his wound; if I keep it drained, I am sure he will survive it. He is very young and strong, all good for him. Do not show him despair; he needs to see you with hope. Do not despair."

"No despair," I repeated.

Later I went back into the hall, where I waited.

And waited. I had no idea what was going on in the north, if Arthur had come out of his trip alive, or if he had been at war and killed; how was I to know? And I prayed for a scout to come with news.

November arrived and Arthur did not. And I was not the only one to worry themselves sick to the bone about where he was. All the women fretted at the doorway and Essylt often went through the mud to the gates and asked the guards if they could see him coming up the roads. The Clan, not one of them dared tell me he would be back in a moment, but they began hounding me to send out scouts back north for news of his whereabouts. I could see it on their faces, just as worried as I was.

It hit hard, really hard.

What if Arthur never came back? What would become of us, the Clan Bear? Who would lead us? Who would mount a defence against the Saxons? Who would unite the nations under one leadership? And who would be his heir. Medraut? Another thousand reasons why Arthur was so important, not just to us, but to Britain herself…

It became so bad I called for volunteers from the scouts to ride the long leagues back north. Drustan came forward first, then Tegid, Brendon

Ro and Owain, then some from the new recruits, plus many more; they all wanted to go. But I chose Drustan, Brendon and Owain.

I sent them out on the morning of the fifteenth day of November and it was still raining; rivers were rising, though we were safe in Cadwy from floods, high as we were above the land and the wetlands to our north-west and around the Tor.

The gates were pulled open and the three scouts flew out and were gone. I sat down at the hall doorway on a stool and stuck my wounded leg out before me, aching it was in the cold, but I sat and watched the rain coming down. The great central fire was roaring and spitting, men biding their time around it, playing dice, and I watched Val making eyes at Arna and she making eyes at him. Maybe she was after him now? I did not care. I wanted Gwydre well and I wanted Arthur home, nothing more.

So I sat and the wind blew over me and everyone screamed at me to close the door. And when I got up and started shifting the heavy door closed, I saw the main gates open again and the three scouts came flying back in…in with Arthur right there behind them! I stopped what I was doing and ran out into the rain. He came galloping in, pulled in beside me and jumped off his horse into the mud as everyone from inside came out and fell over him, all calling at once, as he pushed through the crowd to my side, stood before me.

The relief on me must have shown as I stared at him.

"Where have you been?" I said, the pain of it releasing out of me.

He grabbed me into a hug, both of us standing in the rain, and when we all moved back into the hall, Essylt jumped up with delight, ran to kiss him, hug him. She led him before the fire to warm as the other women called and laughed, running off to stoke the fires out in the cook-house; the Clan like a whirlwind, all talking at once.

Arthur pulled off his riding gloves, and hugged Essylt again, who stared at him as she always did with wonder. I noticed too he was wearing a new dark-coloured, hooded and fur-lined coat, a thing I had never seen before, lined it was with embossed leather around its edges, expensive, impressive.

He took it off and shook the water out and dumped it on the campaign table, stood dripping and cold and told us, "I'm back."

“We can see that!” Cai roared. “What took you so long? Who have you been putting your prong in now?” and he laughed.

“I’m only a few days late, but the scouts found me. I was on the road down there. What kind of weather is this?”

The women came back with food and drink and we all stood still, and that was when Arthur noticed my leg, the bulge of bandages under my breeches. He noticed everything in a rush.

“What’s happened?” he said, moving over to me, the power in him striking sparks where he walked. Everyone knew Arthur was back; we could feel him like a fire.

I told him, “We were ambushed…back at the settlement where you were shot. We were ambushed there and we lost seventeen men on our side and Gerren lost ten. There are nine wounded, one of them Gwydre.”

“And you took command?” he asked me, his eyes dark with power and I almost couldn’t answer him.

Though I said, “I did.”

He looked around at his warriors, went back to the fire and stared down into it, saying, “Seventeen lost, ten from King Gerren…tell me it all when I get back,” and he turned away and went off to his room to change out of his wet gear. While Arthur was gone, Medraut and a few others rode in, all soaked to the bone and freezing cold.

We got them inside and stripped them down to their under-shirts and breeches around the fire. Medraut’s lips were blue with cold and I laughed at him, pleased to see even him.

He glared at me and I said to him, “Uki’s here. I’ve set him up in one of the outhouses.”

“He is here? Sweet Jupiter, Fox, I love you, but I’m too cold to kiss you. Did you bring him from Deva?”

“Aye, so, you survived the Caws?”

“What a story!” Medraut laughed. “Wait till you hear it. This will keep you all entertained tonight.”

65: THE BEAR and THE SNAKE TELL their STORY

WE had the finest supper we could manage that night, though it was overall quiet in respect of our dead and our wounded. Over supper I gave

Arthur the entire account of the ambush, every detail I could think of with Howell making agonising apologies for not hearing me call the retreat and pull out. If he had heard and pulled out, we could have saved more lives, but this did not happen.

"You think I would blame you, any of you?" Arthur asked us, all of us, as he came and sat with us at table. "You are all afraid of me, of what I would say to you, aren't you?"

And none of us could answer, we were afraid.

I told him, "I led them into the settlement, then called a retreat from an ambush. I took the lead."

"It was your duty as my lieutenant," he answered. "You did nothing wrong, though Howell, get your hearing checked with the doctor. You must be deaf not to hear someone crying orders in your ear."

Everyone laughed at him and Howell hung his head in shame.

We finished supper and Arthur did not say anything more about the ambush.

Though I said to him, "So, from where did you get that fine new coat?"

He and Medraut glanced at each other, a smile forming on Arthur's lips, his secret—what went on in the north, we would now find out.

"I won it," he said. "Lot took me north to the Lothians. Hard as steel all of them. They thought me and Medraut were milk-boys, just off our mother's tits."

He laughed and Medraut snarled, "I had to explain to them who he was!"

"Up so far north," Arthur said, "I really felt different, I mean I really felt it, a foreigner. They thought I came from Rome. Did not believe me when I told them I'm British. Then they challenged me to Black Raven."

Medraut laughed, we all laughed. Northern fools.

Arthur went on with his tale, "Meirchion Gul, their prince, said they would help us if I played every single one of them, one by one. And there was a lot of them. I played all night, from just after supper till almost dawn. I won every match. So they gave me that coat and said they would lead us up to Caw-lands, for me being who I said I was."

"If he had not won every match," Medraut explained, "they would have killed him. They are that savage."

He took a drink and everyone in the hall sat listening as Arthur said, “I thought they would kill me if I won every match, but I kept on doing it, and the more I won, the more they loved it. They thought it was a jest for me to thrash them, a milk-boy from Rome.”

He and Medraut both laughed, but I sensed they had been in real danger. I knew the northern Gododdin, the Lothians, were hard as steel and as cruel as the jagged rocks on their grey coasts.

To win them, Arthur had to go into their houses alone. No army to back him, no warriors to tail him, naught but himself and Medraut, son of Lot, to aid him; they had gone walking into the very lair of some of the hardest warriors in Britain.

But they had survived and were home now, with Medraut saying, “Then we almost did get killed.”

Again they both laughed.

“How?” Gareth asked. “Come on, what are you two hiding?”

“Nothing!” Arthur answered. “We found nothing, though we saw the Caw settlement, but we couldn’t get in—it’s bound by sea in the west and high mountains in the east, north and south. They are well protected and almost unassailable. I have to get them to come out to me. Go to them? No, I won’t do it.”

Cai said, “Then how did you almost get killed?”

Medraut sat forward over the table and said, low, “We were hiding in the hills, see, high over their settlement, watching every bloody thing they got up to. Naught but scrabbling around in the muck of their village like swine, but we were trying to find a way in. Night fell, and I tell you, the darkness in the north is darker than any arse-hole in hell.”

He paused and everyone sat forward, listening, he held us, his eyes green-dark—the dark menace only Medraut could give, his voice near a whisper.

“We had to sit by the rocks up there and stay quiet as death. The Lothians told us that the Caws post guards right up into the hills around us; the Caws are so scared of raids both from the Picts and us, they use all manner of wild hill-men to guard them. They’re terrified of us. But we sat in the blackness, so black we couldn’t see each other…then Arthur here said to me…what in hell is that stink, can you smell that vile stench?” and Medraut roared with laughter and sat back.

Arthur took over.

"Aye, some hideous stink just seemed to rise up out of the ground around me. So I said to Medraut, what in hell-fire is that smell? And when I did, I saw a massive black darkness open up in front of me, right out of the black of the night. So I was sitting there like a wet fool, and I looked up, and saw a monster coming out of the ground towards me, stinking like hell and wearing naught but a black bearskin so foul it crawled with lice that I could see even in the darkness. The thing bellowed at me, and I saw a spearhead come out of the darkness and try to burst open my chest."

"The creature dived at him," Medraut interrupted. "Spear first, and we both rolled aside; Arthur drew his sword and went down with the blade, as the creature fell flat on its stinking face over the rocks, and he chopped its head off, didn't you, cousin? You hacked its head off. I just stood there, watching him chopping like a madman, off came its head and it rolled down the mountainside, we could hear it dropping down over the rocks below us."

"What in all hell-fire was it?" I said.

"Don't know, I think it was a Pict," Arthur explained. "A wild Pict out on his own, living in the mountains, I don't know, but I hacked his head off, because I knew he would give us away, so we ran away. We fled down the mountain and crashed into the Lothians who had led us there. I was covered in sprayed blood. We had a good time, I reckon, that night."

A long silence before Arthur added, "The Lothians sharpened my sword for me after that, and thought I was only there to entertain them. Everything I said had them laughing. We left them the next day and went back to Luguvalos."

I noticed now that Cai was giving Arthur a kind of appalled stare.

He said, "So you have been out having a good time, while your boys here are killed in ambushes?"

"Curse you, Cai, shut your flapping gob, will you?" I told him.

"I see what you are trying to say to me, Cai," Arthur answered him. "And you are in danger of being demoted even further, for how does stable-boy sound to you as your new place in the Clan? I know you're trying to blame me for the deaths of those who were ambushed, because I wasn't there…" He came to his feet, stood in front of Cai. "You are going to undo any good you might have done while I was away. Do not do this. Do what Bedwyr told you to do and shut your flapping gob."

Cai glared at him, then hung his head.

He said, “I apologise. I was wrong. I’m sorry, Bear.”

Arthur relented, and released him; came back to his seat and told us, “I’ve been working with the Dal Riada for alliances. I know a lot of you think I shouldn’t have stayed behind, but I have to secure both the north and the south, not to mention the east. You are Britain’s defenders and you must know I cannot do it without you, and I cannot be in two places at once. The Dal Riadans will not liaise with anyone but me. So I had to stay.”

He fell silent, and in his silence, I said, “The next time you go away and leave someone else in charge, please name a delegated battle-leader. Name one now.”

He shook his head, no. “Sit on it, Fox. Just sit on it for a while.”

So the night ended with me knowing there was far more on Arthur’s mind than what he spoke aloud to us now. We broke for sleep, and as I went with him through to our private rooms, he closed the partition door that led from the main hall, closing us in privacy.

He looked at me; moved to the stairway that led up to his upstairs chamber, then sat down on a lower step. Here he looked at me again in the dim light coming from his room above.

Quiet, the warriors all gone to their billets, the women to their house, and because it was only us alone, I told him, “You know, I want you to take me down and put Medraut up to first lieutenant. This isn’t my role, and I don’t like it. Give it to Medraut; he should be the one, not me. And I want to know, did I do the right thing at that settlement?”

He looked away from me, down at the ground, resting his arms on his knees. I stood leaning against the railing of the stairs, feeling his mood.

He said, “You called an instant retreat and that was the right thing to do.”

“You knew that place was ripe for an ambush.”

“The perfect place. I never wanted anyone going back there. And I should have remembered to warn you about it. They saw you coming all right, because that attack on our villagers was to call you out. But I know where those Saxons are from and I will have to deal with them. That place will be destroyed, but not till I say it. I want to wait for the right moment. They cannot do this to my people and get away with it.”

I let him think about it a moment longer, then changed our course.

“Do you forgive me yet for what I did to you?”

“What did you do to me?” He gave me a glance, a look like I had asked him something he did not know about. “Forgive you for what?”

He laughed, reached out and grabbed me and pulled me to sit down next to him on the step, telling me, “I don’t think there’s any love that comes without pain, do you?”

“No, none. Just bloody say it, say you forgive me, and stop fooling with me. You’re breaking my heart.”

“Then I forgive you, you know I do.”

“I thought I was losing you, it felt worse than death to see you walk away from me…it was almost too much to bear.”

We listened to the rain on the roof.

He said, “We don’t have time to fight each other. We could die tomorrow.”

I said, “And you are in love with that girl from Hibernia, Isleen.”

“Then you figured it was me who suggested I marry her, to form a marriage alliance with the Dal Riadans. They were impressed, and Conary is going to propose this to King Fearghus when they get home. But I don’t know when they will be back again, when I’ll see her again. It could be years from now.”

“Are you sure you want to do this? After Rhonwen?”

He answered, “I have to do things that are not easy, but somehow this is different. I feel different about Isleen. I don’t know, who can say if what we do is right or wrong. Maybe I’ll get it right this time. Stand by me, Fox, and I’ll do everything I can to make it work.” He draped an arm around my shoulders, so easy for him to do…

And I told him, “But you’re not marrying her for an alliance, you love her. You want her for love. You need love…” I stopped.

“You know I have to take risks and I have to take big ones. And the Dal Riadans are dangerous, they are not allies of ours, even though they present themselves that way. I want to try and stop them from joining with the Picts. I do not want that danger along with the Saxons.”

“This will destroy Essylt, to see you marry another woman. She’s mad in love with you, you know.”

He fell silent and thinking, then said, “And Medraut. He will split in two when he finds out I’m marrying a Gael, especially after you told him I

was cocking his sister. I told you I wasn't…"

It was true. I had told Medraut that Arthur was sleeping with Essylt.

I thought they were, but he had not touched her.

I laughed at him and said, "You sleep with everyone. How was I supposed to know the difference?"

"Sleeping with everyone is only half of those I want in my bed," he answered, giving me his smile. "It's a very long list, you want to hear it?"

He was on fire again, playing with me, and I got up from the step, out of his loose embrace. I stood in front of him, my heart racing.

"I'm going to sleep now," I said. "And I'm glad you're back."

"I'm glad too."

"Next time you leave me alone here, just make sure you delegate. I want to be your champion, not your uncertain representative. You make decisions with absolute conviction, I make them faltering. I'm not right for such a rank."

He stood up, faced me, ready to go upstairs to sleep, though he stilled, and said, low and sure, "I did it for a reason. Did it for a reason, you just haven't seen it yet…and another thing you haven't yet seen, just how good you really are. Fox, you are the best warrior I have."

He hesitated now to leave, and the cold wind from outside swept through the rafters and he looked up at the ceiling, then back at me, and whatever it was he wanted to say to me, he couldn't.

He turned and went up the stairs, alone…

66: SAYING SORRY to ARNA

I woke the next morn to the sound of crows cawing from the rooftop, and the sun was out blazing; the endless rain was gone. I got up fast, dressed and ran outside, pulling open the hall doors and saw the entire top of the hill with rising mists and fog, though the sun was shining through like a pale disk.

Later in the day when the sun rolled higher, the gates opened and three wains came in, two of them driven by our twins, Dafin and Irfan. The wains struggled through the mud, though we all ran out to help, getting bogged, while the third made it to the hall door.

The wains were Arthur's, and they held treasure. The one by the door held a chest full of gold ingots; the melted down coins that my father had

taken to Dinas Emrys, returned now as ingots that Arthur planned to use to build up our army, and supply us with swords and armour and new horses from the Continent that he wanted to buy.

Irfan's wain contained another chest.

"Picked this up in Viroconium," Arthur explained to me as we climbed up into the back of the carriage; here he opened the lid of the chest. Inside, it was full of the last of the Roman weapons cache that our old master Caan had been storing.

Arthur said, "Caan wet himself when he saw me coming in; we haven't seen each other for a while and he still calls me Wonder-boy. He's been holding this for me all this time."

There were five almost new spathas, all in scabbards that looked untouched by time. I picked up one of them and drew the blade; perfect as the day it was made! Shining in the early morning light from outside, the blade as sharp as a Roman razor. I started to pant with desire, for my own sword was pitted and old.

"Let me have this one," I whispered to him.

"It's yours," he whispered back.

Then there were ring-mail shirts, locked-leather battle-jackets, shields, lamella armour, and a wonder from heaven, one of the spathas was a marvel, even better than the one I had just bagged for myself; though it was not as beautiful or perfect as Arthur's own sword, yet it was so good, I knew that Medraut would try to claim it as soon as he saw it, and curse him, the man himself now came climbing up into the carriage to join us.

"That's mine!" he ordered as soon as he saw the new spatha, just like I knew he would.

But Arthur held it back; he said, "Balls to you, no you don't, this one's special. Whoever wields this, will have to fight for it. I'm not letting you have it. This one is a prize that I will give to the warrior who proves himself best in our next battle. So if you want it, cousin, you will have to win it," and saying this, Arthur climbed out, and took the prize spatha back with him into the hall. Medraut looked at me, gave me a hard stare.

"And I suppose you think it will be you who will win that blade," he said to me.

"Could be anyone's win. Gwydre is good. When he gets better he might win it. Cai…if he can control himself. Or Howell. And don't forget

Val. Even Uki, if you let him."

"Uki is not fighting any more. I won't let him. And Arthur wants him to retire, so don't try and tempt him out to battle or I'll—"

"No more threats, Snake, you and me, no more. Because you know, I've asked Arthur to promote you to first lieutenant. You are going to have my place, because I want you to have it. What do you say to that?"

Surprise showed on his beautiful face; male beauty seemed to run like a gold load through Arthur's family.

And Medraut, he smiled at me; said, "I love you," and turned away, going out after his cousin.

So the day went on; all of us in the hall and Arthur telling us we had to win the treasures he had brought with him. It was a hard fact of our lives that not every warrior could have full armour, only the greatest of fighters could take such a privilege. But the best thing of all, in the third wain came the huge Roman bronze and iron bath-tub from Luguvalos.

We drove the wain around to the back of the hall and parked it there, unhitched the horses, and we all stood staring at the thing sitting in the back, and wondered how we were going to get it out.

"How did you get it in there?" I said to Arthur.

He said, "I didn't. Everyone else did."

"Then do that in reverse to get it out."

"No, it can stay where it is. If we take it out, where will we put it? I don't have a fancy bath-room like Medraut had. And till we build one, the tub will stay there. The back of the wain will be the bath-room, see, it's even got doors," and he closed them on the tub and we all went inside for something to eat…

Almost all of our men were now getting ready to leave, as Arthur formally dismissed his army for the winter season, ordering them to return to Caer Cadwy on the First day of March next year, all ready for the start of the new year's campaigns. Many of our warriors took themselves off to outer lying towns and villages, most to Aquae Sulis, Gelvum, Viroconium, Calleva, Lindinis, and even some back to Deva. Lord Darfod ap Luca, our missing druid and counsellor, stayed away somewhere doing unknown business of his own and no one knew where he was, not even Arthur.

Sandedd and Pedr went home to Calleva, as did Nicomede. Cai got his house back when the wounded were better and moved out. Medraut and

Uki stayed together in one house, while Essylt had a small comfortable hut near her brother. Lady Efa went home to her villa in Lindinis, but came often to see how we were getting on. Not killing each other or fighting over food. The population on the hill thinned to naught but the very core of our Clan. Master Dlair had a house of his own by the main gate, and the only women remaining were Frying-pan's cooks and cleaners, who lived in the village north of Cadwy. But still there was Arna, who stayed with Essylt. And myself alone.

The rest of my lads had gone down to Lindinis, taking Gwydre with them when he was well enough to travel. And though the caer was closing down in the coming cold, work still carried on and we changed from warriors to labourers, doing mostly repair work, especially horse-gear and armour. We prepared endlessly for the months of winter.

One night we pulled all the long-tables into a circle, a bend around the fireplace, so that when we sat down for supper, we faced the fire and it was much warmer this way. Another time a wain came with three specially carved chairs from the carpenters at Lindinis, all padded, low to the ground, short legs, the backrests leaning backward, perfect for resting before the fire. One of the chairs was made for two; more gifts for the Supreme Commander, and Arthur gave one of the chairs to me. My new chair was so wide I could sit with my legs up if I wanted, covered over with a blanket, and here we talked and played the nights away.

When winter was fully on, I sat one night before the fire, dreaming, almost asleep, when I felt a touch on my arm and I opened my eyes and saw Arna standing before me.

She crouched at my side; looked into my face, my eyes.

"Arna, what's wrong?"

She gave a shy smile and hung her head, telling me, "You know Valarius has been courting me."

"I know."

"Well, he has asked me to marry him!" She took my hand. "Bedwyr, he has asked me to marry him and I want to. But…but…I want to go to him with your blessing. I want you to say to me you care enough to let me go with your blessing. And I want you to come to my wedding. Please?"

Another bloody wedding. I looked at her and she started to cry. Why she cried I did not know, but I said, "You want me to come to your

wedding? Me, who's been so mean to you? I treated you badly, didn't I?"

She gave a small nod.

I took her hand. "Do you really love him?"

Another small nod and I did not believe her.

She was still in love with me, but what could I do? I could not love her, no matter how hard she tried to make me. Love can never be forced, I knew that much. So now I felt truly sorry for her; finally I could see how awful I had treated her over the time I had known her, her only crime to love me…damn it all to hell-fire, what a bastard I was.

I told her, "I will come to your wedding, when is it?"

"A midwinter wedding in Aquae Sulis, by the Jesus chapel. I want Arthur to come to, and of course Essylt and Efa."

Arna brightened then and wiped her tears away as I said, "Val is one of our best warriors; I know he will be good to you, better than me for sure."

"Please do not say that—you are a good man, you just…do not understand women, or even yourself. I will always love you, but you cannot love me, I know that now, and me and Valarius truly care for each other."

"Then you have my blessing. Take care of him. We need him."

I got up out of my chair and took her into my arms, I hugged her hard for a long time, letting her mourn for my loss, and my loss of her, for the wrongs I had done to her.

She put her head on my chest and I kissed her hair.

I said, "I'm sorry…" and kissed her again. "Sorry for everything I did to you, please don't hate me. For I do not hate you, only the wrong that I did to you. Forgive me, and we will be friends."

She looked up at me, pulled my head down for a kiss.

"I forgive you, and aye, we will be friends for evermore. I love you, but you are too mad for me, for any woman."

"I know I am."

I held her hand, and she pulled away, and gave me a long look, still full of love. I knew in her look that she was saying farewell to me forever.

67: FIGHTING OWEN RED-FIST

THE following day, Arthur and I decided to ride down to Lindinis for exercise and provisions, and as soon as Medraut heard we were riding out,

he and Uki wanted to come too. Then Cai and Howell, Gareth, Brendon, Dlair, Val, and Dafin and Irfan. They all wanted to come, and since the weather had improved, no more rain but a soft misty drizzle, we gathered our horses, ourselves rugged up in our winter gear and cloaks, taking our shields and swords and rode out of the caer after breakfast.

Gareth carried the Red Dragon banner and we went at a fast pace to get out of the cold quicker. The land in winter was frosted, but there was no snow as there would be in the north.

All was silent and stilled and by the time we reach the town, our horses were lathered and steaming and we rode through to a small holding area, walled with a wooden hut as a stables, where we left our mounts in the charge of some boys, all excited to see us. Of course by now whenever Arthur went anywhere it caused a sensation, as everyone seemed to think he needed aid and could not look after himself. Everyone greeted him with reverence and the chief magistrate, Price ap Emil, ran out and led us all into his house, where their women were put to work feeding us.

After this, Price took us on a tour of his small and well-run town; we found Gwydre here, and the boys housed out in the west in comfortable homes of local people, for our lads had to work in return for their keep, and as soon as I saw Gwydre, I knew I had to take him back with me to Caer Cadwy. He looked ill and the work at Lindinis was far too hard for him, himself still not fully recovered from his wounding. So Gwydre was glad to come with us, and after he had gathered up his gear, we stepped outside with the other boys of my unit and here we saw a huge crowd of men all heading towards a large barn near the town gates. Men and boys coming from everywhere, all moving into the building.

"What's going on?" Arthur asked the magistrate.

"The monthly fight-match; happens this day once a month. Are you interested? Bring your lads and come and watch the fights! I would be delighted to host the Clan Bear for the day…and, would you be interested in entering any of your men for the matches?"

"This is not what my men are trained for," Arthur told him, but as we marched with Price over to the building, the man looked disappointed. For here we were, the land's highest and best-trained warriors and Arthur did not want us getting bruised.

Still we all filed into the building and joined the crowd, and caused a stir for just being here. Price next made a short speech about welcoming Arthur and the Clan Bear to their matches. Everyone cheered and the fights started; the centre of the barn opened up and two men stepped into the ring of spectators that formed around the walls.

The crowd started jeering, calling and pushing around us, a drum beat sounded, a small bell rang, and as it did, the two fighters began knocking the living blood out of each other with their fists, and within moments I was captured. It was brilliant; two men head to head, man against man, strength for strength, and I stepped forward into the crowd and joined the cheering and calling.

Over on the far side of the barn I noticed men were getting their hands wrapped in bandages, bindings to protect them while fighting. Again I turned to watch the two in front of me, fighting hard and fast, sweat and blood, and I saw the magistrate watching us, probably wondering why none of us from the Clan had joined the matches.

Before me, the two fighters continued to smack each other about their heads, and when the taller of the two men knocked his opponent down to the ground, the crowd went wild. And when the downed man did not get up again, another stepped in to take his place and the fights started again. The champion fighter was a dark-haired man, sinewy in build and looked as if he was over forty years old, and yet he was smashing his way through a string of opponents, one after the other.

Already he had hammered his way through five men and there were none left to oppose him, and I could not stand it, couldn’t stand watching him flatten everyone who stood in front of his fists, so I moved over to where the challengers were getting their hands bound in bandages and offered myself as his next opponent.

Last on the list to fight.

A hush fell over the crowd when the punters realised a member of the Clan Bear was finally up for the fight, and shit and hell-fire! When I looked around in the hush, I saw Arthur giving me a burning stare. I looked right back at him and took off my cloak, pulled off my jacket and shirt, threw them on the floor, stripping all the way down to bare-chest, ready. Held out my hands for the bindings, giving my brothers a grin when they started moving over to support me. Cai and Val full to bear me up, Howell giving

me a slap on my back, Medraut showing me the wild delight he felt whenever I gave Arthur a hard time, he loved it, the bastard.

Dafin and Irfan with Gareth stood by the doorway like guards, and Gwydre, suffering for me, shook his head, saying to me, “Do not do this Bedwyr, that man is a killer.”

Arthur joined me, telling me, “You are still wounded, your leg, remember? Fox, I do not need my warriors broken before the summer campaigns start.”

“Be quiet and let him get thumped to shit,” Medraut told him. “Might teach him a lesson, right cousin?”

Arthur gave a groan and moved back, telling them, “None of you others dare join him. Commander’s bloody orders.”

And it was too late for him to order me out of it now: my name was down to fight Owen Red-Fist, the one who was defeating all-comers, and everyone watched me. For if Arthur was to pull me out now, we would lose face as Britain’s elite warriors, so the match had to go on. The Clan all stood around as my hands were wrapped up tight, though not too tight I could not make a fist, my champion opponent standing nearby, waiting to thump me to shit. The crowd then started to shout, and when the magistrate called the final match to start, I walked out into the ring of spectators; they all fell back to give us room to move.

The drum sounded to start, and my heart was already thumping hard, my opponent grinning a death-smile at me through his black beard, dark eyes, dark circles under his eyes, fierce eyes, and I grinned back at him, as I was already enjoying this fight before it even began. I lifted my fists as he came at me like a madman, and when he came close, I moved right and punched him once hard to the centre of his face and he staggered back, not expecting maybe to be struck left-handed. Enemies of mine never expect to be hit left-handed and it was always my first advantage and the crowd roared! Sending me high with a hit of power rushing through me.

I heard my name being called from the Clan, and I attacked.

Not waiting for the man to recover his balance, I jumped on him and punched him twice more, smack, smack, centre on and he spat blood down his chest and fell into the crowd and they threw him back in again. They threw him so hard he used the push to come at me in another charge; he launched a fist at my head and missed as I dodged him.

Too bloody easy!

I knew I had youth on my side, and he had already been fighting for most of the afternoon, so I dodged him left and right and landed punches one after the other, mostly against his head and the strapping around my hands held good. Smack! I hit him this time right-handed hard, but he wouldn't go down; twenty years older than me and he would not go down!

The roaring of the crowd forced me on; I could hear my name being called. I glimpsed a dark-haired girl at the front of the crowd, staring at me. I lost concentration in a flash and the man hit against my left temple and I staggered back fast and crashed to the ground. I scraped hard along the floor, and for a moment I couldn't get up, yet my years of battle training helped, as a warrior downed in battle would die fast and I was up again and rushed him, gone to that place I go to when battle-lust takes me. It came so sudden and so powerful, I went for him as if he was a Saxon and I was fighting for my country and my brothers' honour.

Left hand, strike three times to his head, right hand, smack behind the left, and I slammed my fist into his throat, then again against his head, dodged his own punches, but he took hold of me and threw me bodily back into the crowd. They gave a roar and pushed me back in again, their roar screaming in my head; dodged around him again before attacking. I struck at his head left and right and still he wouldn't go down.

He hit me full against my jaw and split my lip wide open and blood filled my mouth, but I stood where I was and butted him with my head, hard, and cracked his nose like wood and blood flooded his chin. I hit him again so fast, so hard, he dropped to his knees, and now on his knees I came in for the kill and hammered him till he went down; he did. He went down on his back and lay still and my brothers had to pull me off because I could not stop.

I kept pounding at his head, and the Clan came and dragged me away, threw me outside in the freezing air and tried to get me to calm down; here I saw blood soaking the bindings around my hands, blood running out of my mouth, dripping down my naked chest. I could still hear the crowd screaming in my head, my hands and legs were shaking so hard I thought my knees would buckle under me, and they did.

I dropped to the ground.

I hung my head and breathed hard, trying to control the rage rushing through me. I was dangerous, I felt out of control, just like Arthur said. I would have killed that man, I knew it, it was still pounding through me, the desire to kill and I could hardly see those around me.

Medraut came and knelt at my side and told me to take long, slow deep breaths. “It’s over, you fool…slow your breathing, brother, and you will be fine. I was sure he was going to hammer you, but you hammered him. You fight like a demon. You won us a wain-load of ale!”

“Then get me some, you bastard,” I told him, panting, swallowing blood, and looking up, there was Arthur before me, hundreds of men milling around us and all looking at me, coming over and calling me a champion, because I had downed the beast who had been winning fight matches for months without defeat, no one able to put him down save me, the Fox of the Clan Bear. It felt like Luguvalos all over again, the way I had won the javelin contests…

I sat breathing and bloodied, watching Arthur’s face as Dlair appeared at my side and began winding the bindings off my hands and checking for damage, myself still spitting blood and wondering when it would stop, Arthur still watching, Medraut coming back and giving me a mug of ale, my hand stiff but working as I held the mug and I downed it in one, swallowing blood with it and not caring and asking for more. I spat on the ground, clearing my mouth, but blood refilled it every time and I let it run, felt a pain in my jaw, and Dlair looked me over and found nothing wrong other than my bottom lip was split right open in the corner of my mouth, a huge bruise swelling above my left eye.

He told me, “When we get home, I think I will have to stitch your cut lip, my lad, it is too deep to heal safely without pulling open each time you talk or eat.”

I nodded, resigned to the pain that was to come. He next looked at my hands and fingers, carefully moving them to see if any were broken or fractured; everything worked, though I could feel the pain in them now, pain all over me.

Medraut came with more ale, which I again drank in one, and Arthur put out a hand and pulled me to my feet. He looked at me close, I saw him smile as he pulled me into a hug, held me tight around my neck, kept on holding me, and I breathed down my bloody fire against him. Men from the

matches moved in around us and Arthur released me. Behind him I again saw that dark-haired girl passing through the crowd. I looked at her, but my heart thumped hard and fast because Arthur supported me, backed me for all the trouble I gave him as his lieutenant.

I defied him and still he supported me.

Another band of men approached us, begging me to come back the following month for the end of year fight matches. The men of Lindinis expected nothing less, as I was now their new champion. I had asked for it and so now it was mine. Mine, bruised I was, but I felt so high I could have done it all over again.

As I stood talking to the men, trying to explain to them I won because I was a trained fighter, that I had been trained to kill since the age of eight, the dark-haired girl approached me, carrying my gear from where I had left it back in the barn. She handed me my clothes and gave me a long searching gaze, her dark eyes holding mine through the blood on my face, and I thought maybe she was from Roman stock, and she was young, maybe around fifteen, and she looked bloody good to me. Dark brown hair, her eyes the same, though not as dark as Arthur's, yet with that same kind of smouldering beauty as his, so fine she near took my breath away. I pulled on my shirt, feeling the cold, on with my jacket, and as I did, I saw the girl was still standing nearby, looking at me as if she was expecting something to happen. Something from me?

Dlair reappeared, bucket of water and a cloth in hand and I let him wash the blood off my face.

"That was an amazing show back there of pure fighting power, Fox. You never cease to surprise me," he said. "When we get home you must soak your hands in cold water."

"I will," and as I said this, some men came over to shake my sore hand, saying, "Brilliant work!"

And another, "Now we know why it is so important for us to support the Clan Bear, support Arthur and all his warriors. If they all fight like you, we will do everything we can to aid you."

Arthur overheard them; he turned and gave me a look, his champion. He turned back to talking with Price, and I thanked the men around me, seeing now the true value in what I had done, reinforcing support for our army. Thinking this, I saw my beaten opponent being escorted out of the

barn and away somewhere to be doctored. He looked in a bad way, I admit, and the dark-haired girl, still standing nearby, watched him go before coming over to me.

She said to me, “That was my father you hammered.” She stood looking at me as if she wanted me to apologise to her for her father’s actions. I merely shrugged, wincing as I tried to speak, but the split in my mouth wouldn’t let me talk and it started to bleed again. I had to lean over, and a long run of blood came out and I spat more and made it worse. Arthur came to rescue me. “We are leaving,” he told me, taking hold of my shoulder and helping me upright. “Come with me.”

So we left, going for our horses that were all waiting for us by the town gate, held by the stable boys, us surrounded by admirers who cheered us out of town and up the road, and I forgot about the dark-haired girl for a moment. At least till we had gone halfway home, myself riding quietly and in growing pain from a body full of punches I did not even know I had.

We rode through a misty landscape, a freezing day it was and our breath was on the air. Arthur rode on my right, watching the way ahead, his famous mind working in him so I could feel him beside me. So far he had been silent about my actions, but his smile was true.

He glanced at me, said nothing, but it was there, his feeling. I laughed and split my lip again. I think I drank more of my own blood that day than at any other time of war or battle.

I mumbled to him, “What about that dark-haired girl? You saw her, what do you think? Would she go for me even though I smacked her father?”

“She was sweet, so sweet, man, you should court her. Was that her father you did? Maybe she wouldn’t consider you now, brother, you are dead.” He turned back to watching the way ahead and we reached home in plenty of time for supper, the women dying of fright and wonder when we told them what had happened at Lindinis all day.

And with the fire built up high, all of us hanging up our cloaks, I was seized by the Clan and made to sit at the head-table; here they gave me a round of cheers, lifted their mugs to toast my fighting power, and Dlair came and sat at my side and presented me with a fine bone-needle that he intended to use on my mouth.

A mug of ale was put on the table before me and Dlair said, “Tip your head,” and I did. “Open your mouth,” and I did. He cursed, “Oh, this is awkward! You must not squirm or I will sew you top to bottom,” and he gripped my chin and stabbed the needle through my bottom lip, right through to the inside and I gave out a half growl, half yowl and thought how bloody stupid I was.

I could take a pounding in a fist-fight and not feel the pain, but I yowled like a cat because of six little stitches in my lip. Everyone laughed at me, and Arthur came and sat opposite and took hold of my wrist as I sat leaning on the table-top, his touch had the power to still me and he held me tight and watched as Dlair pulled the gut through and sealed the cut that was deeper and longer than I thought.

“You will probably have a scar from this, my lad,” Dlair said.

I mumbled, “A scar…that’s unfair.”

He cut the stitches and dabbed at the blood seeping down my chin with a cloth. My mouth really began to burn now like a hot ember had spat from the fire and landed there, burning a hole in my flesh.

How could such a thing hurt so much? And I vowed to drink myself to sleep this night.

But Arthur was still holding my wrist and I looked at him, he said, “When you offered yourself to fight, I thought, oh no, Fox, not again. Do I really need my best warrior smacked up before the new year’s campaigns? But the more I watched you, the better it got…and…”

And as Arthur said this, Cai came and sat down at Arthur’s side, interrupting what he wanted to say to me, curse him.

Mug in hand, Cai said right out loud over the noise in the hall, “Give me my unit back. Give me my men back. After what Howell did, how can you keep him in my place? He did not retreat from that ambush when Bedwyr called retreat. He let us down, Bear, and I want my unit back.”

Arthur looked at me for an answer; his dark eyes alight for battle, for what really had happened back at that ambush?

And whenever I spoke, I could only mumble my words…“Howell’s men, they were totally surrounded by Saxons, he took the brunt of that attack, he did not hear me when I called retreat. No blame. We have been all through this before, Cai.”

Cai glared at me, then at Arthur. “I want my unit back, Arthur, aye? Howell is deaf. I think he’s deaf, or going deaf, because he never answers me when I talk to him, he just doesn’t hear me. Bear, come on now, I’ve paid the price for my mistake, restore my honour and my place in the Clan.” His hand went into a fist and his small eyes flamed.

“You think he’s really deaf? Going deaf?” Arthur asked him, turning to face him head on.

“I do. Come on, the rear-guard is mine.”

“You disobeyed my direct orders. You broke my trust in you.”

“I have paid! My men paid with their lives, what more do you want? I bet you wouldn’t treat your precious Fox the way you do to me!” And he got up from the table in a flaming rage, and went stomping outside, letting in a blow of cold wind when he opened the hall door; he slammed it shut behind him.

Arthur got up and followed him outside, and everyone fell silent.

They had all heard what Cai said…

Your precious Fox…

I sat burning in humiliation, while outside, Arthur and Cai would be going head to head in battle. I knew I had to mediate between them, even though I also knew Cai would never in all hell-fire lay a hand on Arthur in violence, not for anything, not like I had done. But their confrontation was long coming, and when I got up and went outside, I found something I did not expect.

Cai, standing before Arthur and saying to him, “I worship you. I fight because of you. You give meaning to this world where there is none, the reason is you, and you Arthur, have built this world around me. The purpose of my life is you. Forgive me, I made a mistake, and I paid and I want you to forgive me and trust me again. I swear on my blood,” and he dropped down on one knee, drew his dagger and cut his palm and took Arthur’s hand and pressed his bloodied hand to his and said, “I give you my blood-pledge, to you with my blood that I will never disobey you again. For if I do, I swear I will forfeit my own life. I swear I will take my own life if I ever disobey you again, by my blood I swear it. And may the Goddesses of Britain damn my bones if I lie.”

Cai, who when standing, reached a full head taller than Arthur, there kneeling before him and offering his life as his warrior in war.

They held each other's grip and Arthur said, "I forgive you, but I lost trust for a while. I forgive you. You did pay. You paid a terrible price. If Howell is losing his hearing, he cannot command a unit of his own. Give me time, please Cai, give me some time to deal with him."

"Anything, anything for you," and Cai pulled his hand away, stood up, saluted, and moved back into the hall, leaving the door ajar. Arthur stood where he was, looking at another man's blood on his hand.

I watched him, he came over to me, to show me, and I told him, "It's true, you know. We all fight for you. It's you we fight for."

"You should fight for Britain, not me."

This made me laugh; I pulled my stitches and laughed because he couldn't see it.

I told him, "Arthur, you are Britain. You are Britain made flesh. And that's why we fight for you, because without you, Britain would die."

He stood looking at me. Cold winter blew against us, and the entire world seemed to open up and grow and move, for the future was in his eyes, a future only he could secure.

68: RED-FIST's DAUGHTER

FIVE days after my fist-fight in Lindinis, I saw the main gates of the caer open and in came a small wain, driven by that town's magistrate, Price ap Emil. It was the first fine day of winter, a few days before we were due to ride to Aquae Sulis for Arna and Val's wedding, and though it was still very cold, the sun was out and we had built some long wooden benches to put outside under the eaves of the hall's roof. Myself, Arthur, Gwydre and Medraut were sitting on the benches, watching the wain roll in, escorted by our guards on foot. What was going on?

First up, Arthur went to greet the man, escorting him into the hall; he beckoned me to follow inside, leaving the others still sitting outside.

"Thank you, Arthur, for seeing me," Price began.

And he looked around the hall, stopped for a moment when he saw the weapons hanging on the walls: swords, shields, spears, long Saxon knives we had taken from our fallen enemies, then at the great Red Dragon banner above the campaign table beyond the fireplace.

In one corner, standing like a guard was Arthur's ring-mail cavalry shirt on its kit-pole, the Roman bear shield on the wall above it, his horse-

plumed helmet topping the pole. Price seemed stuck to carry on, as if he had just walked into the den of murderers and killers.

"What is it, Master Price?" Arthur asked him, offering him a seat at the head-table.

Essylt was home, and she offered the man something to drink. He accepted some of his own ale, that I had won off him during the fist-fights. Price looked then at me; studied me in fact.

I did not like his look, and when all was quiet, he said to us, clearing his throat, "Well, um, Arthur, it is about your warrior here."

Arthur looked at me.

"Bedwyr," he told my name to Price. "Prince Bedwyr…what do you want him for?" There sounded defensive command in his voice, for Arthur would never tolerate any man coming after me.

"It is just this," Price said, "the man he fought, you fought," looking at me, addressing me. "He died."

Arthur warned him, "And now I hope you are not here to suggest my warrior killed that man. You know yourself it was a fair fight, an organised fist-fight for money. That man made his own choices and lost."

"I know, I know, sir, Arthur, please wait, he did indeed die from that fight." Price dropped his gaze, and I felt a cold stab run through me. Had he come to accuse me of murder? I moved to sit next to Arthur; here I gave Price a hard stare. I would fight anything he tried to throw at me.

"Then what are you saying?" Arthur ordered him. "What did you come here for?"

"Well, I have been in discussions with my fellow town elders and we all agreed the man died from his injuries taken during the fight with your warrior here. But your warrior is of the Clan Bear and so, what else is to be expected when going into battle with such a warrior as yours? We expect nothing less. But there is only one thing now…"

He trailed away and Arthur said nothing, forcing Price to go on. "It is the man's daughter. We are left with her as an orphan and no one in Lindinis wants her, no one has the resources to care for her. She is left homeless, as the man was her father and her only parent. I have her here now, outside in the cart, as you and your Clan are the only ones who have the power to care for her."

“So you are saying that because you think my warrior killed her father, he should care for her. And if we refuse to take her, what will you do? Threaten some form of charge of murder?” Arthur then gave the man the full force of his power, his dark Silurian power, and Price sat back, alarmed.

“No, would I threaten you? I have no power to threaten you. But what do I do with this girl? She is too young to just throw out on the streets, no one wants her!”

“But you are thinking my Clan killed her father, so my Clan should care for her. That’s your thinking.”

“All right, I admit, this is my thinking.”

My heart was hammering fast because I could see it was true, there was a threat of some kind that could never stand. Threaten me with a charge of murder? No, I pulled on Arthur’s arm and beckoned him away.

He got up and followed me out of earshot and I whispered to him, “If I take the girl, what does it really mean?”

“It means she’s your responsibility, or at least she would be if you agree to take her in.”

“Like a father to her…or what? What do I do with her?”

“I don’t know; why not let her see what she wants? In her eyes, you are responsible for her father’s death, so you will be responsible for her. Fox, think about it.”

I groaned and turned aside, pacing up and down.

I heard Arthur ask Price, “How old is this girl?”

“Fifteen, old enough to marry. But none in my town want her. She’s destitute and very afraid.”

This sealed it for me.

I turned and said, “I’ll take her. If her father died this way, I will take her. Bring her in.”

Relief showed on Price’s face, and when he got up and went back outside for the girl, Arthur said to me, “There’s more to this, Fox, you’ll see. Something here doesn’t ring true. Either way, I won’t stand for any lies flung at any of my warriors, and the men of that town know it.”

“What’s really going on then?”

“Probably some local infighting involving that girl’s clan. And we are their escape route. I hope you know what you’re doing.”

“When do I ever know what I’m doing?”

He laughed at me. “You wanted her, didn’t you? Now you have her.”

He laughed again, and Price came back in, the dark-haired girl following him and carrying a pathetic little bundle of things in a leather bag, and it all seemed so sad, I could only stand and stare at her.

And she at me.

You killed my father, was all I could see in her eyes…

Price then brought her before me, introduced us formally.

“Prince Bedwyr, this is…” he hesitated, “…um…Rowena, daughter of Owen Red-Fist.”

I glanced at Arthur and caught his look, the girl had a Saxon name–Rowena…this girl was a mystery. But she looked at me with her deep dark eyes and gave a small smile, a flush on her skin from embarrassment.

“Come on,” I said and picked up her hand and led her to the table and sat her down.

Arthur went outside with Price; came back not long after and told us, “He’s gone.” He went and sat next to the girl, Rowena, and she looked at him, almost as if she was in trouble.

“What’s really going on in Lindinis?” he asked her, gentle like to soothe her. She shrugged and said nothing.

“Why do you have a Saxon name? Was your father a Saxon?”

She nodded, yes.

Unbelievable! I had roped myself to a Saxon orphan. To Arthur this was pure entertainment and he grinned at me, laughed, another one of my brilliant acts to entertain the Clan with around the night-time fires.

Again he looked at Rowena; asked her, “If your father was a Saxon, why did he have a British name? Owen is British.”

The girl shook her head; it seemed she had no idea herself.

“Then welcome to Caer Cadwy, seat of British power,” Arthur offered her. He laughed again and I could see how desperate he was to get outside and tell everyone the Fox now had a Saxon girlfriend. If this was what she was supposed to be, for I did not know what she was supposed to be…my girlfriend, my charge, my daughter?

And there was Arthur, sitting and giving me a smile to kill me with, saying to the girl, “And do you speak Saxon?”

Another nod, yes.

“This just keeps getting better and better!” He laughed.

“Where’s she going to sleep?” I tried to distract him.

“With you of course; isn’t that right, Rowena? You want to sleep with the Fox. We call him Fox, because he’s wily and clever and a loner. You will find it hard to get to know him.”

“Will I have my own room?” she finally spoke…in British.

“No, we don’t have spare rooms here.”

“I do not want to sleep with foxes. I am a virgin. My father protected my virginity to the end. I do not want to sleep with your stinking dog-fox!”

“Then you will have to sleep with one of the girls. Essylt will look after you,” he answered, trying not to laugh out loud.

But the girl attacked again, “My father said all British are shit-eaters! Will she feed me shit? Do you eat shit?”

“Aye, we do,” Arthur answered her. “And we kill Saxons. Bedwyr here kills Saxons with only one hand, and I kill them in droves. Do you still want to stay here with us and eat our shit?”

Her defiance then gave way and she burst into tears, solid grief-stricken tears. This was when Arthur relented and pulled her into his arms, and held her as she cried; he stroked her face and looked at me, more serious now. For whoever she was, she had to know who we were and what we did. Killers of her own kin. Could she stand it?

And I said to him, “Maybe we should send her back to her Saxon kin.”

“And then what? Come against her people and kill them in our next war? No, she stays here with us. Rowena, we don’t eat shit, but we do kill Saxons. You have to know this.”

“He!” she pointed at me, “killed my father!”

“It was a fair fight,” I told her. “He was fighting even before I came against him, probably been fighting for years by the look of him, so why blame me?”

She pulled away from Arthur, sat up and wiped away her tears. “Where will I sleep? If I am to stay here, where will I sleep and what will be my place? I know nothing of your people.”

“You will sleep in my chamber, like it or not,” I told her. “You came here for this, didn’t you? You could have refused and gone your own way, but you came here with Master Price knowing you would live here.”

She opened her mouth to fight back, but stopped, staring at me, then at Arthur. We both could see her thinking, and goddess, she was deadly beautiful and yet her eyes were only on Arthur.

He gave her one of his devastating smiles, though telling her, "You answer to Bedwyr, not me."

"He killed my father and he is a shit-eater."

"This isn't a good way to start if you want us to care for you, girl, the gate is only over there," and Arthur pointed the way to the main gates.

We saw her hands grip harder on her bag and she looked at me. "All right then, I accept. I will sleep in his chamber…but he is not to take my virginity."

"He won't," Arthur assured her.

And all the time he tried to conceal his enjoyment at my expense.

He thought it all so bloody funny, and when he got up to move back outside, leaving the girl to me, he was near breaking his balls to stop himself from howling with laughter. He looked at me, backed away and ran outside where I heard him laugh out loud, while I stood and looked at the Saxon girl, and she looked at me. And I could not say for the life of me what was going on in her head. But Essylt came to my rescue and took charge of Rowena, daughter of a Saxon father.

That night, Essylt showed Rowena around the hall, front to back, where everything was and what to do, and what she had to do was be my girl. Or more in line, be my maid, to work for her keep, as we all had to work. She had to serve me at table and so on, and everything she did brought a scowl on her lovely face, and all the Clan, like Arthur, thought it funny. Medraut slapped her arse and asked her if Saxon girls liked to suck cock, British cock, and I swear she almost smashed a pot over his head when he said that to her.

Please, I wanted her to do it! But she only glared at him and called him a stinking British shit-eater. Everyone laughed at her. By late evening and time to sleep, I dreaded what would happened between us; though all the boys sat and watched me take her through to my room, and I heard Arthur sending them home to their own billets. I sighed in relief, because he had done it to save me from being shamed before them if she started to scream at me, which is exactly what she did. I showed her where to sleep,

gave her my pallet to sleep on, left her a lamp, and when she sat down on my bed, she stared at me long and hard.

I said to her, “I won’t take your virginity, don’t worry, you can sleep here and be safe.”

“You killed my father! I do not want to sleep with you, shit-eater. I want to sleep with the handsome dark-haired boy.”

“Arthur? Are you mad? He will take your virginity, girl, and he’s got a cock way down to his knees, do you want that inside you?”

She screamed, “Shit-eater! You killed my father and I do not want you!”

“Aye, well neither does the shit-eating dark-haired boy want you. Now shut your mouth and go to sleep you mad bitch or I’ll throw you out. I’ve given you my bed, so be bloody grateful for that,” and I went out and left her to it, though I heard her break into a sob. I stood for a moment listening to her grief, then went back inside again and found her lying on her stomach, crying.

I went to her, sat down next to her, and I told her, “I doubt if this will help you much, but my father also died…only a few months ago now and so I know what you’re feeling.”

She rolled over and looked at me in the low light of the lamp, her eyes dark, full, wet with tears, “Your father is dead?” she cried.

“Only a few months ago, so I know what you feel. I’m still grieving for him now. You don’t have to stay here if you don’t want. Tell me where you want to go and I’ll take you.”

“I want to stay here,” she confessed. “I have nowhere else to go. Where do I go? And you killed him, my father, so, I am cleaved to you by the will of the gods. Why do they call you Fox?”

Suddenly she changed and seemed to be warming to me now.

I answered, “My eyes. People say they are fox eyes. But it was Arthur who named me Fox.”

She moved closer to me, studying me, looking at my eyes. Sweet Jupiter, she was so beautiful, lying there like that; and when she gave me a long, slow smile, I had to force myself not to touch her. Not take her virginity.

And just when I thought she was over her pain, she said to me, “Go away now, shit-eater.”

Saxon bitch! I snarled at her and got up and left her to her misery, and neither did I care that her father had died at my hand; he asked for it and he got it. We all got it. I slept the night by the fire in the two-seater chair out in the hall.

69: DEATH of a WARHORSE

IT was supposed to be Arna and Val's special day, and it was, but when we arrived in Aquae Sulis, we arrived to a storm of welcome, all to greet Arthur into their town, and the people, hundreds of them, lined the streets as we rode down to the Romani Christ-church for the wedding. But it was Arthur the townspeople really wanted.

Just the sight of him excited them like a wildfire and he glanced at me as a group of young girls ran over to his horse and called out for him. This was what he was now; so famous just the mere mention of his name could cause a riot. Still we rode on through the crowds, down to the church and there witnessed our brother, Valarius ap Weylin, married to the girl who was still in love with me.

And watching them get married, I thought only of Rowena, left behind at Cadwy and made to work for Frying-pan and her cooks. But really, the wedding was not so bad after all, better than Uthyr's, though the priest's babbling mouth ran on for too long as usual. Val and Arna married in the dour Romani Christian cult, attended by the town magistrate, Adrian Marcellus, his wife and daughter, and his spotty, gangly-looking son, Corbin, all of whom kept staring at Arthur like he was a golden boy shining through the dark winter's day.

After it was all over, with Val cleaved now to Arna for life, the magistrate had us Clan back to his lavish villa for a reception party that went on all day: we were well fed, stuffed with produce imported from Europa and preserved for winter. Plenty of red wine too.

Val and Arna were not going back to Caer Cadwy, but staying with Val's family in Aquae Sulis, all till the time came for him to rejoin our forces for the coming season's campaigns.

So in the afternoon, after the reception party, he and Arna said their farewells, Arna all silly and bright and smiling at me in a funny kind of

embarrassment, new bride embarrassment, and they went off together to Val's family's house near the riverside.

Leaving Arthur and I alone with the magistrate and his weird son after his wife and daughter retired for the night. The rest of the Clan, Arthur then sent back to Cadwy, to hold the fort while the two of us were duty-bound to spend time with the magistrate, being charming to him for his generous hospitality.

Medraut was not here either to support us, for he had refused to come, as seeing beautiful young men married off to simpering girls made him sick and he refused, preferring to stay behind with Uki.

And even though Arthur had been here before, the man Adrian still insisted on giving us a tour of his villa, while his son trailed along behind, some kind of scrawny, pimply prick, who I thought was old enough to offer to join our army. I would have refused him though, outright of course, because he was naught but a weed from the ground and no amount of training would improve him, but we were forced to endure him, showing us to our rooms late that night.

We were polite all day and it was a relief to find beautifully set rooms to sleep in, one each, mine with a long Roman couch before a roaring fire, a wide bed in one corner, a bronze lamp burning on top of a tall stand in the other, water-bucket, a jug of wine, mugs, and I changed my mind about Adrian, the magistrate, as even though he hung on Arthur's every word like he spewed pure gold from his mouth. Underneath, he seemed genuine in his need to impress us. And his generosity was true.

Adrian then begged us to stay another day and night, for he wanted us to meet some of his high-standing friends, and to give us a special feast, another one, the following night after the wedding. And as these guests of his were coming over especially to meet Arthur, Supreme Commander in Britannia, we had little choice but to stay. Stay another day to be followed around the whole time by Adrian's weird son, Corbin, who showed us the Roman baths in the town, always tripping over his own feet, picking at his spots and eyeing our swords, mooning and fawning, almost falling into a swoon every time Arthur spoke to him, and in the end I couldn't stop laughing at him. He was a jester, was Corbin.

So Arthur gave him orders, and Corbin ran off, and I laughed, both of us laughing when Arthur told him to go and fetch us a jug of fresh ale from

the taberna that was way over on the other side of the city, when there was a closer inn right next to us. We howled with laughter and stood back and watched him tripping over himself to follow his orders.

Poor sod, I began to feel sorry for him.

"You got that one by the balls," I said to Arthur as we went back to Adrian's villa in the late afternoon, in time enough for his second feast that went on nearly all night with lots of forth and bragging, and I finally went off to sleep in heavy dreams for a few hours, before waking to someone bashing at my door, calling, "My lord! Come, open your door!"

I jumped out of bed quick and wrenched open the door, saw Corbin standing there, sweating and pulling on my arm.

I thought at once that Arthur might be down in a falling-seizure, but a moment later I saw him coming up behind the boy, calling to me, "Get dressed and meet me down at the stables!"

Orders like this meant trouble, and so I dressed at once, threw on my cloak, pulled on my riding gloves, because it was so bloody cold and went out at once, down to the stables where our horses were waiting.

Here I found Arthur standing in the open stable door, a number of stable-boys around him, along with Corbin, and when I came close, Arthur gave me a look.

I went to the door and saw what they were all looking at.

My horse. He was down, he was crumpled and he was dead. Arthur's horse stood next to him and quivering, while mine, he had fallen on his legs, buckled under him and his eyes were fixed and staring, his tongue out of his frothing mouth.

For a moment I stood still, with Arthur watching me; everyone watching me as everything rushed through my head. But I went into the stable and knelt next to my horse and pulled off my gloves, touched him. Cold and frozen, he must have died during the night and been here like this till found early this morning.

I could not tell why he had fallen and died, and as I looked into his frozen dead eye, I heard Arthur say behind me, "Do you have horse-doctors here? It cannot be ergot poisoning or else my horse would have died too…"

Corbin answered in fear, "No, lord, there are no horse-doctors here. But I will have to send for the butcher. This is gut-fever."

I got up with the truth of my loss hitting me; I went outside and gave out a deep cry of anguish and turned and punched the stable door so hard it shuddered on its hinges.

I did it again.

Was about to do it a third time when Arthur stopped me, pulled me aside and said, “I’ll get you a new horse, don’t worry.”

Exactly why my horse had dropped like he did, we guessed severe gut-fever, as horses just died like everything else, and in midwinter, they died more often than in high summer. We ruled out ergot poisoning, as it would have killed both our horses.

We went back inside the stable and stood over my horse, thinking, then Arthur fixed on Corbin. The boy stood in a corner, staring at us.

He stammered, “I, I, I did not have anything to do with this!”

“I never said you did,” Arthur answered, advancing on him.

Corbin cried out, “I know you two think I’m hopeless, but I can…I can do things! I can. Please, I can get you a new horse, I can…you don’t think I had anything to do with this, do you, Lord?”

“And why would you say such a thing? Why even think that I suspect you of anything suspicious here?” Arthur said, advancing as the boy backed himself further into the corner.

I stood watching Corbin’s fear and fascination, he could not take his eyes from Arthur’s face, from his eyes, black and dark and this was what Arthur did, intimidate, and weaker souls backed down before him, and he kept on till he had the boy pressed into the corner.

And standing over him, Arthur blocked him from moving by trapping him with an arm.

Saying to his face, “Corbin, do I think you false?”

“No Lord, I do not know what you think.”

“What happened to Bedwyr’s horse?”

“Severe cramp. I think you are right, it is gut-fever.”

Trapped he was and Arthur told him, “Get us a new mount. Today.”

I came closer and joined with Arthur.

Corbin was after something for himself all right, and I said to him, “What do you want? You’ve been following us from day to night all the time. What are you after?”

He shook his spotty head at me.

Arthur said, “You want to join my army? Is that it? But you think that we think you cannot do it. Is that it?”

His eyes went from Arthur to me and back again.

I saw his legs trembling, he really was weak, and having him join the Clan Bear was a jest. And with the greatest warrior in the land standing over him, I thought he was going to piss in his breeches with fear, but somehow he managed to answer, “My…my father will not let me go; he will not release me from this villa. I want to leave, I can work for you, and you are the only ones who can override him, set me free of him. I can help you, I have contacts. I can get you a horse, Prince Bedwyr, I can.” His eyes were all on me now. Then to Arthur, he said, “I can also bring you new warriors, not like me, strong youths.”

“I do not need you to find me warriors, they come to me.”

“Let me try. I will bring you new horses by three after mid-day today. I swear it. But I want you to help me. Take me from my father. I want to go to Cadwy.”

But Arthur gave Corbin a hard smile, saying, “I don’t let boys like you manipulate me or my warriors. Get us new horses. That’s all. What are you waiting for?” Arthur released him then and Corbin squeezed by me and went out, looking back at us, then was gone, running like a jack-hare back to the villa.

I said to Arthur, “Do you think he had something to do with this?”

And I looked back at my horse, lying there, waiting to be chopped up for the dog’s dinner. “I don’t know,” he answered. “I just thought I would try scaring him to see if he would reveal something, see if he would offer me free horses and he did. Free horses; cannot be bad.”

“Should we take him back to Cadwy?”

We stood over my horse’s body, and I was still feeling the loss.

Arthur said, “Corbin’s got contacts all right. Adrian told me.”

“I hope you’re not going to do it again, take someone in only on trust. That one’s not trustworthy. I sense it. We do not have to do anything for him.”

“You are a hard bastard, Fox; he’s dying to get out of here.”

“Why must it always be us? Don’t we have enough weight to carry already?”

“Let’s see if he can bring in new horses or not.”

I smiled at him, said, “Hard bastard, am I? Are you going to stand here and watch my horse get cut up? The one which carried me into battle? You want to wait for the butchers?”

“Let’s go get breakfast instead,” and he led me out of the stable, both of us escaping before the men with the saws and knives could get to work.

As we crossed back to the villa, I told him, “I don’t want Corbin. I won’t let him into our caer.”

“You will.”

“I won’t.”

“You will,” and Arthur put a strong hand on my shoulder and said, “You will, because I don’t intend waiting around here all day for him. If he brings horses, he will have to bring them to Cadwy. I’m not sitting here all day and be made to look foolish if he fails to do as he said. Let him come to us—if he can do what he brags he can.”

And that was that.

In the end though, Arthur arranged with Adrian for a small wain to take me back to Cadwy, where I could carry my horse gear in the rear, my saddle and bridle and horse blanket and javelin case all went in the back, and I left Aquae Sulis sitting next to the driver, with Arthur riding alongside us.

We travelled through a frosted and foggy land, and it was perishing cold, and by the time we reached home, the sun stood low and weak in the sky, and we invited the wain-driver to spend the night before he would return to Aquae Sulis the next day. And the very moment Arthur and I walked into the hall, we stopped where we were, because there was Medraut sitting in the Pendragon’s Chair, half asleep.

Arthur went and stood over him, kicked his leg and said, “Get out of my chair, Snake.”

Medraut started awake and jumped to his feet, seeing his cousin standing before him, glaring at him.

“What are you doing in my chair?” Arthur said. “Who gave you permission to sit here like a king?”

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry! All right, I’m sorry! With all my heart, I’m sorry. I was only trying it out…to see what it feels like.”

“Trying out what? Sitting down?”

The two of them stood face to face again and I moved in between them; here I gave the Snake a long hard stare. No one should sit in the Pendragon's Chair save Arthur alone, because he was the Pendragon alone, and anyone who sat in the Head Seat was open to a charge of disloyalty. Even treachery.

"I won't do it again, Pendragon," Medraut said, and bowed.

He moved out of the hall, giving us both a long cold look as he went.

70: BEDWYR's BEST BIRTH-DAY

OTHER than this, other than Medraut being a cock, we found the hall near deserted. With Arna and Val both gone, with Lady Efa away in the village, with most of the Clan scattered to their own billets, there was only Essylt, who was absent, as was Rowena. I went to look for her; went through to my room and found her things all there on the table, but no Rowena. I wanted to see her; but she was off somewhere else…till I found her coming out of Essylt's small house near the western wall of the fort, coming over to me, bundled up in a winter-warm dress Essylt had given her to wear, as Rowena had nothing of her own.

She came and stood in front of me, looking at me, her breath on the cold air, and I was sure she was going to call me a shit-eater again before stalking off into the hall.

But she just stood looking at me, gave me a small grudging smile, and when I smiled back, she stepped forward and stamped as hard as she could on my foot, and as I cried out, she hissed at me, "You killed my father," and walked into the hall. The stamp on my foot really did not hurt so much, she was too lightweight to hurt me, and I followed her inside, carrying my saddle.

I followed her into my room. And there she was, brushing her hair, sitting on a stool and looking into a bronze hand-held mirror.

I threw my saddle down on the floor and told her, "I'm not sleeping before the fire every bloody night, you know. This is my bed and I'm sleeping in it whether you like it or not."

"Can you arrange for me to sleep with Arthur?"

"No, I cannot. And what makes you think Arthur will want to sleep with you?"

She shrugged and answered, full of herself, “Lord Medraut told me Arthur likes me.”

“You are great friends now with Medraut, are you? He’s evil, you know that? And Arthur does like you. But that doesn’t mean he wants you in his bed.”

“Medraut is sweet as honey; he held my hand and showed me all around the caer. He told me all about you and Arthur.”

Saying this, she stopped brushing her hair and looked at me hard, with a suspicious frown. I sat down on the edge of my cot, watching her.

I said, “And what did he tell you all about me and Arthur?”

Rowena paled and cleared her throat when she answered me, “He said something about…about you and him. Arthur I mean, you and him, you two…”

I refused to answer this, for I knew what was coming.

Rowena then pulled her stool over towards me and said, all interested and with awe-struck wonder on her face, “Do you do it? Two boys together? Do you and him do it like that? That’s what Medraut said you do. He said you put your stiff cocks in each other like wild dogs!”

Her face turned red when she said this, and I guessed she just could not stop herself from saying it, from repeating the wild ideas Medraut had planted in her head.

“Rowena,” I took her hands in mine. “Medraut has been playing with you. Spreading pig-swill. He loves nothing better than spreading pig-swill in the heads of simple girls like you. He laps it up and you wallow in his lies. If you want the truth, talk to Essylt, not her brother.”

“So it is a lie, what Medraut told me.”

“Figure it out for yourself, girl,” and to me, she looked disappointed. “Anything else you want to tell me that Medraut told you?”

“He said I am not to sleep with you because you prefer boys, but Arthur is the opposite, he loves the female cunt wide open, Medraut said.”

I groaned.

I said, “It’s getting late, almost supper-time; you should go and do some work,” and I pulled her to her feet and sent her out to help Essylt with the housekeeping, feeling a rising sadness touch deep inside me. Medraut; and for his troublemaking, Arthur sent him out on patrol to get rid of him, relieving us for a while of his games…

But the very next morn, something special dawned, and I jumped out of bed and shouted out so Arthur could hear me from his chamber above me, “Hoi, Pendragon! Do you hear? Today I’m twenty years old! I’m twenty years old today, you brat!”

I heard him come bounding down the stairs and he burst into my room, he stopped and looked at me.

He said, “You old bastard! You old sod. Twenty years old, old. You make me feel under-age.”

“You are a brat. Eighteen and a brat. I cannot believe it. I’m twenty and you stand there, as Supreme Commander and Pendragon and you are a brat. This isn’t right, how can you do this to me? Make me feel so old?”

“Then you shouldn’t have been born before me, should you? We have to celebrate you being so old. Old man.”

And he dragged me outside, where he planned a feast for seven. Since Medraut was gone out on his patrol, there was a mere seven of us left. So Arthur had to rein in Dlair to help the girls with the cooking, and all through the day, every time Arthur saw me, he called me an old man. It turned out the best birth-day I ever had.

We had the finest supper all winter, baked salmon in honey, I drank the ale I had won in Lindinis as a short-lived fist-fighter, and after, it was law to talk about my life and exploits. It was also law to exaggerate my life and exploits. And by the time Arthur had finished building me up like a shooting star, both Gwydre and Rowena were gaping at me and drooling with desire. Rowena came and sat with me, searching my face.

“Are you really so brilliant?” she asked, sincere.

She had believed every word Arthur said.

“Of course I am. Do you think the Pendragon would lie?”

“You really went into battle with only one hand and fought a horde of Picts? I have heard about them, they are savages.”

“I did that.”

She took in a breath, sighed it out again, all the time staring at me. She picked up my hand and held it, squeezed my fingers. Her eyes were dark and her lips parted in wonder, and she made me feel strange.

“No more shit-eater?” I asked her.

“Oh, aye, lots more shit-eating,” she answered, and I started crushing her fingers in my hand and she cried out and snatched her hand away, her

face changing from wonder to her usual scowl.

When I looked around, everyone was watching us. Gwydre with a look of sorrow in his fair blue eyes; I took eyes with him, and I was confused. But when Rowena stopped feeling herself in a huff, because I had crushed her fingers, she moved with an air of superiority against me; she moved close to my side, her breasts against my chest, and as far as I was concerned, she was telling everyone here, including myself, that she was now all mine. We sat on for a few more hours, and close to midnight, Arthur sent everyone out, and went to bed himself, leaving me alone with Rowena, himself giving me a sign as he went, the cock into cunt sign…

And fully alone now, Rowena put her hand on my chest; said to me, "Are you going to make me sleep here before the fire every night?"

"You know you can come with me, but if you do, I'll take your virginity. Do you know that's what I'll do?"

She gave me a long searching look.

I said, "Come now, come with me. You have to choose. Come now, or never at all. You are driving me mad, Rowena."

Still she sat gazing into my eyes, and as she did, she moved her hand down between my legs and squeezed my prick, and I was hard in her hand. Her touch took my breath away, and she kept on rubbing me gently and I could not control what I wanted.

"Rowena, are you ready? You must come with me now."

She barely resisted me, for this was something I had to do—I had to take her with me to my room. And once inside, and she stood before me, trembling, I grabbed her, pulled her into my arms and kissed all over her face and found her mouth. I kissed her wild and deep and she gave my kisses back to me, just as fierce. I could hear myself moaning like a wolf at the moon, but I stopped and pushed her back and looked at her. Her eyes were dark, her mouth was sweet, and she was breathing hard, and I studied her, and remembered Arna, and the way I had treated her.

But Rowena was brown and dark, and I thought she would be ripe for me, so I took off her clothes and threw her down on the bed, and when I was naked with her, she took me in with crying gasps, digging her nails so savage and hard into my skin I felt the pain and loved it, loved her open lips and her open legs around me. I could feel myself beginning to release, and spurted my seed deep within her…oh Rowena…she had me, and I collapsed

over her body. I moaned out loud with the pleasure of her. She sighed, “Fox…” The first time she called me Fox.

Not till I could breathe could I start again, only slower this time, the first hot rush of her breaking me, so I kissed her slower, kissed for so long the lamp began to flicker and die out. In the darkness, I pulled her to me and crushed her breasts against my chest, held her and felt my heart trying to slow.

She said, “You hurt me…it hurts, it hurts now, savage shit-eater, you British…” but she never finished what she wanted to say.

I looked into her dark eyes. “I’m sorry for hurting you,” and I caressed her face, kissed her mouth.

She put her arms around me and held onto me, and bit my shoulder, then my neck, bit my lip as she kissed me, forcing me to kiss her back hard, kiss her quiet, till in the end, we were kissing long and slow and deep and she made little crying noises against me. Her kisses, her exploring hands made me hard again, but she would not let me back in, though I nudged against her, aching, aching, she would not open for me again all night.

71: NEW HORSES

WINTER fresh, and the land about the fort lay in heavy mists as I climbed the gate-tower next morn; here I looked out south and west.

I moved over, and walked the battlements to where I could see Arthur standing with Gwydre; they were talking close and watching the eastern side. I went to join them, I put a hand on Gwydre’s shoulder and pulled him against me, and like a fool, as I was feeling like a fool, I kissed his head but once, and he stared at me, moved that I had touched him, kissed him, acknowledged him. He looked pale still, tired, and he worried me, so I left my hand on his shoulder.

I felt for him, wished something from him as Arthur said, “This season, I’m going for Aelle of the South Saxons,” and he moved away, walking along the battlement, watching the land as if he could see those Saxons even now. I gave Gwydre another hug, then followed Arthur down the wall, and when I came up behind him, he gave me a long searching look, gave a slow smile.

“A hard night for you was it?” he asked.

I laughed. “For a while it was hard. She said I hurt her. I suppose I did, it was her first time. It hurts girls for the first time, doesn’t it?”

“Aye, it does.”

“Now she won’t let me back in at all. I tried this morning, but she’s locked her legs tight.”

“Let her heal, use your tongue instead,” and he gave me another of his burning smiles as he moved over to the wall and looked out.

I followed him for a moment, as he seemed to be expecting something. The return of the Snake, maybe. And when he turned to pace by me again, he gave me another look…

“What?” I urged him.

“What time do you think it is?”

“About two before midday, why?”

“Another fortnight, and the troops will muster. I cannot wait for them to come home…and you still haven’t got a new horse.”

Another hot look he gave me.

I shrugged and said, “Requisition someone else’s horse for me. What about Howell’s?”

“Horse-thief,” he called me and went back to pacing the battlements.

We paced together for most of the morning, being our own guards, and I was just about to go back down into the hall when I saw a small group of riders coming up the hill. I did not recognise any of them. They were not ours. They flew no clan banners, though I did see the front rider leading four wild looking horses, and behind them, another two riders.

Arthur came over to join me, said, “Just in time.”

He knew who it was of course. And when they reached the closed gates, I saw the front rider was the spotty son of Adrian Marcellus, Corbin.

"Shit, it's that boy!" I turned to Arthur and swore. "Shit, what's he doing here?"

"Don't you see what he has with him? One of those horses is for you, brother. Looks like he's finally brought us the horses he promised."

"How did you know he was coming today?" I grabbed Arthur's shoulder and turned him to face me. "How did you know?"

"The horse is for your birth-day. I told Adrian when you were not there, that if Corbin couldn't get me horses that day yours died, then to come with them no later than the Twentieth day of February; he's within a day, so you don't have to thump him now."

I just stood where I was, staring at him, for his mind always was leaps and bounds ahead of everyone else's, so why did I feel so surprised?

Then he said, "Looks like he's brought some new boys with him too…open the gates!" he called down to the gatekeeper, Dlair, who now held this duty.

The gates came open and Corbin rode in on his pony, while leading the four horses behind him. In with him came two other riders, wearing helmets and carrying spears, all of them reining in outside the hall and we climbed down the gate-tower to join them.

Here Corbin jumped off his pony and approached us carefully, as if we were about to slice him to shreds of flesh with our swords. He was scared of us all right, afraid when he gave us a short bow.

He said, "Lords, your horses are here. This one, the young grey stallion for Prince Bedwyr, the others are yours, Lord Arthur. They are all trained by these warriors here."

This was when the two unknown riders approached. They looked fierce and I told them to dismount as they were now within the walls of Caer Cadwy and standing before Arthur of the Britons himself.

"Take your helmets off," I ordered them. "And put down your spears!"

The two glanced at each other and dismounted.

I stepped towards them, making moves to evict them if they did not obey me and put down their weapons. They did as ordered and removed their helmets, revealing their faces. Both of them dark and young, around

my own age, one tall and good-looking, the other short, and though he was not ugly, he was far from pretty to look at.

They stood staring at Arthur, and he at them.

He even stepped forward and the boys moved back.

Arthur then spoke to Corbin. "You are supposed to introduce new warriors, Corbin. Who have you brought into my caer grounds?"

Corbin cleared his throat, still afraid.

Again his legs trembled and he said, faltering, "Um…this is Amr ap Moren," to the shorter one. "And this is Llacheu ap Dorath," the taller one. The two bowed, though they did not salute, as they were not a part of our army, even so, Arthur was by right of his status their superior regardless.

And so was I, and they both turned to me and bowed.

Behind us, the new horses stood and I was dying to inspect my new mount, but something held me back.

Held me back more when Arthur said to the newcomers, "And where are you two from?"

The taller one answered, "We are both from Siluria, my lord. We are Silurians." And again he bowed. A moment of silence.

I glanced hard at these newcomers, and then at Arthur, for he was without words. Two Silurians standing before him and he could not answer for a moment.

"Silurians," he finally said. "Of course you would know who I am. I barely know my own people," and he looked ashamed. "How did Corbin find you?"

"We are horse-dealers," the one called Llacheu answered him. "You must know this, Lord Arthur, that your people, our people, have started to rebuild at Venta Silurum…because of you."

"We come for you," the smaller one spoke up, now stepping forward. "What you have done, my lord, has powered our people into coming down from the hills and standing out proudly once again. How we wish to relive who we used to be, and you have done this to us now. There is only one Silurian and that is you. We want to join you, me and Llacheu, we want to join you."

I watched Arthur's face, struck out of the blue with wonder.

He could not answer, and Llacheu moved forward, saying, "My Lord Arthur, something else…my mother, she knows your aunt."

Arthur was more than interested now; he reached out for Llacheu and gripped his shoulder. “Knows my aunt? I thought all my Silurian family were gone…my father said they were all long gone.”

“No, my lord, your father does not say the truth. My mother knows your aunt, Lady Rhosyn, sister of your mother, Princess Igrain of the Bear Clan. One day, if you allow it, I will take you to your aunt. You also have a cousin, Lady Rhosyn’s daughter, Morganna.”

Arthur did not speak for a moment; he was struck again.

Till he said, “So my father keeps his lies intact against me. Then, Llacheu, you should have come to me long before now. I always thought I had no Silurian relations left. Why has this aunt not contacted me herself?”

“I cannot say,” Llacheu answered.

Arthur turned to me.

“Fox, did you hear that? Do you think it could be true? This aunt of mine would not contact me for fear of revealing herself to my father.”

Back at the boy, he asked, “Why did you not come to me before?”

I said before Llacheu could answer Arthur’s question, “This one is Silurian looking, but how would you know who this aunt really is? She could be a pretender, to claim relation to you.”

“My mother has known Lady Rhosyn all her life,” Llacheu answered me, now indignant. “All of us from home know that Rhosyn is the older sister of your mother, Lord Arthur.”

“How do you know it?” Arthur sounded hard. “My father says they are all dead, my Silurian relations.”

“They are not, Lord. Because my mother said so. My mother said that the Lady Rhosyn is the sister of the mother of Arthur, the Silurian Supreme Commander.” He bowed, he said, “I believe my mother’s words, my lord.”

Arthur stood back; he gazed at Llacheu with a long cool look.

“We will talk more about this later,” and he went off then to look at our new horses. I went with him, studied the horse that was to be mine—a strong grey stallion, so beautiful in himself, I loved him at once. I took his head and studied all of him carefully, for he was perfect from hock to hoof, muzzle to flank, wither to heel, he was fine, though he did carry a startled look, even so, he seemed sturdy and light, fast, and when I nudged into his flank, he jumped and kicked…brilliant! He had already been trained to kick.

Besides this, I would have to discover his other talents; his speed, his endurance, whether he could charge in a mass with other horses, if he could turn on a head, or ride to a wall and turn without breaking his legs on my command. All of this I would have to teach him, if he did not know it already.

All the time Corbin and the two Silurians stood watching us.

I joined with Arthur and he said to me, “These are good horses. I’ll take them without question, but what about those two lads? Do you think they are false or true?”

“I’ll roast them for you,” I said.

“Squeeze their nuts and see what comes out of them,” he said to me, and turned away back into the hall without saying another word. I left the horses in charge of the grooms and went back to crush some Silurian nuts. First to Llacheu, because he seemed the leader of the two.

“So you come from Siluria, and your mother knows Arthur’s aunt.”

“I swear it is the truth, my lord,” and he put his hand over his heart. His dark eyes held my gaze for so long I knew he was inspecting me as I inspected him.

“You are called the Fox, are you not?” he said.

“I am. Bedwyr, son of Pedrawg, Prince of Dogfeiling in Gwynedd.”

“I know that. Lord Uthyr, Arthur’s father, fostered him to your family, more to reject him than anything else. We heard Arthur was rejected because he is Silurian and his father did not like it.”

I thought this one was strong, the way he spoke. And he carried a sense of power around him; he looked at me without a downward glance, and I knew he was what he said he was. He was a Silurian.

But I did not like him telling me my own history.

“Be careful of what you say to me,” I warned him. “I know this story; I am a part of it. I know Lord Uthyr, and his nephew, Lord Medraut, and his father, Lot. Gododdin like myself and they are deadly. Arthur grew up under their tyranny, but they never beat the defiance out of him. And aye, it was his Silurian blood that caused him to be rejected.”

And Llacheu answered, without a sign of fear, “Maybe Lord Uthyr should have given Arthur back to us to raise instead of your people. Back to his mother’s people.”

“Do not say that to me. Never question me or how Arthur lived with my family. Never question that side of his history, for what was done there was right.” And I stood in Llacheu’s face and stared him down. “If you want to join our army and become a member of the Clan Bear, you need to know who to question and who not. You need to know you have to get past me to join our Clan.”

“Fearless is the Fox, cleaved to Arthur’s side they say at home.”

“That is the truth carved in stone.”

And Llacheu smiled at me, his eyes sharp and dark brown, not the polished black like Arthur. No, this one was strong and he excited me to war, and as I stared him down, I sensed he had the power to rival me and I swear, if he wanted to challenge my place, I would trample him into the earth. All this time, the other one, Amr, stood at Llacheu’s side and watched, listened, remained quiet. I gave him a long stare of his own, and he looked away, not as strong as the other one.

“Are you two trained for battle?” I asked.

“No, lord, we are not,” Amr told. “We are horse-dealers.”

“But you want to join our army. You said you did. You want to fight for Arthur.”

“That’s why we came,” Llacheu answered.

“Have you ever fought in battle?”

“Only skirmishes against other nations, mostly the Demetae.”

“This isn’t good enough for us. We need army-trained fighters and riders.”

“We are expert horsemen; we only need to learn to fight like you. We can do it. We are also expert trackers and hunters,” Amr said.

“You cannot fight with a sword, or fight from horseback; it takes years of long hard training,” I warned him.

“Then let us start now; let us pledge to Arthur.”

“Then you better come into the Supreme Commander’s hall right now,” I invited them, and walking with them to the main door, I told them, “You cannot enter with weapons. Take them down. Your spears; leave them here outside the hall.”

At the door I stopped them from entering; told them to leave their spears outside, for no stranger could carry weapons into the hall of Caer Cadwy.

“Here we have rank and status,” I explained. “I am a prince and second lieutenant, and Lord Medraut, who is not here at the moment, is first lieutenant. Howell, Cai, Val and Gareth, all still away, are unit captains, and Val is a prefect, and you two are nothing, till you can lift a sword and fight like we do. Are you prepared to train till you fall on your knees, then again on your face?”

Llacheu answered for them both. “We are ready and we will obey.”

“Now you can pass.”

I let them into the hall, and Arthur was there waiting for them, fully battle dressed and the two boys stopped a moment, looked at each other, because I did not think either of them had ever seen a fully armoured warrior before. And Arthur was no ordinary warrior.

And it seemed sad that no one else was home to witness this, that the Clan was absent, because Arthur said to them, “Welcome, brothers and kinsmen,” and he bowed his head to them. Neither of them knew how to answer.

They were out of their rank, so I pushed them forward, I told them, “Say whatever is in your heart, though you swear on oath and if you break your oaths we will send you into exile, and if you turn traitor, you will die. Say your truths, pledges of loyalty, allegiance, honour, trust, and love. Do it. Pledge your very lives to Arthur now.”

I had never seen new recruits so intimidated before, for these Silurians had found themselves in a realm beyond their ken, yet Llacheu made the first pledge, put his hand over his heart as I showed him, and he made words all mumbled, though he said the important ones of loyalty, sworn as an oath.

Amr followed with near the same words and I knew I would have to teach them both the sacramentum before the army amassed, and then, they could pledge again before the host, using the correct words. But for now it was done; we had two new members of our army and Arthur accepted them. He came forward and put a hand on each of their shoulders and told them he was duty-bound to uphold their individual worth and to support them as his warriors.

“Your first duty is to come with me and show me how well you can ride,” he told them.

And this was what we did for the rest of the day. Arthur and I, trying out the new mounts. And by late afternoon, we had exhausted ourselves, and as the new boys were taking the horses to stable, Arthur said to me, “Those two are worth their weight in gold.”

“What? Just because they’re Silurians?”

“No, you idiot, I meant the horses. I’m going to put your stallion to my mare.” Then, “So what do you think of Llacheu and Amr?”

“They are an asset as horsemen, but the rest of it? They’re rough-cut, all right. But Llacheu is strong, could be a powerful warrior in the making, as for him saying his mother knows your aunt, well, believe it or not, you might find out the truth one day. I don’t think you have ever met your own kind before, have you?”

We sat down on the bench under the eaves and watched the winter night descend. And I could sense that Arthur was unarmed, even exposed somehow by their sudden arrival.

He answered, “They make me feel even more lost than before…to come from somewhere, and never been there myself? Never known my own nation, my own heritage, my own relatives? It’s madness, like being stripped open and cast out. You all call me the Silurian, but what do I know of them? Nothing.”

“Get under Llacheu’s skin, he seems genuine to me. But the other one, Amr? He’s strange. Don’t think I like him. But they are in awe of you; just give Llacheu some of your Silurian charm. He’ll break open then.”

He laughed and said, “I trust your instincts.”

“I gave them fair warnings.”

“They might be in awe of me, but they are both scared witless of you, I can see that.”

I looked at him close, impressed, scared of me were they? Good.

72: ARTHUR’s LIEUTENANT-GENERAL

THE following fortnight, the last before our warriors would begin returning to Cadwy was madness, so much madness I had no time to breathe. I trained and trained and trained the two new Silurians till I dropped; they were both brilliant with horses, and helped me train them for the coming season. My new mount turned out steady, calm, had a good head

and did not fight against me when I wanted him to turn, a very important trait for a warhorse. Llacheu had the best way with horses, far better than myself, and he helped me as much as I helped him.

All of this meant I had no time for Rowena, which turned out all right in the end, because no matter what I tried, she wouldn't let me cock her again like that first time. So she returned to her place in Essylt's house. I could not figure that girl out, so I let her alone for a while and got on with the training, where I taught the new boys the use of spear and javelin from horseback.

All within that final fortnight.

Llacheu and Amr both picked up swordplay when Arthur joined us, where he displayed his unique skill with knives and he entertained us in the hall at night with his show-off dagger-juggling act.

Also every night after supper, he taught the new boys his army units, who was who and how to understand hand signals and battlefield commands. And Llacheu taught him about Siluria and Arthur listened to every word with quiet longing. I sat and listened and watched, watched the attraction between the three Silurians growing stronger each day, the attraction between Arthur and Llacheu so strong within a week of his arrival they began going everywhere over the grounds together.

Arthur and Llacheu began to feel like long-lost brothers reunited to me, spending time together almost to the exclusion of everyone else. Together at night when we had all gone to bed, I knew they sat up and talked and I also knew they were plotting and making plans, for Llacheu's character outshone his friend, who was quiet and concentrated. Amr fixed on his tasks and never relented till he had it mastered. Llacheu, a natural learner, was light and loved to laugh and I sensed he had a strong heart.

Amr made friends with Gwydre, which was good, as Gwydre seemed to be isolating himself a lot these days, staying shut-up and alone in his hut. I tried again to get Rowena back into my bed, succeeding just a few nights before the army was due home again. Essylt had talked her into coming back to me, telling Rowena what a dream I really was. She came back to me and I treated her a lot more gently than I did the first time. And it worked. From that moment on, she gave me what I thought were the signs of love.

Then Medraut came home.

Two days into March, he came flying his White Snake banner, bringing with him Cai Long-man, Howell ap Berth, the twins, Valarius back from Aquae Sulis; Uki Wolf-leg; Gareth ap Gan and his cousin, Brendon, then Sandedd and Pedr, Tegid, Drustan, and all the other scouts who had been based at city-Calleva; he brought back half the inner Clan and I climbed the gate-tower to watch them ride in.

Not long after their arrival, Lady Efa came up with her sister Elin, and a group of village women to help with the cooking. Frying-Pan came back and the whole caer began to grow back to life, right on the doorstep of spring. The hall was packed, so we had to find places for them all; the women working hard, and as the Clan gathered, I brought the new recruits, Llacheu and Amr, before the men. Silence slowly fell.

Medraut looked at them with a powerful emotionless stare.

"This is Llacheu ap Dorath," Arthur told him. "And this is Amr ap Moren. New members of our army, though they will need watching when we ride out, they are new and untried."

Everyone now began coming forward and greeting them, shaking hands, and Medraut stood up and said, "They look like you have dragged them out from under some rocks, where in all hell-fire did you find them, Arthur?"

"I didn't. Corbin did, Adrian's son. Why don't you ask them where they come from yourself?" and Arthur walked away and joined with Efa and Elin, who both looked like they wanted him for something.

I stood watching Medraut, enjoying the encounter, saw Amr pale and hang his head, though Llacheu stood his ground.

"So, where did you two come from so suddenly?" Medraut asked him.

"From Siluria. We are Silurians."

"Silurians!" Medraut cried. He turned to look for Arthur, calling, "Silurians! Ha, what a jest, a spent force! Silurians, my sweet arse. There are none of you left, oh, except for my glorious cousin of course. How sickening," and he too turned away and went off to his own house outside.

I moved to Llacheu and told him, "Don't worry about him, he's only out to test you. Stand up to him. He's really impressed but won't show it. But be prepared for more of the same, but worse."

Amr said low, in awe, “Medraut is Gododdin; we do not know how to handle such men. The Gododdin are gods to us!”

“Amr, I am Gododdin; do you think me a god?” I asked him.

The boy looked at me, again in awe.

But Llacheu laughed at his friend, “Once when we Silures were on the warpath, the Romans trembled and had to send to Rome for help. This is the nation you come from, Amr, so do not tremble before Lord Medraut.”

This advice did not work.

Amr stood trembling before Medraut from that moment on, as to Amr, the Gododdin walked in legend and myth and power and Medraut was the pure embodiment of power to him. Blond and beautiful, Medraut shone light beside the Silurian darkness of Arthur, and I sensed Amr was feeling inferior to all of us here. He may have even wondered how Arthur had come to be Supreme Commander at all, and not Medraut. Amr would find out in the coming wars.

After our evening meal and when the women had gone out, this was when Arthur had us all quiet.

And when we were watching him, he stood up from the head-table and looked right at Medraut, looked at him long and Medraut said, “I swear I haven’t done anything wrong, Silurian…”

“I know you haven’t. What I’m going to tell you might make you laugh, or not. And I don’t think there’s anyone here who doesn’t know the power you can summon from the north, the Gododdin power.”

“What are you getting at?” the Snake asked.

“I’m getting at your rank. Because I do not need you as my first lieutenant anymore.”

Everyone moved and murmured, looking now at Medraut, and he was the one to pale this time. I watched him, watched Arthur.

“Say it, cousin. Are you stripping me down and sending me back north? I do not want to go, you know, and I won’t.”

Arthur moved before him, stood there and said, “But don’t forget that without your help I would still be in the north fighting my own father for control as Pendragon; you helped me secure the north, and without you, all of this would have killed me to do it alone.”

Medraut began to squirm in his seat. None of us knew what was coming and Arthur told him, “So who needs a first lieutenant?”

“You do.”

“No, I need a lieutenant-general.”

And when Arthur said this the entire hall erupted. Cai came to his feet and so did Howell, both Val and Gareth gave me a look and I felt my heart skip a beat—lieutenant-general was all but elevating Medraut to joint ruler of the army, almost equal in rank to Arthur himself. Another of my Silurian’s mighty risks he took in his life and he had me in shock. And I sat staring at him.

Medraut too came to his feet, saying, “You are making me your lieutenant-general?”

“Right now. Tonight.”

“You are giving me joint command of your army?”

“I want it clear, you still answer to me, you are still second to me, below me, but you have the power not to override me, but to act in my stead. I’ve never delegated power before and it’s a problem. Medraut, my cousin, you are now my lieutenant-general and you will have an army of your own, an assault unit that you will lead. But remember, do not let this power go to your head. All military commands come from me. Do you agree?”

“Oh, I agree! More than agree! I’ve been waiting for this a long time, Arthur, you know this. An assault unit you say?”

“Not just assault, assault and pursue. I want a unit of warriors who are relentless,” and Arthur was talking to all of us now, not just Medraut. “Warriors who are single-minded, with great endurance to stay in the saddle and on the ride, warriors to pursue the enemy to the very end of their lives, even right into their home bases. Pursue and destroy, leaving no Saxon standing. I want you to lead that assault, Medraut, so you will need to choose your warriors carefully.”

“I can do that, my lord.” It was Amr who spoke. We all turned to face him. “I can do those things. I never give up, I take it as a personal insult if I ever allow myself a single mistake in endurance and I am dogged as a hound.”

“Here’s your first recruit,” Arthur said to Medraut. “Amr. Take him. I order it.”

Medraut pulled a sour face—take that skinny, uncombed, untested Silurian?

“I will take him,” he relented.

“Cai!” Arthur turned then and pointed.

And Cai choked on his ale, and everyone laughed. “What have I done now, Commander?” he said.

“You have your old command back. Captain of the rear guard.”

Cai leapt out of his seat, jumped the table and threw his massive arms around Arthur and hugged him up off the ground and dropped him again, crying, “Thank you, Bear! You will not be disappointed in me, I swear it!” Kissed him, made a dance and went around shaking everyone’s hands. Arthur laughed at him, then turned away and went to the campaign table and there he pulled out a large dark box from underneath; opened it and took out the sword that was to be won for valour in our coming battles. He drew the blade and walked the hall, showing it to the men, put it down on the head-table and moved back.

He said, “Whoever I choose as the best warrior from our next campaign, will win this sword.” He then dismissed us to come and see the prize, and we all came out of our seats to take a closer look at the sword, a beautiful thing with a long shining pattern-welded blade, pulled from a carved metal scabbard. The perfect spatha.

One of us would win it, and we already began to argue about who it would be. Then as we broke apart, I saw the Ladies Efa and Elin once again pounce on Arthur, luring him away into a corner, where the three of them went into hot discussions. I frowned, for what were those women up to now? Something they wanted from Arthur, and I left him early for my cot…

73: THE LOSS of GWYDRE

I was up next morn before dawn, as this day we were riding out for a mock battle; a training run for men and horses and I would get the chance to test my new mount as a runner against other horses.

So going out into the hall, I found Arthur standing by the fire, looking quiet, stilled. I knew at once something was wrong. When I joined him, I did not need to say anything for him to tell me.

“Efa is putting pressure on me; she wants me to marry Elin. She seems to think I need a wife, and Elin should be the one, plus the fact she’s

trying to convince me Elin is in love with me. I don't want this, Fox, I don't."

"I thought they were up to plotting something, well, you know what I think about that, don't let her do this to you. Let me speak to her. Did you tell her about your plans for Isleen?"

"No, I haven't told anyone about it yet."

"Let me deal with Efa and Elin, Elin runs whenever she sees me coming." I laughed, trying to lighten his mood. "Come on, let's get the men up and get out of here for the day."

He shook his head. "Fox, we are riding out today, but we're not coming back. We are riding to Calleva and staying there for the new season. I'm out of winter supplies here for both men and horses; we are down to nothing, so we have to leave. And not only that, but Medraut told me the Saxons are already on the march across the southern lands, and because Rhodri has more resources than we do, we are leaving before the enemy can strike against us, or before we starve along with our mounts. I'm leaving Howell behind to hold the fort with some of Gerren's men; they can go down to Lindinis for feed. And if Howell is losing his hearing, I don't want to risk his life on the battlefield…he will have Uki with him too."

"I see, and what about the girls?"

"Efa will take care of Rowena and Essylt, I've arranged for them to go to Aquae Sulis. Adrian will look after the girls. I love Efa, but she wants a lot from me; she seems to be working for ulterior motives and I cannot defend myself against women, I never could. She will get me in the end if I'm not careful."

"Then we better run for the hills, but Calleva will have to do for now," and I gave him a push and he moved, ready to muster the Clan for a ride to what was fast becoming our eastern outpost.

The next few hours saw us first having breakfast, then clearing the hall, packing our gear; Arthur lost his riding gloves and I found them for him under his bed, while Rowena followed me around everywhere, helping me pile my gear on the floor, holding herself together and I admired her bravery. She knew she would not be seeing me again for a long time, and when I got her alone in my room, before I went down to the stables to saddle my new horse, she stood still for a moment, then turned and began hurling things at me from the little dressing table she had set up by the far

wall, opposite the bed. First came her mirror and then her hairbrush, both of which I caught in flight before they could hit me, and when I caught the hairbrush, one handed, left hand, she stopped, surprised I had caught the brush before it could hit my head, as this was what she was aiming for, my head.

"How did you do that?" she whispered.

I went to her, put the brush down and pushed my hands into her long dark hair. "Fast actions are what I need to stay alive in battle, girl."

"Teach me to do it, to be so fast; you were so fast when you killed my father. I watched you; you were the best he came against. He always knew he would die fist-fighting. Said he would go that way, because it was his life, just as yours is being a warrior. And you fight Saxons," she put her arms around me and put her head on my chest. "I can hear your heart beating, it's a strong beat and it's fast too."

I stroked her hair, smoothed her hair from around her face.

"Will you come back?" she begged.

"I'll come back."

"I think I will miss you."

"Even though I'm a British shit-eater and killer of Saxons?"

"Even so." Her arms tightened around me, then we were kissing and I knew she would be waiting for me to come home again one day soon. A day I could barely know would ever come.

When I pulled out of her arms, I gathered my gear and left the hall.

All over, men were gathering, others still to bring out their horses, and I walked down to the stables alone.

Nearly everyone else had already assembled by the gates while I had been lingering with Rowena, but there was no hurry, it was still early, and when I went into the dark stable, I found Gwydre sitting there on an old saddle, trying to fix a link in his horse's bit. We were alone, and as soon as he knew it was me, he stopped what he was doing, dropped the bit and looked at me, a long deep painful look.

He said, "I cannot go."

The way he said this…

I dropped my things near my horse and went to him; he sat looking up at me with anguish in his eyes. I noticed how pale he was, with dark circles under his eyes, his lips washed of colour; he looked violently ill.

I knelt to his side. “Gwydre, what’s going on? You look sick.”

In answer, he lifted up his tunic and shirt and showed me the wound he had taken to his hip back at the ambush battle; it was now deeply infected, weeping, inflamed like a terrible burn, a bad smell that told me his skin was rotting from the inside out and eating him alive.

The sight of it shocked me and I said, “Why did you not say something about this before? I could have brought Nicomede back for you; you have been keeping this secret. This is why you have been hiding away, you fool, you cannot do this with battle-wounds, they have to be watched and treated daily. You let it get this bad?”

He nodded, said his words breathless and forced, “I did not want the doctor back…he wanted to cut into the bone of my hip and dig out the rot, that would kill me! He said it would lame me for the rest of my life…”

“He never told me that, he never said anything about cutting into your bone.”

“Bedwyr…he wanted to cut the bone open and scrape out the rot… how could I let him do that? He would have killed me doing that…no, I don’t want that man near me…and I didn’t want…to put trouble your way, because you would have allowed him to do that to me. You would have ordered him to do it!”

“I couldn’t. Nicomede is a civilian doctor, not an army one. All army doctors must report to unit captains for confirmation of procedures to the men, I wouldn’t have allowed it.”

“No, I thought I could look…after it myself, but it just got worse and worse. I’m scared, Bedwyr, please, I cannot ride. Tell Arthur I cannot ride, do that for me? I’m scared…oh, I feel so ill…I’m cold…”

I grabbed hold of his head and held him to my shoulder.

Here, feeling me close maybe, he began crying like a little boy and I said, “Don’t worry. Let me tell Arthur what’s wrong. Don’t cry,” but he was so weak and ill he collapsed against me and I had to hold him from falling to the stable floor.

Just then another warrior came in; Brendon, Gareth’s young cousin. I told him to run back at once and tell Arthur what was going on. He saluted and ran off up the field towards the hall, calling as he went. And waiting alone with Gwydre, I held him close and he looked into my eyes, he gazed for a long time into my eyes.

"Gwydre, you fool," and I lowered and kissed his dry lips but once.

"I love you," and he touched my hair, and all I did was hold him in my arms, dying for him and feeling the raging fever in his body. He was raging hot, sweating, and behind me, I heard the sound of horse's hooves, a rider coming up fast and Arthur was with us, off his horse now and looking down at us both.

"I'll take him in the wain straight for Calleva," he said. "Though I've already sent out Gareth to ride for Nicomede, warning him. Gwydre," he knelt to his side, took his hand. "Look at me, tell me, I can take you in the wain. Do you think you can come with us? If we stay here, I cannot feed the horses or the men and the Saxons are moving, but if we go, you will have to travel ill, though Nicomede will come, he will. He will not let us down. Can you travel?"

"Please, keep that doctor away from me, he means to kill me…let me ride in the wain…"

Outside the stable, men were gathering, they were ready to ride and they wouldn't like being held up by one sick warrior.

Though this was Gwydre, and I said to Arthur, "Let me stay behind with him. Send Nicomede to us. I'll come and join you when we are out of danger."

"Fox, there's no food left here, only rubbish, stuff fit only for swine, the girls are leaving too this afternoon for Aquae Sulis with Dlair, and by the time you can get good quality provisions from Lindinis, Gwydre will be starved and he needs a doctor right now. He can only get this in Calleva. Gwydre, are you sure you can travel? Do not lie to me now."

"I can make it…I'm starving hungry, Arthur, I am. I haven't eaten anything for a long time," and his voice was naught but a gasp.

"We are going now," he ordered, "and you are going in the wain. Fox, get your horse saddled."

As he spoke, the wain came and pulled up outside the stable door and some men came in to help Gwydre up into the back.

I saddled and bridled my horse and took him out and all the time my heart was racing, and once I saw that Gwydre was up and comfortable in the rear of the wain, wrapped up in blankets and lying with bolsters against his back, I knew he was ready to go with us. It was a risk taking him this way; it was a risk to stay behind with no food and no help.

Winter this year had been long and hard, and even though it was now March, it was still cold and dark and spring had not yet shown its face. At the gates we said our last farewells to our women; Essylt as usual, crying wild and insane to lose both Arthur and Medraut together, Rowena standing aside with not a tear in sight and looking at me with deep regard. And I glanced once at Lady Elin; in love with Arthur? I say she was…

But now we were leaving, and we took the road to city-Calleva without delay. I rode my new horse side by side with Arthur riding his Roman warhorse, Big Brown, with Epona coming as well, trotting behind on a long rein. Arthur was going to run her on the green pastures outside of Calleva and put her to foal, to breed new horses as soon as she was ready to take to a stallion. He had been planning the move for some time, I knew, as also with us went our gold ingots, to be used for buying more horses from their Continental runs.

We rode on in our unit formations, all up with our shields and swords, fully armed and hungry. And Gwydre falling ill could not stop an army on the march. No matter how important to us he was, the Clan Bear was moving and could not be stopped. And I was ready to fight. Saxons, I would kill and drink their blood for daring to face me. Gwydre; I would fight to keep him alive on this journey and I wondered if I should be with him now. It was a full day's ride to Calleva and we would not make it there till well after sundown; it would be a long hard ride for Gwydre.

The morning was foggy, a low lying fog I had seen many times in this land and we rode through it, following east, all of us rugged up still in our winter cloaks and gear, though as usual, Arthur wore his sun-rayed headband instead of his helmet. Nowadays, he only wore his helmet before going into battle; a signal he used to warn us that he was up as Supreme Commander and the time was ripe for killing.

He glanced over at me and said, "Why don't you ride with Gwydre in the back of the wain? I think he would like your company. I don't need you so much right now."

"Are you trying to tell me something?"

"Just go and join him. I know he wants you. Just go."

"I want to ride. I need to get used to this horse. I've called him Mischief."

“That’s a good name. Seems he came to us with a lot of horseplay. Fox, you bonehead, go and keep Gwydre company. That’s an order.”

“Yes, Commander,” and I saluted him and dropped back to the wain. I waited till it caught me up; halted it and roped my horse to the front right side, then climbed up into the back, finding Gwydre lying pale, no, not pale. He was white, breathing hard, suffering, though fast asleep. It was a good road to Calleva and was not too rough, and in the back he could sleep without too much jarring.

I settled in at his side, watched his face, cursed him for being so stupid and allowing his wound to become infected. But I cursed myself more for not keeping a closer eye on him. He was under my care, my warrior. I should have kept closer watch. What a fool. It was myself who was the fool, too complacent or too interested in my own affairs; or had I just avoided him because of his feelings for me? Damn his poor bones!

He was sick, so sick he looked…no, I couldn’t face what I was seeing. So I opened out the doors and latched them back, where I saw the army following. Cai in the far rear, delighted to have his men back under his command. Medraut, elevated to lieutenant-general and riding out on the far right, flanked himself by Dafin and Irfan. There was a hundred riders around me and more would come in over the next few days, till the entire army was fully amassed. We rode for one watch, and Gwydre slept; he slept and I watched him, trying desperately to fathom what it really was between us.

What was it really? I watched his face, I found him…

I took up his hand and felt the heat and the fever and he slept on, drenched in sweat and an unacknowledged hunger; a hunger I knew and lived with every day of my life. I heard a horse coming up behind the wain; turned to see Arthur now riding up to me, and when he got close enough, he jumped from horseback to the rear step of the carriage and leapt inside, all in one swift movement. He made me laugh and I said, “Pity you didn’t fall; would have been even better to watch.”

“I know.” He looked at Gwydre, looked worried. “How is he now?”

“Been sleeping all the time, he’s spent, and he’s got a raging fever.”

“Nicomede should reach us soon, if the message has gone through all right.” He paused a moment, still looking at Gwydre, then at me. “This doesn’t look good. You know that, don’t you?”

“Why don’t you say what you think?” and I squeezed Gwydre’s hand even harder. He did not wake.

“I think Nicomede is the best doctor we have ever found,” Arthur tried to ease me, “even better than Arial, but—”

“Are you trying to tell me he might not make it?”

“Look at him, Fox.”

I looked.

I looked with the clarity that Arthur had, and what I saw threatened to finish me here and now. Tears filled my eyes and I tried to hold on; turned away and looked out of the carriage doors and saw the army, our army, our warriors on the path to war. Where men died and suffered.

Arthur gripped my wrist and squeezed hard, watching me. “I’ll have the best for him, I swear. Nicomede will fight and so will I, though I don’t know how.”

I fought the tears but could not stop them falling.

He said, “We are going to need to be stronger than ever before, for what we are going to do and where we are going, we have to be strong. We have to hold up and endure like never before. And somewhere, my brother, there is a reason for this…for life. For the life of Britain. For the life of our people. It has to be worth it, Fox.”

I heard his words, nodded, stopped my tears and we rode on for hours in silence, the wain rocking and creaking, me and Arthur together watching Gwydre as he slept, sleeping, sleeping and slowly dying at my side. I knew now that he was dying, and I held in my pain for a few more leagues, till we heard a call and Arthur climbed out of the carriage and left me. I saw him gallop off up the road and a moment later we halted. Master Nicomede had finally come.

He came climbing up inside and glanced at me, his face set.

He took a quick look at Gwydre and said, “I think he will make it into town, there I will do all I can.” And lowering his voice, he warned me, “Bedwyr…you must face the truth, I hold very little hope for him now. But I swear, I will do all I can. On to Calleva!” he called aloud to the wain-driver and we began to move again.

Nicomede then did what he could for Gwydre and that was little, having no room in the carriage to move. So we rolled on without pause to Calleva, and when we arrived after dark, we took over the town just as we

did the time before, everyone here to meet us, but all I wanted was to get Gwydre into a warm room and a soft bed. Master Rhodri was there too, having arranged rooms for us back in his house as before, only this time he had given Arthur a special room all to himself on the second floor. But Rhodri led the doctor and me back into the room I had shared with Arthur, the one by the apple orchard.

We carried Gwydre in on a stretcher and as soon as he was down on the bed, he woke without fuss, slowly opening his eyes and appearing not to know where he was. I stood aside a moment, then pulled over the stool to sit and help Nicomede with his doctoring. He stripped Gwydre naked, and laying out cloths under his body, he set about a savage attack on the wound on his hip. When his breeches came off, only then could I see the massive extent of the festering wound, so foul I turned away and listened to Nicomede complaining and moaning aloud.

He would have to try and open the wound as much as possible, to the bone itself and cut and flush out the poison. This action alone could cause Gwydre's death. I knew it. I could not stay to watch, that is I did not want to watch, but Gwydre needed me and I stayed and held his hand, though he was too weak to grip back and I believed now he had fallen so far into illness, he had gone beyond pain. And as Nicomede tried to drain the wound, I knew Gwydre was dying. His hand in mine, I watched him die. I sat squeezing his hand as he died, breathing his last, the boy who loved me…I wept.

All the time I kept calling his name, to have him hold on, but Nicomede whispered to me that he could do no more; the infection was rotten through the bone of his hip and right leg and was gone far, far beyond any doctor's skill to heal. And I did not want him to carry on any more. I wanted him to go away and leave us alone…so I could watch Gwydre die in some kind peace. I saw it; he had been dying even back there in the stable.

Arthur had seen it then as well. The way he had looked at me, telling me with his dark eyes that my warrior was finished. Death was on him even then and I had refused to see it; now I saw it. A moment later Arthur came in, saw what was happening and ordered everyone out of the room, leaving just the two of us.

Everything inside me broke open and I fell on my knees at Gwydre's side, stroking his face, suffering along with him like a whipped and

trampled animal, torn into a thousand shreds of skin and bone.

I wept, “No, no, Gwydre…no…”

He never took his eyes from my face, he tried to tell me something, but I knew what he wanted to say. “I know, I know, Gwydre, don’t go without knowing I love you, I love you, too.” I could not speak without begging. I begged him not to do this, don’t die…don’t let go…don’t die… find a way to heal and stay with me, stay with me…and all the time I knew Arthur stood watching us, himself broken.

I saw his hand take Gwydre’s left hand, while I held his right. Gwydre was too exhausted to fight, to answer us. Not even Arthur of the Britons or Bedwyr the Fox could stop what was happening before us now, not even us. We could not stop death. Arthur knelt and put a hand over Gwydre’s heart. I took Arthur’s hand away, and put my head down on Gwydre’s chest and cried; cried so hard I thought I would die with him.

Inside him, I could feel him trembling. I looked up and I kissed him; kissed him till he died, and when he died, I felt him breathe out against my lips and he killed me. Killed me so fast and so hard I got up and walked outside into the dark apple orchard, kept on walking through the trees and right on to the very rear of the garden where I was stopped by a wall in pitch blackness.

Over the wall and into the north was a rampart built to hold back Saxon incursions, as if such men could be stopped by mounds of earth. I felt numb, stripped of my senses, a man stripped to bone and leaving nothing alive. Gwydre’s sudden death had changed something inside me, and I saw with terrible clearness my own neglect. I had neglected him because of the way I felt about him; all he wanted was one night with me and I had refused him, I could not face the way I felt about him.

So now he was dead, lying stilled forever, his youth gone and his beauty wasted…wasted on me. Before the wall I broke and fell on my knees and stayed this way for a long time. I could smell the earth beneath me and knew we would put Gwydre down into this same earth; we would bury him next to his friend, Druce, who was also lain to rest here in city-Calleva. A host of our warriors lain to rest here, and I saw again that Saxon spear thrusting into Gwydre’s hip in that ambush battle, my warrior. I should have taken care of him. I knew he was wounded and I let him die. I wanted to die in his place.

And I remembered how he had come to find me in the mountains of home when my father died, I remembered him sitting on his horse on the hill top, I remembered his love.

After a while longer again, I slumped back against an apple-tree and sat staring at the black wall in front of me. No one came to invade my grief. Arthur would not let them. He knew I would grieve deeper than ever before. Yet it was not Arthur who came. I heard footsteps coming up behind me; saw a faint light from a lamp, someone standing at my side.

I looked up.

Medraut.

"Fox," he said. "You know you don't have to hide your grief away. No one will judge you. You have to know this."

I told him my confession, "I killed him, you know. He was my warrior and I neglected him…his wound…I neglected him, Medraut, and now he's dead."

"This is a hard lesson to learn."

He knelt to my side, put the lamp down at his feet and placed a hand against my face and smoothed my tears, turned my face to his.

"We are all learning lessons that are hard, and have a very high price. I'm sorry for the way I bait you. I'm so sorry for that. We all neglected him. This is a hard and bitter lesson…"and he too cried, surprising me, for Medraut never cried.

I stared at him, at the quiet tears on his face. They were real.

I told him, "Bitter lessons! When Arthur comes, I want him to take everything away that he's given me. I don't deserve what he's given me. I want nothing, and no place any more. Whatever I am, a lieutenant? He has to take that away from me. I do not deserve such a rank."

Medraut looked disturbed by my words. "What are you saying?"

"I want to be stripped of rank. All I want is to fight and be the best in the Clan, in Britain. A warrior with no rank other than my name and my birth-right as a prince. Will you help me persuade Arthur to strip me down? It's what I want. After the way I neglected my warrior, caused his death, I will never again take official military rank. Stand by me, Medraut."

He nodded. "You were never made for such things. What you are is the purest of fighters, pure, a pure warrior. Not made for rank, but for valour. But we have all learned something from Gwydre's death. Even

Arthur has learned something. He's learned how bloody inexperienced we all are; it's driven into him how young he really is to be doing all this, how he's without so much experience it has killed one of us. He said so before I came to find you. He's almost as broken by this as you."

"Let's get back now. I cannot sit here any longer."

I got up, and taking the lamp up high, we walked together back to the room where Gwydre was laid quiet, peaceful, and beautiful.

Arthur was still there with the others, with Cai, Gareth and his scouts, Amr, Llacheu, Val, the twins, Sandedd and Pedr, nearly all the inner Clan with Rhodri and Nicomede crowded into this one room, with candles burning around his bedside. They had already dressed him for burial; full battle gear and his sword in his hand and when I saw him like this. I fell at his side and stared into his sleeping face.

I said aloud so they all could hear me, "Forgive me, Gwydre, forgive me, I wronged you. I wronged you and you let yourself die because of it." I stood then, and the Clan began leaving after first fare-welling our warrior. And when they had all gone save myself, Medraut, Arthur and Nicomede, the doctor stepped to my side.

He told me, "It was not all your fault. I had doubts for his survival all along, his wound went into his bone and that's where the infection came from, impossible to treat without amputation. But you boys have learned something, have you not?"

"I've learned that our wounded warriors have to be watched as close as we can," Arthur answered. "Even when they appear well, they need watching. I've learned I'm without experiences like this and we all failed in some way. I learned how new I am at Command. One year old, that's all I am. I won't ever let this happen again and the price was far too high. Gwydre was worth much more than this, much more."

I took Arthur's gaze when he said this, he was trying again to deflect the blame away from me; but it would not work like that ever again. What he had done so many times in the past was take the attacks for me; never again. I would never allow him to take my battles ever again.

"This warrior was mine," I answered. "He was under my care and I neglected him. Arthur, let me carry this. Medraut will tell you, will back me, I want my rank removed. No rank, no official titles, no military titles,

nothing other than my own name. Only the Fox. Let this be enough to stand me before the army."

Arthur gave me a long searching gaze, then nodded, and just like Medraut, he said, "I understand. Do I disband your unit?"

"Aye. You always wanted me to be free. Now I see why. Do it. Put my warriors in with Medraut."

Arthur did not answer, there was no need.

74: NICOMEDE JOINS the CLAN

I looked down at Gwydre again, and saw the peace on his face.

He was in peace and shadow and I was in pain. I would live with the pain of his death for the rest of my life. So then, duty-bound, I sat an all-night vigil at his side as was right. The Clan left me alone for the vigil and I made Arthur go to his own room and sleep. I even told Master Nicomede to make him sleep, as no sleep made his epilepsia worse.

But before both Arthur and Nicomede left me alone, the doctor swore something to us. He swore he would attach himself to our army and become our head troop medicus.

"You boys are too young and inexperienced to be left in charge of sick and wounded soldiers. You need guidance," he told us.

Arthur hung his head in shame. This happening had wounded his sense of himself as Supreme Commander, he was a boy again and he knew Master Nicomede was right. I knew he was right.

"If you come to us, Master, you will be treated like a king," Arthur swore. "Ever since we lost Arial to the north, we have been naked as far as a good doctor goes. Lord Darfod has other work to do, and yes, we need a head medicus."

"Then I will come," Nicomede agreed. "I was thinking of retiring, but now? You came along and showed me something different, I cannot refuse you now." He glanced at Gwydre's body, at me.

He left, with Arthur following him out, and I sat my vigil, reliving every moment I had spent with Gwydre, all through the night, and the immense loss of him cut a wound through my body. I forced my mind still and took the full force of grief and blame.

And once I had done this, I believed I could bury him knowing he had forgiven me at the end. Before he died, I believed he had forgiven me. I

cried at his side throughout the night, I kissed his cold lips, told him I loved him, now dreading the day and his burial. We always buried our dead at sunset, down with the majesty of the sun, down with the body of a loved brother.

We buried Gwydre in his battle-gear, with his sword and shield and helmet. Lowered into the soil by our own on a board of oak, his body covered by spring flowers. The Goddess Britannia would wing him home; and every time a warrior died, Arthur did the same thing, he put his right hand over their hearts, almost as if he had the power to force their dead hearts to beat again, but they never did, and he touched Gwydre's chest now, over his armour, looking into his face.

"We will never forget you," he said. "You died unfairly, but you were brave and faithful and you once saved my life. If Avalon be true, we will see you there one day…wait for us, brother."

When I looked at Arthur now, so much grief was on him; ripped apart and trying to hold himself together in front of the Clan, and his voice, young and broken, that youth of his, covered by the grief and loss of not only my warrior, but his. The way he said his words…wait for us…a prophesy of our own deaths, when we would one day walk to Avalon together in eternity…

Then I heard others crying beside me, so I cried too, because Gwydre was special to me, and I loved him and always would. He had made me see myself. He had made me a better person, a truer warrior to those around me. I loved him even more for that, and as his body lowered gently into the earth, I knew he had nothing of me to take with him. I had to give something of mine to take with him…

"Stop!" I cried to the men lowering his body.

They stopped and looked at me…

I took off one of my most cherished rings, the fox-head ring that Arthur had given me. I knew he wouldn't mind me giving my ring to Gwydre now; he nodded yes and I pushed the ring onto Gwydre's right forefinger and stepped back. He could go now; go away from me forever, down into the earth at sunset and they placed an oaken lid over his body and began piling on the soil and this was when I had to turn and walk away, because I could not bear anymore, not to see him under the ground and gone.

For him they would hold a wake, but I walked back to my room by the apple orchard, and when I got there, I found the bed Gwydre had died on had been removed, and now there was a Roman-couch in its place with a low table before it, Roman-style. Up on the wall hung my shield and my swords. My armour was mounted on its pole in the corner, topped with my helmet. My horse-gear was stashed under the bed by the window.

Who had done this? Probably Rhodri; and when I went inside I sat down on the couch and stayed there, unable to join the wake. The Clan respected my privacy, left me alone to grieve in peace.

So I drank some of the sweet red wine that was set on the table, choked on it as I tried to swallow it over the lump in my throat. Tears came again and I gave in to them, the rage in me rising at such a wasted life, such wasted potential. I forced the wine down and sighed so hard the sound of my own voice tore through me as if the whole world could hear me. After a time of drinking, I passed out, sucked down into dark dreams.

Gwydre had died on the tenth day of March, I would remember it, and over the next few days, I kept to myself while Arthur had the army camped fully into city-Calleva, and sending units out on patrol. He put forward my new place in the army, without rank, though holding my rank as a prince of Gwynedd, riding as his shield-man. Yet even without an army rank, every bloody one of them knew what I was to Arthur and none of them would dare try to order me around like a common soldier. I was never that. Still I kept to myself and no one bothered me.

I was in grieving and over those days, I grew deeper into another black sorrow, for I went over and over and over again the steps that led to Gwydre dying. And the more I thought about him, the harder and harder his loss became to bear, because this loss of his life was my fault. All my fault and I did not try to deny it. I was in danger. I knew myself well enough to know I was in danger. Danger of taking out my dagger and slicing through my veins and going out into the orchard and bleeding myself to death under the trees. I wanted to do this so violently, I knew I had to do something to stop it, but I did nothing till Arthur came and stopped me himself.

“Are you ripe to take a knife to your own heart?” he said to me one morning, six days after Gwydre’s death. He stood in the doorway, by the orchard door and studied me. “I won’t let this happen, and you know it.”

He knew me so well…

When I looked at him through my tears, I swore, “If I don’t save myself, you are the one who will bury me next to Gwydre.”

I got up and got dressed and Arthur stood watching me. Feeling defiant, defiant towards my own grief, I asked him, “Any work in town? I don’t want to work for the Clan, give me another week, but right now…”

“Try the carpenter’s. I’ve given him extra work repairing some of our broken lances and javelins.”

“Just what I need.”

I threw my cloak over my shoulders and gave Arthur a nod, and went out past him and down the path to the gate, went out into the town, down to the carpenter’s forge and asked the master there for work.

I told him who I was, that I was a spear-man and javelin-thrower, a good one to help with the repairs. He accepted me and put me to work right away. So I devoted myself to my new craft and the master, Bryce, taught me how to make long spears and how to tip them with metal spearheads, and as I was such a good thrower, I took the made spears and javelins out the back of his shop and tested them on the targets set up.

Bryce was impressed with me and I think he grew used to my stoic silence, grew used to the fact that I was even willing to sweep floors and fetch ale from the taberna for the workers to quench their thirsts, all of this even though he knew well enough I was one of the Clan Bear, and a prince…

75: THE TRUTH of SAXON SAVAGERY

ONE morning on my way to work, I saw the south-gate open and five of Medraut’s riders came thundering in fast by me and heading straight for Rhodri’s house. I turned in my tracks and ran back again; something was happening and I had to find out what.

When I got there, and walking up the path, I found the riders at Rhodri’s door with Arthur. They were all talking fast and I pushed my way through them; looked at Arthur.

He told me, “Saxon attack, south and east, beyond Venta, we ride today.” He then dispatched two new riders of our scouts to let Medraut know we were coming to reinforce him, then he sent out Sandedd to summon the trumpeteers to call the war-horns to battle, to summon the Clan and muster the troops. All of our provisions for battle were already stored in

the warehouses in town; all we needed to do now was pack our horses and ride.

I followed Arthur back into the house, all the time he was talking, giving directions and orders, saying to Medraut's riders, "Exactly where was this attack?"

"The crossroads beyond Venta," one of the riders answered, "about two Roman miles out, and east, a village there, Commander, devastated, most of the people were slaughtered, though some are still alive."

"And why did Medraut miss them, this attack?" Arthur began arming himself as he spoke; he glanced at me, and I went through to my own room and began doing the same, on with my battle gear, strapping on my spatha at my right hip, the gladius on my left; on with my helmet, and every time I did this, my mouth dried and my heart thrashed. Nothing felt so powerful as arming for war, to ride into battle. It bit into me, bit at my heart and head so hard I wanted to kill where I stood.

My hands shook, and I thought of Gwydre, who would not ride any more at my side.

"For you," I said under my breath. "This is for you, Gwydre, do you hear me? I dedicate this coming battle to you, my brother," and I took up my shield, javelin case and spear.

Outside I could hear the army amassing, shouting, calling, and when I was fully armed, I went back out into the hall and saw Arthur out on the path, surrounded by men, Cai and Val, their own men ready to ride. Gareth gone out fast ahead of us with his scouts, and I wondered where Arthur would put me in the formations.

He turned to me, saying, "Ride with Llacheu, five riders back, but when we go into charge, you ride at my side."

The remarkable power that he could summon out of the air was on him now; the heat in him, scorching the ground as we moved out to our horses. Every living soul in town gathered on the streets to see us go, wonder in the eyes of some as they watched us mount our horses, a flash from Arthur's bear-shield as the shining rim of it caught the spring sunlight, the rings of his armour flashing fast, the light striking the silver studs on his sword belt, the hilt of his Armorican sword alive and red for blood. And when he was up and on horseback, everyone, every voice in town cried out and the men cheered in a roar that reared our horses.

I felt the pounding of my heart, then in my throat as my hand gripped my spear, and the horses wheeled, and with Arthur in the lead, we thundered out of the south gate in a mass, the Clan Bear riding again to battle. People ran out behind us; the young boys of the town wild with excitement to see us ride, wishing they were us, and when the Red Dragon came up and out, flying in the wind with red wings wild and open, the thrill of it, the sight of it flying over us, no Saxon could stand in our face.

They trembled when they knew it was Arthur coming for them. They cursed his name in their long-houses and discussed how to destroy him, they prayed to their gods to strike him down with thunderbolts from the sky in the broad light of day, and still we rode on, the King of Battles before us, and the Saxons cowering in their lines when they saw his British warhorses amassed against them.

And I rode five horses back with Llacheu on my right, while behind me, a hundred and fifty riders thundered in their lines, Cai in the rear-guard, and Medraut somewhere out and alone. We had gone this way before, when we had rode to defend Venta Belgarum from another Saxon invasion attempt, but now we headed straight for the crossroads and the small British village that lay there.

I glanced over at Llacheu; this was his very first battle with the Clan, and as I looked at him, at his set and determined face, I realised with a smile that I was once again riding with a Silurian at my side.

It made me laugh.

"Are you all right, Llacheu?" I called over to him. "Are you afraid? Afraid of what you have got yourself into? This is real, no more training, no more pretending!"

"Am I all right, am I afraid?" he called back at me. "I'm shitting my breeches! But look, with a Silurian leading us, what chance the enemy? Don't they know about us Silures?"

"All they know is Arthur and what he does to them; you will see it for yourself very soon!"

And we rode on, my new horse tossing his head wild a moment before settling into the movement and taking the canter side by side with Llacheu's horse without baulking. Mischief ran with the others four leagues to the crossroads, past there and on another league to the village where the

Saxons had struck. When we finally reached that place, we found it just as Medraut's scout had said; ruined.

Here Arthur halted the ride and stationed our troops on the roads in and out of the village, while he rode over to me, and bringing his unit captains with him, we rode together into the village square, quietly, as the place was the scene of a massacre; dead lay scattered on the ground, where the huts and houses were burned to charred remains, where a few stunned and broken women wandered through their dead, stopping to stare at us, while others ran to us and begged for help.

Whichever Saxon horde had struck this place, they had struck with a savagery I had never seen before. They must have come in large numbers; they had even slaughtered the children…a sickening sight, and I squeezed my eyes shut a moment, riding on, and opening them again, some kind of sickness rose up in my throat, but I swallowed it and rode on, following Arthur down to the eastern side of the village.

Those who were still alive, all older women, followed us with pleading and cries, weeping of rape and murder.

Here I heard someone call, "Are you Arthur? Are you Lord Arthur of the Britons? Tell me! Tell me sirs!" An old woman, staggering through our horses and looking for Arthur.

He heard her calling for him and stopped, and we dismounted, moving together on foot as the woman came to him. When she found him, she collapsed on her knees and wept and wept. I looked at him now, the expression on his face. He turned and stared back the way we came, then east, then north.

Through it all there was no sign of Medraut or any of his warriors.

He lifted the old woman up, said to her, "Tell me, which way did the Saxons go from here? Can you tell me, grandmother?"

"They went north and east from here."

"When did this happen?"

"Early yesterday morning, just after dawn, they came from nowhere, hundreds of them, brutes! Brutes! Killing everyone…" and she broke again into wild sobs, her pain beyond understanding to any of us.

What I saw of this savagery to our people, I knew we had to hunt down those Saxon animals and destroy them. And I hoped Gareth and his scouts would find them for us. But the old woman pulled on Arthur's hands

and led him towards a house close by. A group of us went with him, and when we came into the house, it was dark inside and smelled of death. The old woman went and stood by a bed in a corner. And when we moved in closer, we saw a shape lying there; a young girl, crumpled up tight into a ball and ashen white, dead.

I joined with Arthur at the girl's bedside. The old woman wept, "They did this…my grand-daughter, those stinking filth…they raped her and cut her insides to ribbons with their knives," and she screamed in anguish and fell on the floor, "…left her lying like this to die in agony, oh, please help us!"

"Granmother," Arthur said. "All we can do now is find these men, and I promise you, I will avenge your grand-daughter's murder. I promise you. I promise you this."

I heard the pain and rage in his voice, controlled, but hurting…

I swallowed again, the girl, curled up tight, bloodied like a mutilated carcass of some animal, bloodied from her waist to her feet and all over the bed, and Arthur standing there, staring down at her; this monstrousness would devour him. The memory of all the murdered women and girls he had seen before, one of them his own wife; this mutilated girl would threaten to crush him, and his hand went to his sword, shaking.

He turned, ordering, "We move now!"

Outside, he picked some younger warriors to ride back to Venta Belgarum to ask for help from the king there, to send aid to the remaining villagers. There were no men left alive in the village here that we could find, and the surviving women would have to be transported to Venta, as there was nothing left for them here and could not stay or else they would die themselves.

Everything around us was death, brutal death, and I paid no attention to the tears on my face as I went back to my horse. This place was a scene of horror, where we witnessed the true extent of Saxon savagery—to rip apart a young girl after raping her? To kill children like killing swine? No, the men who had done this would have to be destroyed and our defence of Britain now became even more vital as we rode out again from the village, heading back north, where we stopped again about a mile up the road. Arthur was off his horse and pacing.

We gathered to him, also off our horses.

He walked up and down, stopped in front of Cai, gave him a look.

Cai answered, “We can catch them on the road, come up behind them, break them apart and destroy them from the rear. But you are going the wrong way, Bear.”

“No, they have a day and a half lead on us,” Arthur answered him, standing in front of him and looking up into his face. Cai stood taller than all of us. “They would have dispersed by now, broken up, they won’t stay in a single band to be hunted down by our horsemen. They will break apart and scatter, where they will regroup later in another place. Right now, they will be in hiding, knowing that I’m coming for them.”

He turned then to all of us, saying, “Death can come swift or it can come slow for them and I want a slow death for those who did such things back there in that village. I want them to die slowly, so I am going to give them time to put in place their little plan, and then I’m going to break their plan apart. If we do it my way, they will die slowly.”

And he moved away and stood looking into the east.

I went over to join him, looked at him. Saw him shake his head and say, “They must think I’m easy to manipulate. How stupid do they think I am? How stupid are they? I know what they are doing! I know who it is and none of them will come out of it alive.”

“So what are we going to do?” I urged him.

“Wait here for Gareth and join with Medraut when we find him. Then you are all going to follow me north.” He turned and called to the men, “We wait for Gareth here!”

We obeyed, stood at ease for a while, though always ready and alert to danger. Though we did not have to wait long. Only when Gareth came, just over one watch later, he brought fifty riders with him, Medraut and his assault unit. Every one of us cheered their arrival, though as soon as Medraut halted at Arthur’s side, Arthur pulled him off his horse and began hammering him for information.

“Where were you? Why did you miss such a large war-host of Saxons? Didn’t you see them coming? Where were your scouts, and why didn’t you cover the roads and crossroads?”

Medraut paled and stared back at his cousin. Answered him, “I went south, south beyond that village, and I did cover the crossroads. But you know yourself we cannot be everywhere at once!”

“Why did you go south? Octha wants to knock you right into the arms of Aelle of the South Saxons. I told you not to track Aelle just yet.”

“Yes Commander,” and Medraut saluted him. “We saw nothing in the south. Not a sign of Aelle, and the war-host who attacked that village came from the north, though by that time my scouts were gone again. I told them to patrol the road north from Venta, not north of the crossroads.”

“So where were you for Gareth to find you so easily?”

“Just south of the village, only a few leagues and watching the road to the coast, I told you, there’s nothing moving now.”

But Arthur gave Medraut a long cold look and left it there. Went for his horse, we troopers did the same, mounted, and followed him in our units north, back towards Calleva. Yet whatever way we went, Arthur knew exactly what he was doing and where he was going; all we needed do was follow, trusting to his greater instinct.

We rode all day, a full two hundred of us, and when we approached Calleva, Arthur halted us one more time. We would need to water the horses, take them feed and rest and feed ourselves before carrying on.

And as the troops began to break and take the horses to water, Arthur came riding over to me, pulled me away from my job and spoke to me from horseback, “When you were attacked in that ambush back at that Saxon settlement, you told me you escaped north from there. What was the ground like there and can you find that same road inward from north of Calleva?”

I studied him a moment, as he spoke to me officer to soldier.

I answered the same, “Commander, the road to the settlement runs almost straight south to north. North of there, the ground was open and wide, thick grass and the forest began to thin in the west. I think I can find the way, though we did not take that road in the end and I came back using the south-road.”

“Are there any others here who know the way?”

“Taredd, when Gwydre was wounded, he carried the boy back through the forest westward. He found a way and he could lead you back. You are going to attack that settlement now?”

“Find Taredd and send him to me, Fox, then come and join me yourself.”

I saluted him and went right away to find Taredd, found him with Gareth’s scouts and we went together back to Arthur, and when the men and

horses were ready again, he put the two of us in the lead back to the Saxon settlement where I had lost so many of my men. Where Gwydre had taken his death-wound, and it felt sweet to return to that place and destroy it…it felt sweet.

We kept on the ride till Taredd led us off the road and we took to a wide and rolling landscape, north of city-Calleva and veering towards the east. Once we came near the clearing that headed into the forest around the settlement, we halted and made camp. It was getting late in the day and it would soon be dark.

We were now out in a line too far from Calleva to stay there, yet still within our own territories, the Tamesis-water to our north. Here Arthur had the troop camp in their units, all ready to ride again at dawn.

Night fell, fires lit, warriors taking provisions and settling into their units, and after I got my horse up in the pickets, I joined with Llacheu and many of the newer recruits. These men still looked to me as their trainer, and here I enforced it into them what they must do the following day. Above all, instant obedience. They would do what they were ordered to do when they were ordered to do it, no hesitation, no doubts…and as I spoke, Llacheu stared at me, his dark eyes wide. I noticed his hands trembling. Battle. Full combat against a savage enemy, who were relentless and desperate. I saw the fear of it in his eyes.

He gave me a nervous laugh and said, “I won’t sleep tonight…”

“No, you won’t.”

I ordered them to do this besides, to try to sleep, while I waited out the night by our dying embers, watching the sky.

76: ARTHUR’s ANGER RELEASED

WHEN everything was still and dark and misted, nearing dawn, with guards patrolling the lands and night-horsemen out and down the roads and through the trees, I lifted my head to the sound of a barking fox…out there, out into the trees…somewhere out there…it barked again, then again further away, that high unearthly cry of a fox that gave me shivers, and I stood up; looked back towards the picket lines.

The horses were quiet. Our horses were good watchdogs for approaching danger, they could sense it and when danger was near, they shied and pulled on their lines, giving us men fair warning. The horses were

quiet now, shadows in the night. But then I saw away to the rear, a line of horsemen coming forward, one after the other, and as they came close, I saw it was Medraut, leading out his unit before dawn, Dafin and Irfan back now as his shield-men. Where he was going I guessed to the settlement and surround it, and as he passed I could feel coming death spreading out from where he rode.

The rustle of them through the grasses as they passed in a long line gave me shivers and my heart began to race. At their rear came a long line of horse-archers; with them too was the other Silurian, Amr, who rode with Medraut, though almost last in line and also carrying arrows.

And there was Arthur, coming out of the darkness, walking over to me with a touch of sunrise away to the east behind him. It looked as if he was walking out of the dawn itself.

He stopped before me and said, “Over there, away to the north-east, there’s a wide grassy road, it cuts through the forest and comes out north of the settlement. We are going now, and we are burning the place to the ground.” He spoke with determination. A sound of voice that made my heart skip even faster.

A soft morning breeze touched us as the sun came higher.

I did not answer.

He said, “Medraut will begin it, then he’s moving his unit into the south, while we come from the north. If the Saxons are there, we ride to destroy them. If they are not there, I want the place cleared out and any women and children driven down the south road and into Aelle’s territory; let him look after them. Get your men ready.”

“They are not my men any more, don’t you remember?”

“They still look to you for leadership, for guidance. They will do what you tell them. You still carry the authority of me with you wherever you go, foster-brother. And they love you.”

He gave me a long searching look, the look he always gave me before we rode into battle

“Fox, ride at my side, shield-man,” he told me as he turned to go and raise the troops. For a moment longer I watched him go, turned away and went to get the recruits up. And just like Arthur said, they obeyed me without question. We moved to our horses, eating breakfast provisions as we went, then filed out in unit order, while I trotted my horse forward to

join with Arthur on his left, and the whole mass of us began a slow and quiet advance across the grass-way that led into the forest bordering west of the settlement.

We rode in silence, no talking. Taking horses through a forest was dangerous; ambush was always possible, as the enemy would use the trees as cover. It was also near impossible to fight on horseback through close growing trees, impossible to form units to charge and manoeuvre.

But now the path ahead was clear, or else Arthur would not have come this way.

The land about had been scouted overnight, and Medraut had already gone through, yet even so, every one of us stayed alert for danger. Aye, I felt alert like a fox, because I had already been ambushed here, and no part of me had gone to sleep on our ride. If anything moved from any direction, I would see it. The Fox sees everything, Arthur always said about me, and I made sure of this. I would see everything.

We rode into the sunrise; we rode for a long time, before the road began to veer north again, and we came out onto the wide-open grasses where I had stopped my men after Gwydre had been wounded. I knew where I was now, and the memory of what had happened here rushed over me, but I kept on my path, now hearing from down the road the sound of a raging fire. We went into a trot, and as we turned south down the road, we saw ahead the Saxon settlement fully ablaze and Medraut's warriors already gone. And there was nothing, no people.

Just a burning settlement with the gates wide open and everything inside the walls on fire, smoke twisting to the sky in thick dark clouds, the loud crack of sound as rafters broke and fell and walls collapsed inward, the crack and hiss of logs as we approached, riding to the gates and watching the Saxon long-houses burn.

We sat for a while, our horses shying through fear of fire. We saw nothing within; only I felt a broken feeling of numbness inside me. For Gwydre had died here, really. And to see this place burn, this place where I had put my sword through the hearts of two women, it was a feeling of numbness, of bitterness, and I cursed this place as I watched it burn.

And Arthur beside me, he must have known what I was feeling for he sat looking at me.

Cai rode over to join us, he said, "What now, Bear?"

“Medraut will send a rider with reports of the south-road, hopefully soon,” Arthur answered. “Stand here for a moment, Cai,” and he pulled his horse out and headed back to the road, watching the way forward as before us the settlement continued to burn, so fierce a fire we could feel the heat of it on our faces. Choking smoke began blowing towards us as the wind changed and so I moved to join Arthur on the road. Here we saw a rider coming up fast. It was Amr, an expert rider.

He pulled in close, saluted and told us, “Down the road about a mile we herded a group of women, Saxon women, Commander, no sign of any men, and no sign of a war-band to protect them.”

“So they leave their women to defend themselves,” Cai said.

“Aye, Medraut is holding them now,” Amr said. “He asks that you join him, as we have searched the settlement and there’s nothing and no others here, any Saxon war-host cannot be here now.”

Arthur turned and signalled to Val to bring the troops forward and we moved out with Amr, following him down the south-road; rode a mile and then turned off the road for a further hundred paces towards the east. All the time we were tracking closer and closer to Saxon territory, though still south of the Tamesis-water and north of the road that led to Londinium, all within easy riding distance of Calleva.

Amr led us across a rolling plain, though keeping close to the forest, where up ahead we saw Medraut and his warriors surrounding a group of women, holding them up at spear-point.

The Snake rode over and joined us, telling Arthur, “Found them hiding in the settlement, we herded them out and down here. Had to get them out quick in case of ambush, but there was nothing and no men anywhere. These bitches were all set to throw themselves at us to fight, but we got them out at spear-point.”

He looked back at the women huddled together, only one of them had a child with her, the others were all older, one an old Saxon drab with long silver-grey hair, free of its braids.

Medraut said, “I thought you would like to interrogate them, Arthur, that’s why I held onto them. They might have information and I need Val to interpret for us.”

“Good work,” Arthur told him, turned and called, “Valarius!”

Val, now second lieutenant, detached from his men and rode over to join us, knowing of course what Arthur wanted him for. And as they moved over to the women, I stationed myself on the outer flank of their circle, still sitting on horseback and watching every direction around me, over the low rolling mounds of ground and away to the east, south and west. Behind us, the remnants of the forest was much more open and easy to spy enemy advancements, sunlight beamed down through the thinning trees and the ground behind me was clear.

Arthur walked over to me, off his horse and telling me, "You can lower your shield now," and he gave me a nod, as if to say it was all right for me to finally relent my guard. So I hooked my shield on my saddle and sat and watched him and Val talk to the Saxon women, who were still huddled together, afraid. Their eyes showed their fear, their white faces and the way they held on to each other. They were just beside me on my right and I kept close to them, though still watching the land.

Medraut said to Arthur, "See that old witch? She's the leader, I think. They all look to her before speaking. She's the one to interrogate."

I looked at the old drab, and she looked at me…me, sitting on my horse and staring at her, a British bastard to her. But Arthur moved closer to the women and they gathered back from him. He stopped before the one woman with a child, a young woman, fair, the most beautiful amongst them. All the others were worn and old. This young one had her arms around a blond-haired boy of about ten years old.

Both the boy and his mother looked terrified.

"No," Arthur said. "This is the one we talk to. Cai! Come over here and take the boy off her and hold him. She cannot have him back till she tells us what we want to know."

The women's terror increased when they saw Cai lumber over to them and snatch the child out of his mother's arms; she screamed and screamed, terror on her, and for a moment, I could not watch her any more. Cai would never hurt a child, but of course, the woman did not know that. She pleaded wildly for her son and held out her arms. And the boy kicked madly in Cai's massive hands, but the woman cried out something to him and he stopped.

Cai put the boy down, though still held onto him and Arthur said, "All right, Val, I want you to ask her where their men are. Ask her who their

leader is and where he is now. I want to know everything, ask her everything, or else she will lose her son."

So began the interrogation.

Val spoke fast in Saxon to the young woman and she listened to him with her eyes wide with fear, with amazement that he could speak their language. And when Val pointed at her son, she froze, turned to look at the drab, who nodded. They believed we would kill the child if they did not speak to us. Val spoke again, this time harder, moving closer to her.

The mother blubbered something back at him, he told us, "She said their leader is the Atheling Raedwald, said he went out to war against us British."

"Is that all?" Arthur urged him. "Ask her who Raedwald has alliances with and why did he go to war."

Again Val gave the order in Saxon and the woman stared back, her beauty marred by her fear. I watched her again; all of the time she took glances at her son, held by Cai, who stood so tall over the boy he could have been a giant born and bred.

The woman answered fast, almost dribbling in her fear; we recognised the name Octha…then the name Aelle…she babbled some more then fell into sobs, collapsing to the ground, sobbing with her head down. The boy cried something out to her, but she did not lift her head again. She sobbed a long wailing cry.

Val said, putting a hand on Arthur's shoulder, "She said that Raedwald is in alliance with Octha, they are the ones who attacked our village. Octha is trying to take power from Aelle of the South Saxons. The Saxons here call Aelle, Bretwalda."

Arthur spoke then to the woman himself, as if she could fathom him. "Octha is using your Raedwald to do his dirty work for him; Octha cares more about destroying Aelle than he does me. Octha thinks that by using Raedwald to provoke me, I will destroy both Raedwald and Aelle for him. And I will, and then I'll destroy Octha himself. It doesn't make any difference to me which Saxon I eliminate, because you are all going to fall."

Behind his speech, Val gave back the words in Saxon.

Still the woman stared only at Arthur.

I watched all of this sitting on my horse, yet at the same time watching the land and looking for movement; nothing.

I heard Arthur say, “One more time, ask her where Raedwald is now and when will he be back.”

Val asked her, then told us after she screamed at him in wild words, “She claims she doesn’t know where he is now, only that he went to war. Doesn’t know when he will be back. She thinks she’s been abandoned by her man. She even cursed him. She just wants her son back and to go free.”

Arthur said, “I want to know where the rest of her people are, why just the five of them left alone in their settlement.”

The talk went on, Val and the woman, till Val said, “She said everyone left after Raedwald ambushed some British warriors here before winter. Us. It was us he ambushed, me and Bedwyr.”

And Val looked up at me. I nodded to him.

“She said the reason she and the others stayed is because they are all Raedwald’s family members and were ordered to stay. I think she’s his wife and the boy is his son.”

“Ask why did the others leave after the ambush battle.”

More fast talk, before Val told us, “She said there was some kind of a rebellion amongst them. Said the other men living here thought Raedwald was wrong to mount an ambush at their settlement gates, as this would only bring us British back down on them for revenge. We would burn them to the ground and kill them all, so they left for Aelle’s territories. The others were right. We would come back for revenge. And we did.”

“And if Medraut had found the place full of people,” Arthur replied, “he would have killed them all.”

“I would,” Medraut added.

All this time he had been quiet, staring at the old Saxon woman.

For some reason, he seemed to hate her more than the others.

Or she hated him.

“So Raedwald doesn’t have solid support for his alliance with Octha,” Arthur said. “The other men rebelled and left with their own women. Raedwald is desperate now. And he will come back for his wife and son, perhaps that old one is his mother, the others must be sisters. Ask her if she knows who Raedwald is fighting with now.”

Val asked this and the woman answered something in a low voice.

“She thinks probably Octha’s men, his war-band,” Val said. “Raedwald is Octha’s pawn all right. None of this might have anything to

do with Aelle at all."

"Get the women something to eat," Arthur finished it. "Give them food and water, get the men down and we can eat too, I'm famished. Cai, you can give her son back now. And Fox, will you please get off your horse and stand down? We are not going anywhere till we've eaten. No battles just yet."

I finally jumped down to the ground, now seeing the boy fling himself into his mother's arms as Cai freed him; mother and son hugged and she cried over him, kissing his blond head.

Our troops then parted for a break, though Arthur sent two units back to the settlement to cover the roads for any sign of the return of this Saxon, Raedwald, the one who had ambushed me and my men and killed; no, I would not think of it any more. Instead, I unpacked my saddlebags and took out some camp food, took a drink from my water-bottle and wandered over to stand with Medraut, himself sour-faced and still menacing the old crone like he was.

Arthur came over to join us with some food, some camp biscuits and he offered some to the same old woman first. For his efforts, she spat at him, and Medraut stepped forward and punched her full in her face and she roared like a stuck animal; blood ran thick from her nose and over her chin. He had broken her nose with one hit and all the other Saxon women screamed and swore and spat at us even more.

Arthur then did something I never imagined he would ever do in his life, surprising me. He jumped at the old woman and locked a hand around her throat and began choking her, as blood from her broken nose dripped over his hand.

He cried at her, "Your bastard son raped and killed our women as if they were naught but pigs scrabbling in mud! Raped a young girl and ripped out her insides with his knife, leaving her to die in agony! Val, I want you to tell her everything I just said."

Val obeyed, and Arthur kept a grip on the old woman's throat, choking her and turning her face blue.

Our warriors had to hold the other women back as this happened, and I stood over Arthur, watching him. I had never before seen him turn like this on a woman, whether young or old. He squeezed her throat, the darkness in his eyes turning to cold blackness.

"I saw a girl ripped up…torn like rags…our children slaughtered and lying dead in the street. I saw a boy like that one over there, his head clubbed in…clubbed in by your son! I'm going to do the same to your son when he comes back. And he will come back and when he does, I will kill him."

As Arthur spoke, Val translated and the drab's eyes stared at him, wild and filled with terror, with horror. "But I will not kill your grandson," Arthur went on. "I wouldn't do that, but you spit your filth at me and I am the one who saw that death, not you, you stinking old—" He stopped.

I saw him swallow his words, though the power in him seemed near to murderous now. All the time Medraut stood at his side, loving every moment, smiling that dark, lusting smile of his.

"Arthur," I said, calling him back. "You can stop now," and I pulled his hand off the woman's throat, though I did not do it for her sake, but his. I did not care if he strangled her to death, but later, he would care. He let go, though the rage was still on him, still staring black and dark into the old woman's horrified and bloodied face.

As I watched him, to me it was a sign that something had changed in him. Something had broken him and it scared me. He never even questioned Medraut for punching the woman in the first place; years ago he would have. He turned and walked away, going back to his unit and his horse, and all the time I knew he was broken inside.

I glanced at Medraut, told him, "Nice punch, pity you didn't run her through with your sword."

"You mean that? No sobbing over some Saxon bitch and her whelp who murdered our children?"

"No, only Arthur is hurting. Can't you see the change in him?"

"I saw it. He's beginning to learn. He's beginning to harden. He has too, or else the pain of all this suffering will destroy him. And if that happens, we are all finished…"

Medraut now went off, following Arthur.

After all this, Arthur decided it was too risky to release the women into Aelle's territory. They would only warn their men of British warriors standing at the burned settlement to destroy Raedwald when he returned. They would warn any Saxon they came across.

So we kept them with us as prisoners, took them back to where their homes had been burned to the ground, and here we set up camp to the north, beyond the grassy plain and above on a low hillside; from here we could see the road bending towards the settlement, but no further than that. And as it was still light and we had time to plan, Arthur set about posting units in strategic attack positions all across the area. He had every intention of staying in position till this Atheling Raedwald returned and could be destroyed, eliminated from the chain of Octha's alliances.

So here we camped in for the night, north of the settlement. Back outside the burned walls, we found some Saxon pigs loose and wandering; we caught and slaughtered them for our supper that night. Not long after, Master Nicomede was escorted into camp from Calleva; his very first tour of duty with the Clan Bear. He came with a wain-load of food, water and medical provisions, which we had parked up in the woods behind our camp.

77: FINISHING RAEDWALD's SAXONS

BEFORE dawn fully broke the following morn, our troops were moving out to stand in positions north. Medraut's unit to the south, and when I joined with Arthur for a grab of breakfast, some of last night's pig, he told me that Medraut would let the enemy come through, then cut off their line of escape. We then went for our horses.

I mounted and hefted my shield and turned back to Arthur's side, saying to him, "Today I am alive. So alive that if the enemy come now, I will fight to the death for you and nothing will stop me, nothing will change me, because today I am not afraid for either of us. We will live, and we will fight."

He answered, "Then let's ride!"

We rode, pulling out in two units. Arthur's own and Medraut following. We took to the road and headed back to the settlement; here Arthur stopped and posted Medraut's unit into the forest on the left of the track-way, also here the track took a slight bend. From this point, the Saxons would not be able to see any hidden horsemen till it was too late for them to retreat.

"Do not attack them till they have come fully around the bend," Arthur told his cousin. "You know what to do."

Now in a band of twenty riders, we followed the road further south and joined with Gareth; we went back to where Medraut had first bailed up the Saxon women. From here it was a vantage point to scout the land for advancing war-hosts. We led the horses in under the trees to conceal them, then spread out across the rise of land that overlooked the south and east. Before us lay an open stretch of ground, not as wide as a plain, but long enough to see clearly anything coming towards us.

As we took to cover under the trees, I could see how any approaching Saxon war-host would be near fully surrounded by our army, as the north was blocked by the Tamesis-water. And when the time came, Arthur would lead us back that way to cover the river.

Eastward though it was more difficult for us, the forest began to thicken east of the burned settlement, yet Arthur even had that side covered. The very place where we were now, gave a direct and open line into the east that Cai's rear-guard could use to hunt down Saxons fleeing that way. Cai's men were out there now, keeping out of sight like the rest of us. I stood by my horse, thinking with satisfied pleasure that those Saxon bastards had ambushed us, so this time, we would ambush them.

Only far more effectively.

All we had to do was wait.

We waited one watch, keeping patient and keeping quiet.

But just as I was growing tired of looking at nothing and straining my eyes for movement, I saw Gareth riding over the track-way and into the trees towards us. He stopped next to Arthur and said, "They are coming. They are coming now. They are still too far out to count, but there are a lot of them and they are running in a tight band. Typical Saxon war-host, I would say."

"Are they on the track or heading for the trees?" Arthur asked him.

"They are right out on the track-way, which is why I saw them so soon. They are either stupid or else they think we have gone in another direction to hunt them. But they are coming right this way. It must be Raedwald."

Arthur gave a smile, a satisfied smile. "Brilliant work, Gareth. Ride back now and warn the troops the Saxons are coming. How long would you say till they reach the settlement?"

“Half a watch, even less if they keep on like they are now. They are not hurrying, but making tracks for home at a steady pace, hoping maybe to reach the settlement before they are attacked. I’m sure they think we are coming up behind them from the south.”

“That’s just what they think,” Arthur told him. “Go now, go and warn the troops. Cai first, then Medraut, up to Val next. And Gareth, join with me when I get in position.”

“Aye, Commander,” and Gareth saluted and turned his horse’s head and moved off through the trees, up the track and was gone into a gallop.

I ran out to the track and stopped, watching as the rest of Gareth’s men came out of hiding and followed him. Most of our younger and less experienced warriors rode with Gareth, learning their craft through scouting and skirmishing in his unit. When Gareth had gone, I ran back to my horse and mounted, pulling out with Arthur and heading back to where he planned to stand the ground.

We rode beyond the settlement, up the road and towards the small rise of land where we had camped the night before. Here in the forest and near Nicomede’s wain, were the Saxon women, still our prisoners and bound into a group and under guard. We could spare three men to act as guards. The trees back there were grown tighter together, and we moved towards them, though standing on the low hillside and waiting.

As soon as Cai could move into position and cover any fleeing Saxons, Medraut would attack the Saxon right flank, Val would attack their left and Arthur and I from the north. Even though the time we waited was short, it seemed to last for an age to me.

“They have come back just when I wanted them to,” Arthur told me, sitting on my right and watching forward. “Perhaps they thought they could get back to home-base and barricade themselves into their settlement, thinking I would follow up the roads from Venta, like Cai wanted me to do.”

“Cai always gets it wrong, poor Cai,” I answered.

I also kept my eyes forward, watching for a signal from Medraut to reinforce his initial attack.

“He just doesn’t stop to think,” Arthur said. “If he would only slow himself down and think about things, he would do better. He’s impetuous that’s all.”

“You love him that way,” I said. But I looked away from the road ahead and stared at Arthur now in a sudden thought. “This battle…”

He looked at me, a slow smile touching his lips. “What about it?”

“How far ahead did you foresee this battle? Go on, you can tell me.”

“I almost ruined it altogether months ago, back last summer. I almost gave in to temptation and burned this place down back then, but I had to leave it to stand till I could come back and catch them here again. I figured this settlement was important to Octha, and I was right. Octha’s been using this place as a forward colony for his men as they move south and west.”

“And when I came back? I almost destroyed your forward thinking, didn’t I? I shouldn’t have come back here that time to get ambushed. You are brilliant, Arthur.”

“Fox, you did what you thought was right back then and I wasn’t here to stop you. Maybe we both almost ruined it that time, and I still have nightmares about it. I could have lost you then.”

“Maybe.”

We both looked forward again, waiting.

It was not yet mid-morning, but nearing it. Showers on the way.

Around us our men waited, horses growing restless. And Arthur moved forward a few paces and turned his horse’s head to the right.

“I hear them!” he called back to us, only now putting on his helmet.

Within a moment of him saying this, we saw one of Medraut’s men come racing around the bend, he pulled up and signalled us to advance.

At last I was going to get my revenge! And every one of them I killed would be for Gwydre. Arthur then called for the troop to move down a step and we lined up in our ranks, spears down, shields up, where again and again, my mouth dried and my heart thrashed and when I saw a breakaway band of Saxons come running into the clearing below, followed by more, then more, we went into a charge.

A downhill charge where we ploughed into the Saxons like reapers through barley, cutting them down as they scattered and broke, their line of escape into the north cut off, as beside me on my left a line of riders went beyond my position, slicing through the enemy who had made it out this far. My duty was to keep close to Arthur, his shield-man, my job to protect him on the battlefield, but the very first thing that happened was him protecting me. It came so fast; a Saxon running at me from my right.

What I saw was Arthur charging by me and slicing his sword across the Saxon's face and taking off his lower jaw, like a knife cutting through pig-meat. I saw it, saw the Saxon stumble, horrified and still alive, turning and throwing his spear at me with his face half hanging off…the spear winged by my back and Arthur turned his horse and came charging back again, and when he passed me, he brought with him a hot rush of power that flooded through me and took me over.

The Saxon was now mine to finish. I laughed to myself, for this Saxon was a left-hander, and so I was free to run my spear through his chest and under his left arm and into his heart as he failed to defend himself on that side, his shield on his right arm. The weakness of all left-handers, myself included. He fell backwards and I pulled my spear and leapt my horse over his body and followed where Arthur had gone, trying to catch him up and stay on his left. His other shield-man, Owain ap Mofran, came over to join me, the first time I had ever fought with Owain side by side.

Together we ran for our Commander, caught him up as he led a frontal charge through those Saxons who had tried to flee northward. Medraut; I sighted his white-snake banner flying just once down the south road, where he had hopefully trapped Raedwald and was holding him for us till we could reach him.

By now, the main body of Saxons believed they could take the track into the north, and they now came running towards us. Here we charged into them, splitting them from their brothers. It was chaos around me. Val came from their left flank, many of them tried to flee into the eastern forests and escape. But Medraut would then bring his unit into action, and we may not see him again for a long time as he and his men turned to hunt those fleeing Saxons down, no matter how far they ran or where they ran. We could not see Cai; he was too far into the south and would be blocking any action from his direction.

For us, we continued our forward push, killing all in our path and heading back towards the settlement itself. Ahead as I caught level with Arthur, I saw him slam his shield into a Saxon's face and club his head with his sword, but the man did not drop. The Saxon staggered back into my path and I finished him with my spear through his back, but it lodged deep in his chest, and I let go of the shaft and pulled my sword, breaking through to Arthur's side and forging ahead of him.

Here a mass of Saxons charged us, rage in their eyes, insane rage as they knew themselves fallen into a trap.

"Retreat!" Arthur called. "Fox! No, retreat!"

He turned his horse and I went with him, almost not moving as the Saxon band came at us in a line with their spears down, we were almost trapped ourselves. Gareth came in with a group of his riders, blocking the enemy for a moment, now joining with us.

We galloped back to the line of riders behind us, turned, regrouped, lowered our spears, and just about to make another charge when Cai arrived into the fray, coming up the road behind our Saxon attackers.

"Charge now!" Arthur called and again we ran in, a thundering charge, thirty riders in front and fifty from behind.

We crushed the enemy between us. Cai went into the mass as I wheeled and charged back again.

In this one moment of turn, I lost Arthur again from view. Curse him! He was gone again. I turned south, saw him, that is, I saw his bear-shield up and shining in the sun and I galloped after him, and came out before the settlement where Val was fighting.

Arthur cried out, "Raedwald!"

He then pushed through the captured Saxons, bailed up by Val, who had orders to find Raedwald and hold him. The battle here was over, and Val had already stripped the prisoners of their weapons, and they were now unarmed, cowering together in a small group.

"Which one of you is the Atheling Raedwald?" Arthur demanded of them. "Show yourself, dog. Saxon dog! I want Raedwald! I will piss on your blood, Saxon! Piss on all Saxon blood!"

The full battle itself was now over, with Cai finishing off those behind us, but Medraut was still chasing the ones who had fled into the east. The dead, as always, scattered the ground like fallen autumn leaves.

Through them I came to Arthur's side and watched as he rode from Saxon to Saxon, grabbing some of them by their hair and saying, "Raedwald, are you him? Show yourself, you stinking dog!" His sword at their throats.

Val interpreted for him, riding with him. There were seven Saxons bailed up and huddled on their knees under our horsemen's spears. I went with Arthur from Saxon to Saxon. He rode quietly, staring at them one at a

time, and they stared back at him, vicious snarls on their faces and ready to fight. An eighteen-year-old British warlord and they hated him with a lust I could feel and breathe on the air.

We both stopped before them, our horsemen gathering in, Cai riding up and crying, “I’ve finished them! None left back that way, and none down the road to the south.”

Arthur nodded hard to him, then said, “Get off your horse. See that blond man there in the centre? Pull him out for me. I think he’s Raedwald. He looks like that boy…the boy. Val, tell him we have his women and his son. Tell him to come and face me. Cai, pull him out from the others.”

“Aye, I will.”

Whenever Cai jumped off his horse, it was like he shook the ground under him, he was so massive, he lumbered through the Saxon group and they tried to fight him, but Cai landed one with a punch to the top of his skull. The man fell at once. And the one we thought was Raedwald tried to stop his brothers from causing more trouble.

He shouted at them and they all fell silent.

The blond one said something to Arthur, and Val told him, “He says to go to hell.”

“Not me, but he will. Tell him I am Arthur of the Britons. Tell him for what he did to my people he will pay with his life, and the lives of these men here now. They are all going to die. He is going to pay for what he did.”

Val told these words in Saxon and the blond man stilled and went quiet, the others around him screaming and starting to fight again.

Cai landed a few more and some of our other warriors joined in till the fighting stopped and Arthur said, “I want them all to see me before they die. Arthur, they know my name. Tell them I am here before them. Tell them I do not care about their alliances with Octha, or what secrets they know about him. They will still all die.”

This Saxon speech went on, and the blond one confessed, we all heard him say Raedwald and he touched his chest. Arthur jumped off his horse and he stood in Raedwald’s face, staring him down.

He said, “Ask him if they were the ones who slaughtered women and children back at our village the other day. Ask, Val.”

As the translation went on, the sky darkened, showers coming over from the north-west as Val gave Arthur the reports of Raedwald's speech.

"He said yes, it was them. Under orders from Octha, though as always, Octha is not here in this rabble. Octha stays at home while his men fight for him."

The cold black power came up in Arthur's eyes again when he looked at Raedwald; he said, "Now ask him if he killed any girls, women, children, ask him. Remind him we have his own family."

But Arthur did not wait for Val; he turned and called, "Owain! Ride up and have his family brought down here now. I'm going to let him say farewell to them before I kill him."

All the time I sat on my horse, a guard, a witness, my inner feelings pressed down as hard steel. I looked around the field, saw the grey skies and looked back; for a moment Raedwald looked up at me, our eyes locked. He babbled something in his own language.

Val said, "They killed everyone as ordered. He said he didn't kill any girls himself. He said if you release him and his family he will give you the ones who did."

"So he's a coward too and will betray his brothers," Arthur answered, hard, unrelenting. "Tell him I hold him responsible for what was done at that village and he will die for it as he is their leader. A leader must bear the burden of what his men do."

From my left I saw movement and turned. Medraut rode out of the eastern forest, bringing most of his men with him. He rode over to us, his sword out and bloodied.

He came up to us and looked at our Saxon captives and said, "I got most of them who fled. I just waited for them to come out the other side of the forest, rode them down and killed them. If any are left, they will be hiding in the trees somewhere…" he glanced over his shoulder at the trees where it was menacing, and the skies darkened again and it started to spit with rain.

"You can take this lot of Saxons here and run them down," Arthur told him, pointing to the enemy under guard, Raedwald's brothers and Raedwald's murderers. "Kill them all. For what they did, this is not a battle, but justice. Get rid of them!"

And the guards let the Saxons go, and at once they began to run, trying to escape by fleeing directly into the cover of the trees, right into the path of Medraut's men as they came through the forest in numbers.

I sat and watched. Sat and watched the Saxons being cut down before they could even make cover. Medraut turned his horse and heeled away fast, chasing down two and killing them as they fled. The rest were cleaned up by his men and all the time Arthur kept his gaze hard on Raedwald's face, as when I looked back at him, he had not moved or given an inch of ground to the Saxon, holding him and waiting for his family to come down from the hillside and say farewell.

Rain began to fall in driving sheets on a wind picking up, though far to the south it was clear and sunny; a strange day this one.

Everything about this place had been strange from the very beginning. When the sounds of those being hunted down had stopped, when their screams stopped, I saw the Saxon women coming down the track-way, led as prisoners, roped together and crying out when they came close enough to see the hideous carnage around them. They sighted Raedwald, and the old crone cried out his name. It was him. Our guards brought the women before him and the first thing that happened was the young mother spat in his face. Cried out at him.

"She said all this is his fault," Val told us. "Raedwald's fault."

The woman stood defiant and staring into her husband's face and he struggled to reach her but was held back by our men.

"Speak peace to your women and your son," Arthur told him. "But I won't kill you in front of them. I'm setting them free, but you will die."

Medraut rode back, and sitting on his horse and watching, I noticed a look in his eyes, a look of concern.

He said, "Arthur, let me kill him. I want to do it. I saw what happened at that village too; let me kill him for you."

Arthur answered, "I am the leader here and I have to do it. You cannot take this one for me. And I promised to avenged that girl's death to her grandmother; maybe he did not kill her himself, but he led the attack, he is responsible." Then he pushed Raedwald before his women and down on his knees. "Say farewell! Tell them you are sorry for what you have done to them, all of them!"

Val told Raedwald what Arthur wanted. The Saxon never even blinked when he said his farewells, he never even looked at his son. The old crone wept and the other women stood firm with each other, holding onto each other, all of us enemies together in the rain.

"Medraut," Arthur looked at him. "Take the women and set them free on the track-way to Aelle's territories. It makes no difference now who they speak to, as they can tell Aelle what will happen to him if he ever does what Raedwald did. Go on, take them now and set them free!"

Medraut moved, rounded up the women, and with a small group of his own men, began walking them away down the south-road and back the way to open ground.

Arthur waited till they were gone out of sight. Only then did he step before Raedwald, who was still on his knees and under spear-point. Arthur drew his gladius, a sword with a point so deadly and sharp it could slip into a man's heart through his ribs almost without sound or resistance. And the gladius Arthur held in his hand now was like that, a vicious weapon with razor edges and a savage tapering point.

My heart was thrashing and a terrible fear gripped me. I was going to watch him, my brother, kill a man in cold-blood.

And I sat on my horse, holding my own sword, saw Val open the Saxon's shirt to bare his chest, bare his heart to the point of the blade.

Raedwald now began to fight, to beg and scream. Val and his men held him still, struggling between them till he stopped and stared at his killer, at Arthur. The point of the sword, when it touched the Saxon's skin, was trembling.

I wanted to stop Arthur from doing this, wanted to do it for him, because he was changing again, for he would make himself do what was alien to his nature. And he did it. I watched the cold suffering look on his face as he thrust the blade through Raedwald's ribs and into his heart, a single double-handed thrust as we had been taught in training. The blade slipped through, slicing flesh and tearing the Saxon's heart within him; a terrible gagging cry came out of his mouth, a shudder and a contortion of his face, blank horror in his eyes.

He grabbed the blade of the gladius as he died, slicing open his hands on the razor edges and blood ran down his wrists. Then he dropped back and Arthur pulled out his sword, stood watching as Raedwald went into

shuddering convulsions on the ground before he stopped and died on a breath. It was over…

78: MEDRAUT DOES a BAD THING

EVERYONE around us stood silent.

Rain fell, a cold breeze and the trees rushed and Arthur stood over his first kill in cold-blood, before lifting his sword and looking at the long streak of blood smeared on the blade.

"For justice," he whispered. "For British justice."

And I looked at the faces of my brothers around me, at Val and Cai, Gareth too, Llacheu and Sandedd and Pedr, the twins, all of them. Cai looked at me, his face was white. But he nodded, this was right.

But Arthur was still standing there; he looked around.

"Clear the ground," he said. "Clear the ground and take what you need. I want the horses taken to water."

"Commander, there's a stream running through the forest just over there," Irfan told him. "We found it when we went through with Medraut. There's a small glade too, perfect for watering."

"You can lead the way, Irfan, but first, clear the field," and when Arthur said this, everyone began to disperse to their duties.

First to find the wounded and our dead, to send for Nicomede to carry any wounded back to Calleva; strip the Saxon bodies of any valuables they may have on them; gold and silver and any good quality weapons, for if these bastards were going to take from us, so we would take from them. We would melt down their gold and silver and add it to our cache of war-booty, and while all this was happening, I sat still, because Arthur had not moved and he was suffering.

I jumped down from my horse and went to him.

"For the women and British justice," I heard him say.

"I want to go and find my spear," I answered, trying to distract him. "It's lodged in a Saxon's back and I have to go and find it. I made it myself in the carpenter's shop, you know. Come with me?"

He nodded and looked around for his horse, the grooms were out and gathering up loose mounts, one of them bringing Arthur his horse, and as

we turned and began wandering through the dead, searching, I moved with him to where I thought I had lost my spear.

He helped me look for it. The rain now began to clear towards the south-east, and the sun came back out. In the light, we found my spear near the edge of the field. I had to stand on the Saxon's back to pull it out, it was stuck in bone and when it came free, I almost fell over backwards to the ground on my back.

Arthur laughed at me and shook his head as together we went to the stream in the forest glade to water our horses. With the sun now beaming through the branches, it seemed almost like summer; we were hot and sweaty, and when we found the right place, Arthur fell down and sat with his back against a tree and I stripped off my gear, threw it down, took off my shirt and waded into the stream. Mid-calf deep, and I splashed all over, washing away the horror and the sweat, dunked my head under and threw it back and sprayed him with water as I shook my head. My hair had grown long, around shoulder length. I refused to cut it.

Would only compromise with a leather thong to tie it back sometimes. And when I turned to leave the water, up the small bank, I stood dripping in front of him, saw him grimace in pain. He was wounded, but I could not see where.

"What's wrong?" I said, going to sit beside him.

All around us, warriors were moving down to the stream with their horses and spreading out for a rest along the bank before we would head back to Calleva. Yet Arthur looked in deep pain.

He said, "It's this shield. It's far too heavy to carry into battle. I thought I could carry it, but I cannot. When I hit that Saxon with it, I think I must have pulled a muscle in my shoulder. It hurts like all hell-fire now. I have to get rid of this shield, leave it up on the wall in Cadwy…"

"Shoulder pain," I said. "I know all about that. A cold compress and good strapping, that's what you need, Bear. A bloody good strapping."

"You sprayed me with water, you know."

"I know. Did it on purpose."

"You are a vain cock with that hair of yours."

"I am. I admit it; you would have to tie me down to cut it."

"I'll grow mine now too. What would Ambrosius say if he could see us with long hair? It would make him weep, no more Roman clean-cut

precision for us."

Suddenly Cai appeared. He said nothing, but grabbed Arthur by his shoulders, causing him to cry out in pain, and hauled him up to his feet and dragged him out onto the field, crying out at the top of his voice, "To the Silurian! Another victory! The Silurian! The Silurian!"

His sword came out and up into the sky, all the time crying, the Silurian! Near two hundred voices answered him the same, and I sat leaning back against the tree and laughed.

The Silurian.

I listened to the roar and the cries of victory, the feeling of adulation for my brother pumping away the horror of what went before. The cries for Arthur went on and I looked up and saw Medraut coming through the trees, he jumped off his horse and I stood up.

Went back to the stream for a drink, my horse still standing there and docile after his hard work, his first battle. After drinking, I fell down on my back on the bank and took some sun on my skin, closed my eyes and tried to ignore the presence of the Snake standing over me. Foolish mistake. He was on me in a strike, down on the ground beside me, lying next to me, and he put a leg in between mine. I did not move. It was best not to move when Medraut was randy.

I stared into his eyes, and he looked into mine.

"Got you," he said. "Got you half naked. Beautiful you are, Fox, such eyes…shh…"

"Get off me," and I threw him aside and sat up. I turned to look behind at the warriors, their cries of victory now falling away, the forest falling silent. No one could see us.

"Oh, don't fear, my Gododdin brother," Medraut told me. "None of them out there care about us. They have Arthur."

He sat near me and stroked my hair, pulled on the strands in his fingers. Something inside me thrilled at his touch and I almost dared myself to let his hands go where he wanted, just so I could break him if he went too far.

He moved even closer and whispered to me, his lips almost against mine, "I have something to tell you, and promise me you won't let Arthur know. He doesn't need to know."

“Then don’t tell me either. Whatever it is, if it’s from you, it can only be deadly.”

“You are right! So bloody right! Those women, the Saxon women he asked me to free…”

“Do not say it!” and I jumped to my feet. I turned away and gathered up my gear. “Don’t say it, Snake. I know what you are going to tell me. Just tell me you’re lying.”

“And why would I tell such a lie!” He came to his feet in a rage. “Why would I lie? It had to be done and Arthur wouldn’t dream of such a thing himself. They were walking free to go back to their own and breed more Saxon sons to kill our women and children. You know that’s true!”

I went for him, was about to hammer him but stopped. For if I did, Arthur would only want to know why I had broken his cousin’s jaw.

I said in Medraut’s face, a fist in his face, “Just never, ever tell him what you did. Don’t ever use it against him. Keep your mouth shut about it, because if I ever hear you say to him that you had those women killed, I will finish you for good. Why did you even have to say it to me?”

“For support,” he said, softer now, crushed under my anger.

Medraut knew what I would do to him; he knew well enough I could kill a man with my bare hands. I had done it to Owen Red-Fist in Lindinis, I would do it to him if he pushed me hard enough.

“Fox, I want your support, sometimes it’s hard to carry these things alone and you are hard as nails. I’m a killer I know, but sometimes I have to confess what I’ve done. I cannot tell it to him, so I tell it to you.”

I heard a horn-call, the call to gather our horses and begin the ride back to Calleva. I went for my horse, and moving by him, I saw a look of deep sorrow and pain in his eyes, the way he watched me. A new look for Medraut.

Like a bloody fool, I relented a moment. “We will talk about this later if you want. Come on, it’s time to go.”

So we left this place where so much pain had come on us, so much pain I wondered if this part of the land would be forever damned. And like the stories of haunted places, no grass would grow or crops sprout to healthy stalks. We left everything behind us, walking away in our units and taking the south-road home, a far quicker route than the one that had led us

here. Home to city-Calleva, where I could try to keep my mind off Medraut and his murderous nature.

Though luck finally came my way and I was spared the pain of Medraut's company for any longer, as I saw Arthur sending him out in a wheel to the north, and whatever I felt about the Snake now, he was always a diligent soldier. His men went with him, peeling off the main road and taking a track northward while the rest of us continued our ride back to Calleva.

It was growing dark by the time we reached town and all the people were out on the roads with lamps and torches held high, lighting our way and crying with joy that we had returned alive, most of us, and bringing back another victory. We were all permanently stamped as heroes now, unprecedented heroes. And Arthur himself, who had within a single year surpassed the rule of Ambrosius Aurelianus.

The Clan Bear had no equal anywhere in all of Britain. We rode into this feeling and dispersed into the crowds who loved all of us as their sons…

79: MEDRAUT's CONFESSION

AFTER our battle against Readwald, we rested in city-Calleva while Arthur's wounded shoulder healed. And in his rested state, he knew it was time to plan his first full campaign against the Saxons—against the South Saxons of Aelle of the Saxon Weald.

His first real campaign as Supreme Commander, due to begin on the day of his nineteen years birth-day. But before his plans were even out of his head, there was another battle to fight, this time for me. With the Snake.

When he returned from his patrol, he asked me to meet him in the large house he and his men billeted in. I sensed he needed something, to explain more to me about the thing he had told me about—the Saxon women that he had killed; his need to relieve himself so much he wanted to layer even more of his guilt onto me. I could not refuse him, or else, he would layer this guilt on Arthur.

I went to his billet that night, and he greeted me at the main door, saying, "We have to be up at dawn tomorrow; Arthur sent me orders to say we are riding out on patrol, and later tonight, there is a meeting here in this

room, so you need to be ready for everything he throws at us; himself and Saxons, everything."

"I'm ready," I answered. "And will you offer me supper? I haven't had any yet. I dropped everything, just for you."

He laughed, and took me into a private sitting area where a large long-table was set up, with plates and mugs ready, lamps burned in their bowls around the room. Medraut's billet was smaller than mine, and he had it set out as best he could, himself being waited on hand and foot by his lads. With him were Dafin and Irfan, Owain and Coll, Gavin and Amr.

And Amr, the third of our small Silurian band, lived off Medraut's every word, his every glance. I noticed this as we went into the room and sat at the table, Amr watching Medraut for instruction.

"Ale," the Snake said.

Amr went off and poured two mugs, came back and set them before us. "You can go now, leave us alone, no interruptions, boy," and Medraut gave Amr a long stare.

When we were alone, we sat for a moment regarding each other, because I knew what was going on in his head, the murder he had committed against the Saxon women Arthur had freed back at the settlement. The wife and son of the Atheling Raedwald.

I took a sip of ale as Medraut said, "All right, Fox, I can tell by your look, those women—you cannot pretend to me you find it heart-breaking to have them killed. But I did not kill the boy; not even I could do such a wretched thing."

Even with the deadliness behind his green eyes, his angel features, his long blond hair, and how like Arthur, both of them flushed with power, Medraut did not move me. I watched him as I drank my ale.

I told him, "Arthur must never know about this. Never. And don't forget, you disobeyed his orders and look what happens to men when they do, slaughtered wholesale. You have to make some kind of amends. What did you do with the boy?"

Medraut looked down at the table, where I saw regret, even pain show on his face.

"I had him blindfolded as…as the women were killed.

I rode with him out of earshot so he couldn't hear what was happening to his mother. I held him before me and he was still, did not

struggle or move or cry out, and for a fleeting moment. I wanted to keep him, send him home to Luguvalos and raise him as Gododdin…I saw myself in him…a son I will never have. That fair child, a beauty he was. I couldn't harm him, so when it was all over, I rode with him out towards the roads to Aelle's territories and set him free, told him to run and run and never look back. I confess to you Fox, it broke my heart to see him go. So there, now you know."

He swallowed a mouthful of ale, swallowing his worry. I saw more pain in him now than ever before, as he seemed near to breaking open and crying.

He seemed to need help, so I put out a hand and squeezed his wrist. "Medraut," I told him, "do not go down dark roads; stay in the light. It would break Arthur's heart to see you go down into darkness, you know that." But then I said, "If you were holding the boy while his mother was being killed…then it wasn't you who killed her. Who killed her, them, all of them? Did you kill any of them, or did you order your men to do it? Tell me it all. I won't tell…you know I would never let anything like this get into Arthur's head."

Sweet goddess, I saw a tear fall down his cheek and he wept to me, "I had them killed, ordered them killed because it had to be done! I won't let them Saxon bitches breed in our land! The female cunt is far more deadly than any invading army; but the boy? One day he might come against us when he's grown, and I'll recognise him and he might recognise me, and he will kill me, if I do not kill him first. I wish I had kept him. A son I'll never have. I'm never going to have sons, am I? Put my precious prick in a woman's hole? The thought of it makes me sick to my guts."

And he downed his ale, then sat back in his chair and stared up at the ceiling.

"Who killed the women?" I asked again, for I wanted to know which one of his men could kill in cold-blood that way.

He said, still staring up at the ceiling, "If I tell you, will you keep quiet about it? I don't want my beautiful cousin to know about it, do I? He's got such a deep heart for trust."

"I know. Tell me."

"But this will make us closer in conspiracy, Fox, do you want to get so close to me? Maybe take a taste of something dark and wicked? I'm

delicious, you know." He said all this still gazing up above him.

I said, "I already know the killer in your unit. What would Arthur do if he found out it was Amr? I know it was that foul little bastard, Amr."

When I said this, Medraut lost his temper and thumped the table, crying at me, "How do you know? Your animal sense is stronger than any real fox. You sense things like a wolf-dog on a trail. How do you do it?"

"It's what I'm good at, it's the genius of knowing, it's the thing that makes me special, and Arthur knows it, I know it."

"Then let's drink to it!" and he made me a toast, and together we stayed and drank for a while, waiting for Arthur to arrive with the rest of the men for our meeting.

And as we drank, I listened to Medraut telling me stories of his extraordinary father, Lot; a man of passions so wild and fierce, I wondered how any soul could survive him, and his brother, Uthyr, the father of Arthur…Arthur, of Silurian nobility, mixed with the incestuous blood of the Gododdin. Northern and southern power mixed to make a genius on legs, so Medraut said, and finished by saying to me, "And you hear his name on the wind, don't you? It sighs in your mind…Arthur…"

And so saying, the man himself burst through the door, and Medraut and I jumped to our feet to greet him with salutes.

He pushed us down, back into our seats, and then leaning on the tabletop, he said to us, "I have it all worked out," then sat down himself, and smiled.

"You see, Fox," Medraut told me. "A genius on legs, with a cock longer and heavier than my leg."

He winked at me then, and I frowned at him.

I said to Arthur, "Have what all worked out?"

"The next link in the chain of Saxon power," he answered, unconcerned. "I will break it, that link. Where are those men of mine? I want to get on with this, then I can go out and chase down that girl who works in the horse-stables outside of town."

Medraut snarled at this, was about to make some answering remark, when the rest of the inner Clan began arriving, closing his mouth on his words, and for that, I was grateful. In came all of our unit captains. Cai, Valarius, Gareth, Dafin and Irfan, Llacheu, Owain and Coll. And when they

were seated around us with glasses of wine in their hands, Arthur stood up and finished the night with a quick round of plans and orders:

"First, we must go back to intensive training. Gareth, your unit keeps falling into disarray when we make a cavalry charge. I cannot have that, ever! Back to training, intensive dawn till dusk training."

Gareth hung his head in shame, and nodded agreement.

It was true. His unit tended to scatter instead of riding firm and in battle order. It meant there were internal problems with his men—his cousin, Brendon Ro, being one of them and they needed training more than the rest of us. I came next…

"Fox, I want you and Llacheu back out on the field with the horses."

I nodded agreement.

"And when the training's done," Arthur went on, "when I say it's done…" He paused and everyone sat watching him. Here he told them what I already knew, "I'm launching a full attack-campaign against the South Saxons. I'm not waiting for them to come to us, but we are riding out in full force to destroy them wholesale. The first full-scale campaign out from base camp, and we are not letting go till I have them done."

Medraut laughed and Cai went wild.

He shouted, "Yes! At last!" Jumped to his feet and raised his arms to the ceiling, his huge arms, and began flexing his mighty muscles. "Break and kill Saxons! I would kill them with bare hands and crush them in my arms!" he roared and looked at Arthur, crying, "I would hold you in my heart and you are the reason I live! Arthur, you are my king!"

Cai had everyone laughing, toasting him with our wine.

We all came to our feet.

Lifted our glasses, and Medraut said, "To Arthur. King Arthur!"

And he laughed like he had just found a way to make our lives even more difficult.

Yet Arthur bowed to us; answered, "Are you ready to fight like you have never done before? I am going to take you into the Saxon Weald. Aelle of the South Saxons is going to see me face to face with my men backing me. Your names will last an age. And if you want me as your king, you have to make me. All of you, you have to make me."

"I will make you a king," Medraut told him.

Now Arthur and Medraut stood looking only at each other, staring at each other hard.

"I will make you a king," Medraut repeated.

And the way he said this stilled us all, because he spoke with power and control and we believed him. The force that was Medraut was the dark side of Arthur. Again the Snake made my blood run cold.

Even Cai was stilled to stone.

And Arthur put his wine glass down on the table, untouched; he said, "If it rains hard tomorrow, rest a day. If the sun shines, start training. You can go now, brothers, and thank you for your work, your support. Without you, I would be nothing."

So we finished our wine and moved out, going back to our billets, Arthur following us out into the rain on the hunt for his stable-girl.

Yet as I went to leave, Medraut stopped me at the door and held me back. "Stay here with me," he said. "I feel alone here and Arthur gets more than enough of you. What about me?"

"I think you'll survive without me. Go and find yourself a lover in town."

"None there. I've looked. No sodomites around here, except you," and he gave me a savage smile, right in my face. Then he ran a hand into my hair and I flinched away. Though he said, "You are a genius in your own right, Fox. You see into men's hearts, and yours is a talent that I confess scares me. You know me too well and you can read my mind."

"You are easy to read. And Amr is waiting for you now, your little killer. I only hope he killed those Saxon women quickly and didn't make a bloody mess of it. That boy isn't like you. He cannot kill like you can."

"How would you know? I would have done it myself, only how could I without Arthur knowing about it? Sometimes I have to get others to do it for me. Amr, for your information, is a bloody madman. He licks the blood of his victims off his hands, his fingers. I've never done that."

His green eyes went probing into mine, looking to see how disgusted I was.

I turned away from him, but he attempted one last time to get me to stay, put his hand again into my hair and said, "Sleep with me."

I knocked his hand away and stepped out into the rain, falling now in sheets of drizzling mists that would ease by morning. Medraut looked

sinister and beautiful in the low misty light.

"Go on now," he said, "go back to your precious Silurian."

Again, yet again, Medraut made me boil; either he boiled me or he froze me with his words, his actions. I went home alone…

The next day it was bright and sunny, which meant we had to start training, we would train in the old Roman amphitheatre outside the walls of the town, and there was masses to do before the start of the South Saxon campaign.

Day after day where I became a tyrant to those I had in my training unit. Most of the younger and newer lads were mine, as always, and I battered them to get them to ride in battle ordered formation, mock attacks and charges, where they must ride and use the spear against the enemy without unhorsing themselves. Others had to ride and fire arrows into targets and control their horses with their thighs and knees.

We ran our horses into mock Saxon shield-walls and as all of this was happening, Arthur disappeared. That is, he left Calleva with Medraut, Sandedd and Cai, and rode south with a small detachment to Venta Belgarum. There to woo Atticos Verica, King of the Atrebates, into supporting our army both from city-Calleva and Venta in our coming campaign.

We would need huge supplies for both men and horses, and these supplies would come not just from those two major towns, but the farmsteads around, and others reaching down to the south coast. And while Arthur was away, and still doing my daily training work, I hatched a plan that had been going around in my head for a while. I went down to see the master-carpenter, who knew me well from my time working with him after Gwydre died, and here I put forward my plan. I wanted a shield made, a new, stronger, yet lighter shield, rimmed in seamless steel, made to easily turn a Saxon blade.

It would be housed in a kid-leather reinforced cover that the women would stitch with a Red Dragon emblem, while on the shield itself I would have painted a new design, not an upright striking bear, but a goddess. It would not matter which goddess, as all goddesses were one to Arthur, as he loved them all. And if she would only love him as much as I did, she would protect him from all attacks, from sword and spear and axe. She would

deflect the stroke that would kill him, the Goddess Brittannia. I planned to give it to him for his nineteenth birth-day, coming soon…

So Arthur then came home from Venta on the tenth day of Aprilis, and everything was ready to go. But for now, and outside in the main street as I went down to the carpenter's to pick up the new shield, I saw ten large wains parked in the square and being loaded with provisions. Master Nicomede too was coming with us, our troop medicus.

Also, on the twelfth of Aprilis, Arthur's nineteenth year birth-day, he would have completed one full cycle as Supreme Commander. He had achieved more in one year than any other commander before him.

This I knew to be true, as did every man in town, from the boys in the blacksmiths and armourers, to the highest ranking chieftains, from the priests of the Christ, to the hidden Druids in the wild-lands, they all talked about the Silurian as a scything power unknown before him.

Arthur's glory had come to a spear-point now, where every distressed voice in Britain cried out for him, and wherever he rode, he would bring us, his heroes with him. He had taken me to the mountaintop just as he said he would. All over town our boys were packing their gear, getting their weapons sharpened, oiling their swords, their daggers, checking their spears and shields and helmets, working with their horses to pack them for a long ride into unknown territories.

The air was heavy, and it felt different from that exalted day the year before when we rode out of Deva to head north to fight the Picts, and Arthur to take the Pendragonship off his father; it seemed an age of time had gone by since then, since that day he became what he was destined to be. Yet through the tense mood, I could feel the excitement in the air rising all over town, and everywhere we went as soldiers, we were hailed by the people; they came out of their shops and houses to shake our hands and give us good-luck trinkets, and little packages of cakes and buns made by the women for us to take with us.

I picked up two bags of cakes and five trinkets of gold, one of them a Jesus-god sign, and the others all amulets of safety and healing, one of them a tiny cock with two little legs. Amazing, made to ward off evil, the woman who gave it to me said. I had to wear it, which I did, and so there I was, swaggering around town with an erect prick around my neck.

This treatment went on all day and nearing the end, I went back down to the leather-worker and bartered with him for a new pair of boots. Here he showed me some of his other work, tunics, soft kid shirts, buskins, and something I needed as well as riding boots, a new pair of leather breeches.

Only the ones he showed me were short breeches, mid-calf length and skin-tight. I gave him all of the gold I had collected during the day. Perfect, new breeches and boots, and I was set for a while at least…

I went home to our billet, and found Arthur sitting at the kitchen table, stuffing his face, as if tomorrow, he would never see food again.

I sat down with him and said, "Can you spare me a moment?"

"I'm eating, and I can't stop now. What's wrong?"

"Just something."

He never stopped eating as he gave me a long look, but did not question me further.

I said, "Come with me, you can finish this later. That mochyn-broth can wait to be eaten."

"Fox!"

I refused to back down.

"All right," he complained, and got up and followed me down the corridor and into my room, saying again, "What's wrong?"

I told him, "Nothing is wrong."

The lamp on the wall was alight as I had lit it before going out and I turned and looked at him now. "I just want to give you something," I told him. "I was going to give it to you on your birth-day, but changed my mind. I want it private, between you and me."

He stood still watching my face.

I stepped closer to him, saying, "On this campaign, you will do what you do best; to take the hearts and souls of men and make them love you. You are going to lead us to war, and all I can think of is that far grey battlefield, where you will fall and die. You are all I want, and I want you safe. So I got you this."

I pulled the skins back from my bed, where under them I had hidden the shield from view. Arthur moved closer to see, and watched me silent and stilled as I took the shield out of its soft leather cover; the steel rim shone in the lamplight, the central boss shone, as around the white goddess

Britannia painted there seemed to shimmer and dance, her arm held up as if to ward off a sword blow.

For a moment, he did not say anything.

Though he took the shield off me and looked at it long and deep, his dark eyes taking in every shape and rivet and line, every movement of the goddess, her white dress floating around her in a mist, her long white hair, and he looked at me, stunned maybe, as all the time he could not say anything…

Then, "This is the best thing anyone has ever given me, so beautiful…and light, because you know I cannot carry the Roman bear any more. It ripped my shoulder to pieces."

"She will protect you in battle," I told him. "I know she will. Women love you and so does the Goddess." I turned to face him again. But all he did was stand and look at me, and I saw it in his eyes, his love for me.

"Life is what you will have," he said. "I will make sure of it, because when I fight for Britain, it is you I'm fighting for. Don't you know this? Because when Uthyr used to pound me with his fists, I used to think of the mountains of Gwynedd and the home of Bedwyr the Fox and you kept me alive and living…I will keep you alive, forever."

He did not move then to go back to his eating; what more did he want? So I stood and watched him pulling the cover over the shield and pulling the ties and picking it up and we went back to the kitchen to finish the broth together…

80: TAKING on the OLD GUARD

NEXT morn we left city-Calleva without fuss or crowds of well-wishers to line the streets and farewell us as we rode out of the gates, subdued, so different from the year before when we rode out of city-Deva as the Clan Bear, everything open and exuberant.

This time, we went quietly, almost secretively, filing out in long dark lines of riders in the early dawn.

Once all out, we formed up in our riding columns, where first, we were to head south to Venta Belgarum. Arthur was already out on the road, sitting on horseback and watching his men ride by, inspecting the troops and ready to order any last moment changes that needed to be made. On this

trip he was riding Big Brown, though behind us came a small squadron of spare horses, one of which was his beloved Epona.

Everything we needed was coming with us, loaded into the battle-wains, though each warrior had packed his horse to campaign level, equipped with all we needed to sustain ourselves if we should ever become separated from our units. Everyone carried a bag of feed for their horses slung across their rumps behind our saddles, as forage, feed and water for the horses was paramount on campaign.

And as I rode out of the gate with the main mass of riders, I saw Medraut come galloping in last, spurring on past me and joining next to Arthur on the roadside. Together the two cousins, Supreme Commander and lieutenant-general, watched the troops forming up, and Arthur called the command to walk on. We moved off in perfect order, down the south road with the sun rising over the eastern horizon.

We rode on steady and sure.

And as we did, Arthur came riding down our outside right, calling out, "Prince Bedwyr! Join me!"

I pulled out and trotted my horse down to join him, where we made our way to the head of the column, and here settled into a walk. I noticed he was carrying his new goddess shield on his back.

I said, "Commander," and saluted him.

He glanced to the rear. Behind us the column came riding on, and if we kept to our pace, we would reach Venta maybe in time for a late breakfast break. Arthur told me, "After you went to bed last night, I stayed up talking to Val."

"Aye?"

He looked behind him again, at his army. Everything in order.

He turned back to me, explaining, "I proposed to him that I start building a full ala quingenaria; it's what I want to do next."

I nodded agreement. "Now you are on the road to a true comitatus; it's what you have already, but it's growing all the time."

"Right, and all the men are to have red cloaks to mark them as mine; the officers will have purple trim on theirs. Rhodri's older sister is going to organise this for me." He gave me an even deeper look now, telling me, "Also, all members of my army are to make renewed pledges every year like the old Roman way, on my birth-day. Val proposed my birth-day as the

day of instigation of the Clan Bear. They will all swear oaths of allegiance on that day, every year to me."

He spoke with strength, determination, authority.

"And when I get back to Cadwy, I'm having these changes set in law. Then I'll start recruiting for the quingenaria."

He was impressing me to my new boots now and I stared at him.

"Foster-brother," he said, "you thought you could get away with no army rank. But you forget about me. Last night we decided you would be the first to be raised to our new horse-guard, like the old Praetorian Guard or Alexander's Companions. You will be my personal bodyguard, the very inner workings of the Clan. Shield-bearer in the Horse-guard to Arthur of the Britons. Dafin and Irfan will come too, which means I'll have to take them off Medraut."

"Horse-guard?" I questioned.

"We're horsemen, aren't we? Cavalry. Equites."

He was impressing me even more now. I was to be the first to be raised to this new position, personal and unassailable companion knight to Arthur himself, his first. It was official. I was his closest, his shield-bearer on horseback, in battle and in times of peace.

We rode on in silence for a while, for I was too impressed to say anything much, though I did say, "Anything else I should know, Commander?"

He laughed, shook his head. "Only we're spending a night in Venta to rest the horses before we go fully into South Saxon territory. And Atticos has some men for me to meet, so we'll be there for supper. You'll like Atticos' place, Fox, he has a smart villa with a walled courtyard, very high-class. And Atticos is sweet on me."

"At least someone is," I answered, and we rode on for the rest of the morning, watching the sunrise over this fair land of ours…

So we made Venta Belgarum in time for that late breakfast like I thought, and coming towards the town, we saw King Atticos had a welcoming committee all out on the roads to raise hell-fire as we approached; we arrived surrounded by cheering people, as we were already heroes in Venta for saving the city that time from the Jutish and Saxon invasion, but this time, we were more like sweethearts than heroes, the way Atticos poured out his love all over us. The Clan Bear!

We thrilled him to his balls, so much he was tugging on his beard, his eyes alight and burning, organising us like the king he was. And sweet on Arthur he was; pulled him off his horse as we arrived outside his villa and hugged him like a father to a son returned, and Atticos, being shorter than Arthur, tried hard to puff himself up and show us the splendours of his city. With the troop now camping outside the city walls, we inner Clan were led to his walled garden and shown where we would sleep tonight. Atticos' villa was more luxurious than Rhodri's house in Calleva, for it seemed we had stepped right into the inner sanctums of old Roman life. Me and Arthur though, we had one huge room to ourselves, three beds, one of which was big enough to sleep four.

The interiors were set with fine Roman trappings, everything from golden candle-holders to padded couches, to red Egyptus glassware and tapestries on the walls and rugs on the floor, bolsters on our beds and tall bronze pots to piss in, a warm and cosy bath-house near our room out the back, and in the inner courtyard, where it was walled off from the outer houses and the city itself, Atticos had a long heavy table set up and braziers to burn, as he intended to feast us well.

"Get some food into you boys before you go out to fight, you need feeding up!" he cried. Even though it was still only morning, his table was already set for supper, and laid with platters and bowls and mugs and glasses. This night, we were to sit on high-backed padded chairs, smell his aromatic plants growing in pots around the walls, be waited on hand and foot by his household servants and maids, and he showed us all of this even before we had had a bite of breakfast.

Then after he had fed us a meal the size of a horse, we had to go back to work, using the rest of the day to get the horses out to graze before their battle; in ordered numbers watched over by the horse-masters. Then organise food and billets for the warriors, take care of equipment and find armourers and leather-workers to fix anything broken, last chance before we left for the Saxons.

And by the time all of this was done, it was time for supper.

I came in from seeing to my horse, saw Arthur standing at the gate in the villa, looking magnificent, I thought, in his clothes for the party this evening: a deep blue shirt with leather-trimmed cuffs and a long open neckline, lined with leather and embossed with knot-work designs, another

gift from some admirer in Venta; his metal-plated Gael jacket over the top and dark breeches, and he seemed flushed like a smouldering fire; but he pounced on me.

"Where have you been? Not in the taberna again?"

I stopped and stared at him, said, "Jupiter's hairy balls, you are bloody good-looking, Arthur, I swear you are. Is it your age?"

"Did you go to the taberna?"

"Bulls bollocks, I have! Why, did Irfan say I did?"

"He did."

"He's lying. I've been working all day." I patted his face. "You do look good."

Other members of the inner Clan now began arriving, all dressed in their best and pushing by me through the gate and saluting Arthur as they came in. I went to go and get scrubbed, feeling bloody good about life. Feeling good even about going into South Saxon territory and cracking their skulls. And after having a bath, a shave, I dressed in my new skin-tight leather breeches, on with my new boots, a good shirt and belt, managed to pull a comb through my hair, and went outside into the private courtyard where everyone was gathered under burning brands and lamps, the braziers all alight, the Clan gathered around the long-table, King Atticos introducing us all to his family, his wife, Lady Arwen, his three daughters, the Ladies Meghan, Rhiain, and Enid, and his two sons, the princes Gauwaine and Gaheris, both of whom were going to use this night to join our army. To make pledges.

Though Atticos caught me just after he made his introductions and whispered, "Is it true? It is Arthur's birth-day tomorrow? I heard it from Valarius. Should I make this occasion for his birth-day?" He seemed unsure of what to do. "How old is he?"

"Nineteen years. Though I wouldn't make a great thing of it, Lord Atticos, Arthur is not one for such things. A toast is enough."

"I will do that."

Our host seated us all around the table, and servants came out of the main living area with platters of food and amphora of wine poured into our glasses. I sat on Arthur's left, Medraut on his right, then Cai and Val, Gareth and Brendon, the twins, all of Arthur's new class of horse-guard, which I was one, and their leader of course, all those who were shield-men, Owain,

Coll, Llacheu, Sandedd, and Rhufon, Rhys, and Huw from the boys I had taken from Viroconium. More would come in time, and as I looked around the table, I remembered Gwydre. Gwydre should be with us now. He should have been at my side and one of us.

Silently to myself I drank to him and lost some of my good feeling. But damn his bones, when Atticos hushed us, and going against what I told him, he made some awful long-winded speech to Arthur for his birth-day, so long and praiseworthy that Arthur had to stop him.

"Lord Atticos," he said, coming to his feet, "I'm nineteen tomorrow, I will be thirty by the time you are finished," and he sat back down again and everyone laughed.

Atticos flushed and laughed as well, sat back down and we were allowed then to eat what he fed us in massive quantities, to drink in equal amounts. The daughters of the household came serving us, and doing the usual flirting, sex-talking, especially with Arthur and Medraut.

And by the time the show of feasting was almost over, Atticos stood up again and moved to the gate in the villa wall. His guards stood outside, and when he pulled the gate open, a large group of men came marching in and began lining themselves up like bloody Roman infantry in the courtyard between our table and the far wall.

What was going on?

Atticos then called the feast to a hush, cleared his throat as I watched these old men; noticed that all of them were old. That is, all of them at least in their mid to late fifties, and all of them dressed in old Roman armour, though perfectly maintained. "Arthur, Supreme Commander of Armies in Britannia," Atticos addressed his top guest, "may I present to you the last thirty remaining and living members of Lord Ambrosius' old guard, who retired here after his death."

At once Arthur was on his feet and facing these new men; he even went over to them and walked their front line as they were lined up in ranks of ten.

"I know these men," he told Atticos. "I know their faces," he stopped before one, their leader, studied him. "Felix Quintus, I remember you. You left my army last year on my march north. I let you go."

"You did."

Then I recognised the man myself, for he had been one of Ambrosius' old prefects, had been one of the old dissenters that Arthur threw out during our march north to Luguvalos for the Red Dragon banner. "They have come back to join you," Atticos told him, moving to stand at Arthur's side. "They want to go with you on your campaign. I invited them to come tonight and offer you their service."

Everything had fallen into a deep hush, the servants gone and the women of the house standing still and quiet in the shadows.

All of the Clan watched, Medraut turning to me and frowning, "Who needs these old bastards?"

I shook my head at him, "Do not make trouble now."

Though when Atticos said about these men joining his army, Arthur replied, "Offer me their service?" He turned to Felix Quintus. "Is this what you came for? After walking out on me last year?"

"We decided, all of us, that this would be the very last of our fighting lives," the man replied.

"But are you up to fighting?"

"A boy of nineteen does not question our fighting ability; I have seen more battles than you—"

"But have you led them? And to victory? And do not call me a boy. You know who I am, as it was Ambrosius himself who chose me. Do you offer me your service honestly? I mean, did you come here to swear oaths to me and join my army again? What do you want, Felix?"

"We came to take revenge on the Saxons for their slaughter of our people at Anderida under our Lord Ambrosius."

For a moment Arthur did not respond.

And Felix seemed immovable, tall and thin, with dark hair in waves, pulled back and clipped behind his neck, face weathered and deeply lined and scarred. He stepped back from Arthur, and seemed reluctant to say anything more, though his men shifted in their ranks. Old men with spears and Roman type scutum shields.

"I understand," Arthur told him. "That was a massive slaughter at Anderida, and Lord Ambrosius never recovered from it. Then I will take you on as auxiliaries; you will take your orders from me if you want to join my campaign."

Seemed Felix did not like this.

He snarled in Arthur's face and turned to move, came back and said, "We are the last of our kind, you should respect us, show respect for your elders and betters. Nineteen! And you want to call me an auxiliary?" He laughed.

One of his companions moved out, put a hand on Felix's shoulder as he said to Arthur, "Lad, Felix just cannot take orders from boys. But we mean nothing more than to spend the last of our days avenging Britain for Anderida. Ambrosius our lord would want this."

"Sir," Arthur said, "Ambrosius left me to carry on his work, I understand, and you are not the only ones who want revenge for Anderida. So I thank you for your offer, and for the sacrifice it will be for you, but I cannot take men who will not obey my orders in battle, who come only for their own personal vengeance. I know what I'm doing and how I'm going to do it, and men like you, who will not swear oaths to me, can only compromise my command. To come with me, you must swear oaths and acknowledge me as your Supreme Commander, for I am the heir of Ambrosius Aurelianus."

They all moved and bristled at Arthur's words, and a great murmur went through them. I looked around at the Clan; they were all without emotion, hard-faced and keeping still. The old men stood their ground and Felix tried staring Arthur down.

"Obey me for the memory of Ambrosius," Arthur told him. "He chose me, ratified in law. How many times do I have to say this to the men of this land? How many times, Felix, do I have to stand up for who I am and what I have done? I have not lost a battle yet, and neither will I. Do it for Ambrosius, for he loved me as a son. Join me, take orders from me, or stay behind and waste."

Felix and his men, trained like Romans, stood themselves without movement, they stood before this nineteen-year-old, and Arthur stood up to them without a flinch or a backwards glance.

Indomitable, these old men would have to learn this of the Silurian if they wanted to ride with him to war. And poor Atticos, his face drained white as he stood twisting his hands together. King of the Atrebates, he should have made a show of support, but he did not seem capable of standing between warring warriors; the old guard, the Clan Bear, Felix Quintus, prefect, and he looked at us all as Arthur stood in his face.

Felix said, “To war as an auxiliary unit is not acceptable to me. To any of us.”

“Then you will have to join my army. Speak the sacramentum…”

“I am seven and fifty years old, and you must give me respect.”

Arthur forced on him, “I never said I do not respect you. It is you who do not respect me.”

Felix’s first companion spoke in his ear, “He fought the Picts in the far north and won; he fought at the Keels and won. He has decimated Octha Hengist-son’s war-host, not once but three times! Felix, let us swear to Arthur.”

“All right!” Felix yelled. “Curse it, swearing to a, a…” he stopped. “We will swear.”

So now in Roman precision, they all to a man put their hands over their hearts and said in unison: “We swear to follow our Supreme Commander to whatever wars he leads us, to whatever wars we may be called, will neither desert his standard, nor do anything else contrary to his military law, and never to shrink from duty or death on behalf of the Roman state. Hail, Arthur, Supreme Commander, we pledge you our lives.”

They spoke the old Roman oath, and Arthur made the correct reply in Latin, “Idem in me.”

Through it all, Felix looked dead ahead, without a sign he truly meant what he swore. I would have to watch that one, I knew it.

The old guard saluted and Arthur told them to dismiss their ranks.

Atticos swooned in relief; the women came out of the shadows, and Arthur asked our new members to stay for drinks, though the courtyard was so crowded now we could not move.

Besides, it was nearing midnight and we had a war to start in the morning, and I heard Felix say he was taking his men home, no all-night drinking sessions for him and his men, as they were too good for us.

Here I saw the look Arthur gave him.

As if Felix was suggesting we were all nothing more than young cocks who wanted to sit up all night, drinking and whoring before our battles even started. So making their farewells, the old guard began filing out of the courtyard, through the gate, two men abreast, Felix standing to watch his men go before he turned to Arthur and saluted to him.

"I'm leaving tomorrow, at dawn," Arthur told him. "You will muster here, and ride next behind my rear-guard; Cai Long-man over there is their captain."

Felix gave a nod, saluted again and went out marching.

I sighed, threw the last of my wine down my throat, went over to join with Arthur.

Val joined us too, saying, "Watch out for him, Arthur. Felix is a renegade. Ambrosius had masses of trouble with him when he fought with us before you came along. I had no idea he was living here in Venta."

Arthur then looked at me, he said, "Keep an eye on him for me; nothing passes the Fox, right?"

"I'll watch him."

He said, "I'll have to get the men out of here now and to their billets, for as I said, we leave at dawn in the morning…but did you see the way Felix looked when I asked him to stay for a drink?"

"Bloody right I did. I think it would please him if he saw you fall."

So Arthur dismissed the Clan before we could become what Felix thought of us, drunks and layabouts. Layabouts, I thought, who were just about to invade Saxon territory…

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HERE ENDS BOOK ONE
TO FOLLOW, BOOK TWO: ARTHUR'S ARMY

NOTES:
Abonae: Bristol
Aquae Sulis/Caer Baddan: Bath
Arbus-water: the River Humber
Armorica: Brittany, France
Brocaum: Brougham
Cant Moel/Caer Cadwy: Cadbury Castle, Somerset
Calleva Atrebatum: Silchester

Camboglanna: camp on Hadrain's Wall
Deva: Chester
Dinas Emrys:
ancient hill-fort in North Wales, near Beddgelert
Eburacum: York
Glevum: Gloucester
Hibernia: Ireland
Letocetum: Lichfield
Lindinis: Illchester, south of Cadbury Castle, Somerset
Londinium: London
Luguvalos: Carlisle
Mamucium: Manchester
Tamesis: The River Thames
Venta Silurum: Caerwent, south east Wales
Venta Belgarum: Winchester
Viroconium: Wroxter
Calleva Atrebatum- Silchester
Venta Belgarum- Winchester
Tamesis-water – River Thames
Ala quingenaria – cavalry troop of 500 riders
Comitatus – a private army

Brawd - brother
Mab - son
Mochyn - pig
Cawl - soup
Dal Riada – Irish tribe
Ulaid – Irish tribe