

A World Long Past

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A Short story from 'The Tanarian Chronicles'

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The Tanarian Chronicles – UK Edition

(Recommended reading age 16+)

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“Our legends obscure the truth, whilst over time the truth becomes a Legend”

Lady Morgan glided gracefully into the room in the way that a lady of high breeding should. She halted her advance briefly to adjust the angle of a potted plant that sat near the window; she moved it out of the shadow and into the early rising sun. The flowers were only ever placed out on display when the wives of the nobles arrived at the fortress. Even as a visitor, she moved about the halls almost as if she

owned the place, but then she should, for she was the Queen of Gore. Lady Morgan knew how to run a household better than most and was more than talented at playing the games of court or any other that she need to turn her hand too. The flowers had been placed out for her late last night by the attentive house servants, after her sudden arrival with her husband Urien. The warrior king from the kingdom of Gore had smirked at the little detail as they had arrived rapidly at the request of her brother. He had called out for their aid in his hour of need. Now on this warm Thursday morning the rising sun slowly began to feed the plants leaves with its nourishing rays, like Mother Nature herself.

Myridin had been kept waiting in the reception room next to her bedchamber - the queen's guest quarters were extensive. He sipped a refreshing apple juice that had been set out for him as he waited, cocking his head to one side to avoid the goatee tufts on his chin from dipping into his drink.

He showed his respect for her by standing up and even gave a slight bow to overdo his display of courtesy at her entrance. She was captivating to the eye, tall, strawberry-blonde and graceful. He had wondered to himself as he climbed the stone steps to the guest's quarters why she had requested this meeting with him at such an early hour? The queen had a separate room to the king and it would not do well for rumours in the castle should he be seen attending her room so early.

'It is early. Does your husband know of our meeting?' Myridin asked, his tone was edged with concern as he placed his goblet of apple juice down on a nearby table.

'Don't be absurd. Of course not and I can promise you he will not hear of your presence here,' she scorned.

'Good, then I think we are well met,' he had met with Artus's sister on many formal occasions in the past and had always anticipated her attendance at court, for her striking appearance always brightened the room. Equally her quick tongue had brightened the cheeks of many a boastful knight, flushing them red with anger or embarrassment with her comments if they challenged the word of her husband the king of Gore. On the face of it she played the part of the saintly wife well, but Myridin had the eyes of a hawk and had spotted the little cracks in her armour as he had admired her over the years from afar. The problem that Myridin had observed in her a long time ago was that she was actually what he would term as 'overly desirable' and worst of all, she knew it. She could, and would, capitalise on even the smallest gesture of beguilement from the opposite sex. The others at court were hardly overwhelmed with her husband's stature, for all knights at court were kings of their own provinces. Their regular meetings were comprised of the thirteen kings and the Warlord that sat at the head of their table. Morgan was not permitted on the men's table and would sit back on the second ring that surrounded the Lords, ever ready to raise her voice and intervene at any loose comment. She carried out her role well, never showing any disloyalty to her king when on official business, but obviously enjoying the attentions that the second ring of seats brought with it, being seated in plain view of most of the kings. The Lords had a large entourage of advisors that would join her at the second table and she soaked up their attention like a wet sponge. Myridin had noticed her willingness to openly flirt when she liked what she saw and the king of Gore ignored this trait in her too easily. Myridin had watched many people like a hawk from the sidelines of the back bench and considered that Urien was either overly confident or uncaring of their relationship. After lady Morgan, Queen of Gore had discovered that he held his own unique set of powers, when he had been called forward to give a prediction to the Court she had managed to feign a little more interest in his conversations. He had noticed with a smirk that she would

sit closer on each meeting until they were eventually side by side where she parked herself as a regular seat. She would listen to his occasional ravings happily adding her own comments in order to get close to him and gain a better understanding of the powers he commanded. It had not taken him long to work out that another motive drove her other than an interest in listening to his endless recounts of history and poems. He was well known in the lands for his powers of insight often called upon to make prophecies to the kings. She had deliberately drawn counsel from him several times and it was not by chance that he enjoyed her passing company. He had put off his urges to delve into her mind for as long as he could bear it, considering it bad manners to enter her mind with his magic as their familiarity grew, yet in the end he eventually attempted this. It was simply what he did. It had been after a night of feasting; on a grand and memorable occasion when his temptations were finally met. His latest prediction had been correct and a victory had followed at the river Glein. The alliance of kings had met the advances of the Saxon invader for the first time, forcing them back to run away and lick their wounds. The kingdoms of the north had united and faced the enemy for the first time as one united force, rather than the fragmented War-bands that they had faced before. Any attempt against their kingdom would now be seen as an attack on all and the creeping advances of the invader would at last be met with equal force. The great celebration had been for Artur, Morgan's brother who had been appointed with a new position, one that held great honour after that battle. He had been sent to represent the kingdoms of his father who preferred to wallow in the glory of his son's victories back in the safety of his hall. After a reckless display of courage from Artur as he battled to hold their line across the river bank he had been awarded with a new title of honour. Artur had spotted the weakness in their defences before any man and thrown himself into the gap. He had managed to rally the men of the mixed force that were beginning to falter as they questioned their own courage to stand toe to toe with the Saxon. Artur had fought like a madman, forcing the enemy to retreat back across the shallow crossing rather than meet with his blade; this act of courage alone had recovered the army from the brink of defeat. The rivers had run red that day with the blood of their victory. After the battle Urien's had put Artur forward to the other twelve kings with a proposal. Several of the leaders had noticed Artur had a natural talent for war, it was as if he had instinctively known where to be at the right time and the command of men had come naturally to him. Urien followed the old ways like his father before him, the way of the Roman. He had proposed him as their "Dux Bellorum," or Battle Master, to those who had forgotten the old Roman words. It was evident that they needed a single leader to unify the fragmented men of the vastly different armies of their alliance, someone whose mind was not clouded by the troubles of running a kingdom. The unique position of War Lord would ensure that he only commanded the men in battle, on leaving the field all kings would retain their normal authority. Artur had inspired the men that he had fought with regardless of which king's standard or mark that they held on their shields. Myridin had arrived late after the battle with the rearguard and had quickly seconded the motion, for Artur had shown a level head and good taste in friends – namely him. Myridin also realised that with his increasing influence came raised levels of jealousy and animosity from the others on the outer table who jostled for the various kings' ears or an opportunity to move up a table. On their return from battle they were all soon drunk in the halls of Camelot with celebration. Myridin had sat with Morgan and laughed at her story as she retold it, she even pursed her lips to recount the way her stories character had moved to kiss the hog by mistake. The punch line was yet to be delivered, but the tears of laughter poured from his eyes – he

had already guessed the hog was named the same as his wife but her story had been told well. After spotting her heightened emotions with the story telling he had attempted to probe her mind to see if she harboured the same growing feelings that he had started to nurture for her. For it would be a dangerous game to play seducing the queen of Gore; if his suspicions of her neglect were correct and her husband was paying her no heed a brave move may deliver a great reward into his lap. He would need to consider the consequences of discovery for some time before committing to his move, so better to see if he stood a reasonable chance first. Was she worth dying for? Every man who had laid eyes upon her had considered the same thoughts, for she was a rose planted in this otherwise barren land. Back then he had needed to better understand the nature of the woman that he now stood facing..... back then things had been different, more different than he could ever remember. He had reached out into her mind, yet with disbelief he had failed to penetrate a dark veil that rejected his probing interests. This had at first shocked him to his core, for although she had never displayed the slightest understanding of magic, she must have known a considerable amount to protect herself from his prying eyes. Only those skilled in the art could resist the powers of his mind and often not even then. This had worried him for he had never even noticed this about her until now. He had recoiled from his attempt, yet she had appeared none the wiser from his efforts. She looked at him noticing that his incessant laughter had suddenly stopped. He quickly hid his surprise and distracted her attention,

‘That’s a nice necklace that you wear Morgan, how unusual - what is it? A large tooth or claw perhaps? She blushed at first as she felt his eyes staring at her chest. Seconds later she capitalised on the weaknesses of the man and threw back her shoulders most innocently revealing more.

‘I’m not really sure, you know I can’t even remember where I got it from, would you like a closer look?’ Morgan shuffled closer squeezing her cleavage together as her arms came forwards to cup the necklace. Myridin interpreted her reaction as intentional.

‘Most interesting, I like what I see ... I would love to get my hands on one like that. Should you come by another or preferably a set; please let me know for I would pay a high price... for such a necklace.’ His innuendo was intentional, with her being masked from his magic he would need to test the water the old fashioned way, with hook and bait. He had never been one for the subtleties or patience of fishing, he preferred to just smack a fish with a large stick then pluck it from the lake. She had given him a long sideways smile and then walked off to mingle; she deliberately fanned herself from the heat of the room as she departed.

He had not sat idle on the fact that he had failed to read her mind nor had he ignored the fact that she appeared not to have realised. Morgan had however asked about his magic several times and also asked for several demonstrations, which he had of course refused. Magic was not there to be used on a whim or abused; it was far too scarce to waste. He had noted that it had been after his refusal that she had began to return his minor flirtations. Myridin had used his time and magic wisely, he needed to understand more of Artur’s sister and why his magic had failed to read her mind. With each passing night his urge to see her grew until he could bear it no longer. Eventually he possessed one of the numerous ravens that stalked about the rafters of Urien’s stronghold, controlling the bird using its eyes and ears as his spy. It had taken less than a week of his surveillance to discover the nature of the woman he now stalked. With news of fresh raids from the Saxon and Angles that bordered Urien’s lands the King of Gore rode out with the better part of his army through his kingdom

to the south east to deal with the threat. King Urien had rapidly departed his stronghold to send the invader a clear message; even tolerating these smaller raids would demonstrate a sign of weakness. He was no weakling to be abused and would prove it. He had sworn an oath, the same oath that Artur, his brothers and the twelve other kings had sworn on that fateful day of their alliance. Morgan's husband was a dedicated man, bound by his duty and Christian faith. He had not hesitated to rush off to defend his people and lands with this news. It was a shame that his dedication did not extend to tending to the needs of his wife for that very same night she was warming their bed with her lover. Myridin had watched on through the raven's eyes, he could not help but watch the exquisite beauty undress before him, a scene which he had imagined several times, but until this moment never enjoyed. Accolon her lover was a foreigner, dark haired and handsome he had arrived from Gaul a rich and important man. He was known to be sharp of wit and mind and had quickly secured trading rights with the king shortly after his arrival. He was a young and athletic man, enjoying all physical pursuits; a very different man from his father who had handed on the family business before passing away. Accolon had confessed on several occasions to any who would listen that he would rather be a soldier, than live the life of a merchant – instead having to battle every single day over the prices of wheat and grain. He had made himself quite at home in the King's household and had entertained more than just the queen with his exaggerated stories. Even the men in the court had taken to enjoying his recounted adventures; he seemed to have a way about him that entertained and a story on hand for every occasion. Accolon had remained in Gore to over watch his trade agreements and now instead of business his hands tenderly eased out the queen's breasts from her dress. Myridin watched on as the couple eagerly stripped each other for their encounter. They did not paw wildly at each other like new lovers, oh no - they did so with a familiarity that told him this was not the first time the young man had tasted this pie. The bird's eyesight far exceeded his own and he viewed every little detail and bead of sweat with a mixture of horror and interest. She slid on top of him and writhed wildly with the pleasures that he eagerly gave. He had somehow maintained his control of the bird through his waves of mounting anger, he felt the spirit of the bird fight to take control and just fly away as his focus waned. He regained control, forcing himself to watch on instead of leaving them to enjoy their sordid little encounter. He later discovered to his horror that the birds hearing was also as exceptional as its sight. After the repetitive sounds of their rutting they finally collapsed down on top of each other, they lay relaxed in the king's bed discussing their treasonous whispers.

'Did you enjoy fucking me Accolon?' she asked with a polite but teasing tone.

'Of course I did, couldn't you tell? You know I only stay in this freezing piss-pot of the north in the vain hope of warming my body against yours each night.' His hand lovingly caressed her inner thigh as he talked.

'You make a fine body-warmer in this freezing land.'

'Good,' she rewarded his attentiveness with a kiss, but pulled away from him as she felt his passion grow. She needed to make sure he was prepared to do the things she required of him before he was rewarded again. It was like giving treats to a hungry dog. The problem with the Gaul she knew all too well was that once his passions had been aroused he only had a one track mind. Ordinarily when left alone by her husband this trait suited her just fine, however they had little opportunity to talk lately and there was much to discuss. With the King returning frequently from his campaigns she needed a more permanent arrangement between them. Accolon was not giving up so easily from his warm position and his hand slipped upwards

between her thighs to a place where his distraction would be the most effective. His hands were so very smooth and gentle, unlike the king's and she lost track of her original intentions for a moment enjoying the sensations that rippled through her body. She pursed her lips and groaned with pleasure, enjoying his caresses for just a moment longer. For a second she wanted nothing other than to just surrender herself to his will.

'Oh Accolon my love, where would we be if I left you to your own devices,' She sighed upset with herself for what she needed to do and grasped his wandering hands firmly, halting their work. She decided to come straight out with the things that had been playing over and over in her mind for the past few weeks.

'Urien must die if I am to be yours, you understand this don't you? You realise that if he ever found out about us he would kill us both. I can't stand all this sneaking about, we are bound to slip up or be spotted sooner or later, so it is better to strike first I say.' She had tried to rationalise her decisions many times in her mind and desperately sought the support from him that she craved. She went to kiss him but suddenly thought better of it, with her ideas revealed, she needed his agreement tonight. She had hinted at this intention several times before – but then with a slightly more light hearted notion. Saying words such as,

'Oh, I could kill that man sometimes,' she had eased the words out jokingly at first, but had studied his reaction. She had been paving the way for the delivery of the main event; for treason and murder were no idle topics of discussion. The king's court had many ears to overhear such whispers, just as many that might hear their passion. Accolon had never batted an eyelid against such idle suggestions from her. After enduring the King constantly over the passed week she had been remind of how trapped she had felt in his presence. She was like a caged dove and since her very first encounter with Accolon she had been bewitched by his touch. With Accolon came options, doors could now be opened that were once shut to her. She had not had any choice in the choosing of her husband,

'Alliances are made with either the cunt or the sword,' her father the king had said when he delivered the news of her marriage.

'I dare not face Urien with the sword; he is far too wily for that, so I must use the other.' The truth was instead clear to her and her father had been almost correct – the world was dominated by cunts with swords – the type of men that forced their young daughters into marriages for their own gain.

She looked up into Accolon's eyes besieging him for a positive response. She desperately needed to hear the returning words from his mouth.

How had things become so bad between her and Urien over the years? She pondered this as she waited for his reply. She had borne the king their sons and yet now she could not even watch the man eat without being filled with anger and disgust. She consoled herself that she had no choice with their arranged marriage; their bond had further secured the alliance of the nations. This involuntary act brought nothing but a wave of resentment from her against her husband and her father. Aeden had given her away like bait to a hawk at the first opportunity; he had been an uncompromising man and a harsh king. He had even sent his sons as infants into the camps of his enemy as hostages to secure his borders. She had only been thirteen when they had been wed and had been forced by duty to endure Urien's mundane toil upon her for years; his love making was as rapid and forceful as his raiding army. She had endured him for too long and his last son had nearly killed her at child birth – all this whilst her father made his amends with god, content with life in his halls and praised himself for his holiness'. Accolon still pondered her words in silence.

‘Just say that you will deal with him, I don’t care how, be it blade, arrow or poison I care not which. Please say that you will do this and I will be forever yours.’

Even from this great distance Myridin could detect the traces of magic flooding out from her, she was totally exposed with her nakedness with her dress and necklace neatly placed to her side. Was she blessed with the art he wondered, was she one of his own kind? He wondered at how he could have missed this before?

She rolled on top of Accolon, dominating his thoughts; her eyes implored him for the answer she sought as she pleaded with him. He eventually nodded back his agreement,

‘Yes my love, I will do it – just you leave Urien to me. However, I will not send a king to the afterlife with poison; no – I’m sorry my love, I’m afraid that I’m not as cowardly as that. From all of the things you have told me about and from treating you so badly I must teach him a lesson. A king of the sword, must die by the sword.’ He stated.

‘No, my love that is his way – he will kill you,’ she had to make him see sense; this was not what she had planned.

‘Don’t worry, I believe I have a better idea altogether than just crossing swords with him, one that will satisfy all of our needs. I am not crazy – I still want to be here to hold you tight after he is gone. The sword my love, the power lies in your brother’s sword. They say whoever wields it cannot be beaten – I would normally pay no heed to such idle chatter. But whilst in your husband’s court I did witness the gathering of kings and an act that convinced me of its power. In my presence King Ryderrch did withdraw your brother’s blade by its ivory handle, declaring its power to a Saxon prisoner that had been brought forwards and flung before him in chains. I saw it with my own eyes Morgan, the blade did spout bright fire like a dragon’s breath; I had to avert my eyes to avoid blindness. They then set the Saxon free to return to his people in order to tell them about what they faced, cutting his chains with a single blow from the sword. It was that Druids idea I think – why they endure that damned pagan’s advice I’ll never know? We shall put that magic to the test, for in my dealings across this land I have seen and befriended several Smiths with incredible skill in metalwork, I have several others already placed close to your brother, close enough to take note of the sword's design and get me close enough to make a switch of blades when required. If I were to swap blades with your brother, I am sure I could beat Urien.’ Morgan considered his words for a moment,

‘A noble idea, defeating my husband with a blade – it would be no easy feat, I have felt his body above me. He is as hard as iron, but in all of the wrong places. I must point out to you though, there is a flaw to your plan, you may forge an identical sword – yet it will contain no magic ...if the blade is as powerful as you suggest and spouts fire when drawn, then how will you bring the power of fire to your duplicated blade? I know my brother rarely wears the sword but if it is handled the lack of fire would be a dead give away don’t you think?’ He began to laugh.

‘You’re good, but I believe I have this covered. King Ryderrch himself, made the mistake of telling all in the court that the fire will only come to the blade when a man of Noble and right birth takes the blade. I can vouch for its magic for when he handed the sword back to Artur’s squire by its hilt the flames were immediately extinguished. I am of Noble birth, not from this country – yet noble all the same.’ Myridin chuckled to himself insanely as he watched on, delirious with the discovery of the lovers and their intent, yet amused at their belief in the simple enchantments of illusion he had placed upon the blade. The fire was not real, just a nice touch to inspire the weak minded. Accolon continued,

‘And with the size of the weapon, it cannot be worn at Court – it takes a man to carry it. It only comes out to take heads in battle, most of the year it sits in the armoury gathering dust or being polished by his squire – I would be surprised if its absence was even noticed, yet we will take no chances.’ He went to molest her further; all of this talk about magic swords had riled his blood. Her firm grip halted the advance of his fingers yet the moistness on his fingertips betrayed her excitement.

‘Are you sure of this, did you see this with your own eyes?’ she enquired knowing that he had a talent for over embellishing stories.

‘Yes Morgan, I was there and saw it with my own eyes as the king spoke to the Saxon prisoner, he was a chieftain of his clan, I can even remember his name clear as day “Dyrnwyn,” that was it, yes - that was his name. He said Dyrnwyn, today we will spare your life. Go back to your people and tell them of the fate that waits them – for today will be the last that a Saxon walks from my court alive. Tell your people to repent their sins and bow to the one true god, then we may talk peace or forever leave our shores.’ Accolon had almost sounded excited as he recalled his day in court.

Morgan lay still soaking up his words, before responding,

‘Even if you can switch the sword, how do you intend to finish him alone? He travels everywhere with his bodyguard, they will cut you down before you have fair chance,’ she asked.

‘Your husband often brags to me of how he slips his bodyguard and hunts alone. If planned correctly I believe that I can switch the blades ensuring my victory and slay him on his own. I will do this for us, I just have to.’

‘Perfect.’ It was certainly risky in many ways, but she was prepared to take risks as much as he was. Even better he showed both bravery and initiative, his plan also clearly showed that he had been plotting his intended move for some time, this certainly was no last minute plot that he had conjured up on the spot to please her.

‘It doesn’t sound like you have put much thought into it,’ she taunted him mockingly, then giggled excitedly with her troubles relieved.

‘I think that you will also need to beware of the Druid, Myridin has eyes in the back of his head and watches the events of court like a hawk, she suggested.

‘I thought you said his eyes were now fixed on you? Make sure they are; but just his eyes mind,’ he stressed.

‘Don’t you worry, I see nothing in that goat-bearded little hermit, I have him wrapped around my little finger, right where I want him. Now where were we?’

She released his hands giving them free range to wander once again.

‘You may proceed,’ she instructed, more like an order than a request when he did not instantly continue where he had left off.

The raven flew rapidly away, out through the small gap in the rafters as her groans of pleasure followed it into the night. The slight clatter of its wings only disturbed the embrace of the two lovers below for but a fleeting second before they were lost in one the depths of each other.

Myridin had acted swiftly like the hawk that his friends had nicknamed him after. The Merlin threatened to strike with its talons extended. He was outraged at the actions of the couple and had at first sought their blood under the guise of the threat that they presented to the alliance. In his mind he quickly realised that his true loathing was at Morgan’s unavailability to his tentative advances and the words she had said against him. His mind twisted in thought, she was now far beyond the possibility of his reach and with two men already locked in contest for her; there was little chance of what he sought from her. He considered his anguish; how far would

she really go if pushed to distract him of their plans? Perhaps he could hold the threat of revealing their plot against her to scratch his itch; she could be forced to give herself to him then. He considered every angle, for after seeing her naked he wanted her all the more. His desires were driving him mad, blinding him from common sense. He began to slip into the pit of despair as he realised she would never be his. She was driving his mind into a place which he had visited a long time before – last time he had remained insane for over a year. He felt as if dark talons were clawing upwards at his soul seeking to drag him down to a place where he did not wish to return. He reached out in desperation with his mind to the one he had secretly confided in; for once he had the sense to know when he needed help. He had found her several years ago as he had searched for the dissipating traces of magic; since the destruction of the order of Druids the energy that he needed was becoming scarcer to find. With his spirit eyes he had investigated an area that drew his attention; searching with his projected spirit he had at last found another of his kind. There were once several more like him, men and women who extended their life and abilities through their magic. Each had a different theory on how they had came about to hold such vast power. One claimed they were all descendants of Wotan and Freya, another even claimed they were spawned from the devil? But in reality, none truly knew their origin and Myridin had long since given up caring about such things. It had not been long after the occupation that they were branded as a blemish of society. This land had changed rapidly for them and several others like Myridin had gone into hiding. After the Romans had came and hunted down his fellows, eventually hounding the last of their ranks to the island of Mona and bringing slaughter to their number. He had thought himself the last of his kind. His order had called for him to join them on the island and make a stand against the invader. They were preparing to fight General Suetonius at his own game using the force of death against the living. Their move was too extreme for Myridin, one part of him had wanted to join powers with them and release the curse of a revenant to destroy Suetonius and his people, but unusually his more just side had prevailed. He had dismissed the use of such a dark art at the time and refused to join them. Pure evil was not the best tool to use against a more diluted form of evil. He had lived and they had all perished, it had been the correct decision at the time, one of his few.

With the turmoil of his mounting confusion and anger racing through his mind he called out for her aid. He called out for the one he had found and Niviane answered his call, she always did for they had become the best of friends over the years. She had however always insisted on their anonymity refusing to meet with him in physical form. She had stated that too much magic in one place could draw the wrong kind of attention, yet he knew it was just an excuse but did not push the matter. It was not unexpected that the few of their kind left should wish to remain anonymous; these were dark times and most normal folk feared the kind of powers that they possessed. Instead of meeting with him in person she only talked to him through the power of his dream trances. He understood what it was like to be different and hunted and he genuinely wanted to protect her, their remote friendship had blossomed over the years. They had not become overly familiar - yet each vigorously supporting the other when needed. As always, he could not help his inquisitive nature and as their friendship had developed so had his intrigue; eventually he had traced the paths of her magic back to the nearby abbey of Avalon. She had been close by all this time. Several times he had stood on the distant hill watching the water flood rapidly about the many rivers that intersected the small island on which the abbey had been constructed, yet the numerous apple trees of its grounds had obstructed his view.

However, not once did he find the courage to break his total trust and seek her out in person. The Abbey was no normal house of worship; men were discouraged from its approaches by an armed guard that watched over the island. The stories told that the men were made up from the souls of those who had travelled to the abbey with a mind to steal the women away. Nine maidens inhabited the island, they were said to be the descendants of Brychan the enchanted ... that they might be, yet Myridin knew that only one commanded the power of magic.

‘I need your advice Niviane; I have uncovered a plot of deceit.’ She could feel the turmoil within him as he battled with his emotions, she instantly realised that there was more to his troubles than just deceit. In the past she had found him inefficient at dealing with stress and especially matters of personal betrayal, he had often raised concerns of this kind to her when questioning the action of the various members of the king’s court. This time it was different; this time she could feel his pain and knew her council was needed for matters of his own involvement. She had wished for a moment that she could be at his side to calm him. He had confided in her on several occasions over the years, he had told her more than most, everything from the madness that had taken him to slay his sister’s children to his desires for his friend’s sister. He had shamefully confessed his feelings weeks before to her, how he yearned for the queen of Gore. He tried to rationalise Morgan’s betrayal in his own head and to Niviane. Urien was a great tactician and ferocious warrior, the likes of which the Britons had found easy to flock to the king’s banner and protection. He had been one of the early adopters of Christianity amongst the remaining kings and had been instrumental in forging new alliances with the other kingdoms. The cross was now the symbol of their alliance, even if Myridin would never follow it. The seat of Urien’s power was handed down to him as his blood right, left behind from the traces of the Roman Empire. Years before, his father had stood proudly as custodian on the windy walls; he had guarded the banner of SPQR facing north, long after all others had left although his duty was not to be abandoned – to him it was simply what real men did and now what was left of his territory had been passed down to his son Urien. The people trusted him but his wild gallivanting career left no room for such matters as a personal life. He was a hard uncompromising man even by his own opinion, Morgan was only there to make babies for him and see to the administration of his halls in his absence. He needed sons to fight with him against the relentless flow of the invader and carry on his legacy should he fall in battle. They were not sitting idle in the north as the invaders flocked to their shores; there was no time to enjoy such frivolities as poetry and love. Morgan on the other hand plainly did not follow his principles. Myridin had always thought of her as a tender creature on the outside; that was until that fateful night of the raven when he discovered that she was a very different creature on the inside. He began to trace back through their many meetings and conversations in court, seeking for any hidden intention as he had blindly played along like a fool to her attentions.

‘Calm yourself Myridin,’ Niviane called out to him, ‘I can feel your anxieties from here.’ He realised that his breathing had become erratic and his brow was wet with perspiration as he struggled to restore a sense of calmness to his body.

‘I have seen enough,’ she confessed, she had never found his mind so distraught before and she knew something needed to be done.

‘I will join with you in your mind - together we can bring peace to your chaos.’ He knew from the things they had talked about in the past that she held a considerable talent for healing, but her offer made him feel more like a patient than a friend. Her offer to join with him in a single consciousness brought with it several issues, the first

being that their identities would be revealed and the second being the unrestricted access to the others thoughts and memories that could easily be unlocked. He could not unleash the horrors of his mind upon her. He knew that he held great powers and dark secrets alike locked away in the vault of his mind, but like the apples on the trees surrounding her abbey they would all look tempting and juicy from the outside. The full array of his memories would be there for the picking should she wish to sample the fruit, but she would need to be wary for they could leave a bitter taste. As a fellow magician he knew the temptation of such things, for he would have gorged his face faster than he could swallow.

‘No, I can’t allow it,’ he stated, but as he finished his words he opened the eyes of his mind to behold the blinding light and the inspiring figure of Niviane as she entered his mind. She had not listened to his final cries of refusal and as she breached his thoughts. She stood there like a vision of an angel; his mind had felt naked and exposed before her. She was beautiful and her blond hair floated wildly about her face and he instantly felt soothed by her presence. Niviane looked into his mind seeking to ease his distress and found more than she ever wanted to see. It was no wonder he wavered on the edge of insanity with his lifetime of memories and thoughts pent up. She knew at once that without her calming influence he may tip over the edge of his sanity at any time and the results could shake the world. She marvelled at the power within him as he stood exposed to her, his soul seemed to glow brighter than the stars. She then quickly recoiled at the other darker things that she found within him, hidden behind the light. He had lived for a long time, far longer than her and meddled in the affairs of men since his birth. He had moved amongst their people shifting from one guise to another, he had been known by many names and variants of his own, Emyr, Midir and Myrddin – there were many feats of magic and traces of his manipulation, each one could be clearly seen in his memories. He had tamed the dragons of the underworld, destroyed kings and even the children of those who had taken him in and called him brother in his time of need. Yet with the foresight of that what was yet to pass, the insanity of his actions had made perfect sense. And then she saw it, the horrific truth that made her recoil with fear. The dark shape hid rapidly behind another memory in his mind. He was tainted with the soul of a demon, its blood red eyes glared back at her with hatred as its dark secret was uncovered. It made no move against her; it just clung to his essence all evil and benign, its talons were deeply embedded through him yet clinging on for fear of falling off. She quickly realised that it was the demon that was captive somehow to his human soul rather than him to it. He had prevailed in a struggle once before, perhaps a battle that was waiting to be re-fought. She knew better than to ask him why he had done some of his darker deeds, she had now glimpsed his soul, but above this darkness that threatened to pull him back down into the pit she could see that his true soul was pure at its core. What battles had he already fought to save himself against such a foe? She had underestimated just how much he really needed her, for without her help as he struggled with his latest discoveries his guard may slip down far enough to allow the demon to drag him back to the brink of oblivion.

She began at once to truss up the forming cracks of his mind; if the creature took hold of his soul, who knew what evil it could release into the world through a man of his power. She quickly found his lust and desires for Morgan, the feelings that had caused his initial quandaries; it was a tricky situation and she only knew of one way to fix this problem. She would have to replace his feelings for Morgan’s with an image of her own.

‘Shh, rest easy Myridin – fear not any longer, for you are mine now.’ Her magic took hold, it was willingly eased into him and accepted, this was good for if it had not been so, she would have been forced to destroy him rather than allow the demon its chance of control.

Joined with his mind Niviane had managed to calm Myridin down, bringing his anger back into the realms of her control. She had hijacked his emotions turning them from Morgan to her; it had been her only choice for if the demon regained control of his mind with his untapped powers it could do untold damage to this world. It had sat there totally dormant for far longer than it had wished. He had battled it with the strength of a child when first born and now it remained imprisoned and benign for years, yet she could feel the hatred emanating from it as she had searched through his mind repairing his soul. In a world of dying magic the tainted soul had taken hold of one of the most powerful tools it could find, it was not by chance it had selected him. Perhaps it had bitten off more than it could chew and she knew as long as she remained at his side this would always be the case. Her enchantment of him was certainly not just made on a merciful whim, over the years of their communications she had grown to enjoy his wit and intellect, they had shared their minds for they were kindred spirits and some day soon they would share the heat of their bodies.

Urien had returned from his campaigning and several months had passed since the night of the raven. Morgan and Accolon had been busy with their scheme and he even busied himself in his spare time with a hired Sword-master. He was a driven man and exerted himself with every lesson and as Master Klewn had commented, he was not without skill to begin with. With his focus and determination he was leaving nothing to chance. Accolon was no coward and yet he knew in his heart that when it came down to it there would be no fair fight for Morgan’s hand. He understood well that if needed he would stoop to the lowest level of backstabbing should the time come and the opportunity arise, for he loved her too much and would do anything to possess her outright. As predicted when Artur held residence over the winter months the sword had been put aside - held safely under lock and key. The weapon was impractical for every day use; it was an icon and only sat at his side when riding forth to battle. Accolon had first bestowed the guardian of the key with his utmost generosity on his increasingly frequent trips to Camelot; his contact in the old Roman fortress had placed him close enough to mix in the same social circles, enabling him to entertain the Quartermaster with both women and wine. It had only taken but a moment to gain an imprint of the key; the drunken man had not the slightest idea as he snoozed happily in the arms of his Pictish whore. His craftsmen could reproduce the points of the lock from the clay cast and within days he had soon found the opportunity to draw a cast from the large sword. He had concealed the cast of the sword in a specially prepared lyre, in which he had adapted the hollow to hold the needed clay. The blade was so long that the cast had to be broken into three sections. His plan had taken weeks to prepare and if discovered what harm could there really be? The sword was still under lock and he could easily press the clay into some obscure shape before fully discovered. The only question to answer would be why would you carry clay inside your lyre? Hardly the biggest threat to the kingdom. The main problem to his finalised plans actually evolved around an element of luck. After his visits he decided that he would not attempt to swap the sword in Camelot; no, that was far too risky – The old Roman fort had too many watch towers and soldiers hurrying about its halls. No, he would make the switch on home turf where he held

the advantage of preparation. The factor of luck involved would be that he could not foresee when Artur would attend Gore next. He would often join Urien in raids and conflict to the south, staying in his halls for several days of preparation before such a raid. The great sword now always accompanied Artur on his battle trips, like a battle standard or banner for their men to flock to it better served the Dux Bellorum than Urien. A dagger in Urien's back was soon proving to be an easier prospect to arrange, but he required Urien to be found slain by the hand of the Battle Master, with the great sword of Artur marking his guilt in this affair. It would cause a rift in the alliance of kings that could be exploited. He was not a rich man through trade and hard work – he was rich because the Saxons had paid him far too much gold to ensure that Urien was found this way and the so called Dux Bellorum was implicated in his death. Both men had been making too many waves against their invasion plans. Artur was sure to be close at hand for the blame if his sword was found through Urien. He was sure to be accused and he would make sure of that. Theobald of the Bernicia had decided that after his man Dyrnwyn had returned with tales of the sword of fire, he just had to have it. He was to replace the weapon in Urien's body with another replica, then when Artur would hold the sword next with the accusations of the king's death it would not burst into flames, proving his guilt ... for it would be the copied sword and it would clearly mark him as now being an unworthy man. The plot should weaken the north for the new and worthy Saxon ruler; King Theobald would be ready to take charge.

Accolon became tetchy at the news of a planned hunting trip soon after Artur's arrival. It was not the exact news that he wanted, yet it would be as close to an opportunity as he was likely to get for some time – so he decided to act. One of his spies had reported the King and Artur riding out early into the forest alone. He claimed they held boar spears, a long shafted spear with a cross bar set back from the point to stop the savage animals advancing up the pole to maul the hunter. It was unusual to begin the hunt so early, so perhaps they had slipped out away from their guard to hunt alone. It was not quite as alone as Accolon had hoped to find Urien but leaving to hunt with Artur could also further suit his plans. He needed to act quickly and hopefully he could catch the men alone – it was easy to get separated during a hunt. First he would need to swap the swords, this would now be easy – a small concealed trapdoor had been engineered into the floor of the strong room when the King had been away – it could be accessed via the storeroom below, simply by rearranging some crates to use as steps upwards. Naturally all contracted work had been completed by his workmen under the guise of something more innocent. He had covered his trail well, paying off the men and relocating them back to Gaul. He quickly finished dressing; stopping only briefly, just long enough to give himself a quick pep talk of reassurance that he could do this, then he ran out to put his plans into place.

Urien stooped low on his pony avoiding the low branches of the tree as he traversed through the forest after the petrified boar. It was not the largest beast he had hunted but by the saints it appeared to be the fastest. He dug his heels in harder and tried to chase the beast down. Artur had showed more sense than Urien; he had decided to take the longer route around the small patch of woods and would wait for it on the far side when it reappeared. In battle he had earned the reputation of 'The Bear,' for his great stature and fearless charges into the enemy lines, but he was not lacking in intelligence. Why run his horse ragged like Urien when he could wait and

steal the kill from the king at the last moment. Once around at the far side, with the river behind him he was sure to cut it off. He chuckled to himself as the squeals of the hog drowned out the shouted curses of the pursuing man. Even some way off he could hear the two quarrelling like lovers as they ripped through the forest.

A voice suddenly entered Artur's head, it took a moment before he realised that it was not his own.

'Artur beware, a Saxon seeks to kill Urien this day – he is hidden in the woods.' He suddenly recognised that it was Myridin's voice that he heard and by its urgent tone he knew better than to question him.

'Ride along the river bank and you will find the traitor; turn left when I say. Do not question my actions just slay the man that you find there without question or hesitation, if you don't Urien will die. Now ride, you must get there quickly but help is on its way.' Artur urged his horse forwards; he did not need to go far before the voice in his head urged him to turn left.

Urien reined his horse in suddenly, abandoning his chase – he knew the song of steel against steel when he heard it. He changed direction, wondering who it could be doing battle so close... Artur. He rushed off. Breaking free of the trees he found two knights dismounted and fighting on foot. Artur was forced backward, giving up ground to the great arcing blows of the great sword in the other knight's hands'. The blade in Artur's opponent's hands was familiar yet no fire surrounded its steel, just the sound of parting air as the blade struck out again and again. It glowed with a blue shimmer as it sought his head. Hateful eyes glared at Artur through the small eye holes of an expressionless mask that covered the face of his attacker's helmet. Artur dodged to his side narrowly deflecting the blow with the short hunting sword which he had considered this morning a much better fit for his day out, he quickly regret his choice. He recognised with despair the enchanted greatsword he now faced, with another blow from his opponent the short sword snapped in his hand like a twig. Artur back peddled throwing the hand-guard at his opponent and seeking room to evade. Niviane walked calmly across the water of the river, her feet did not sink as she chanted a spell of considerable power. Artur's cloak swirled about him in their hard fought melee and suddenly Accolon couldn't believe his eyes as Artur vanished from sight before him. He continued to swing the Greatsword at the thin air before him in a fit of rage at his opponent's unexpected disappearance. Artur couldn't believe it – suddenly it was as if the man could not see him. He had not at first realised that Niviane's enchantment had been to enchant his cloak and conceal him. She had given him the time that he needed to defend himself; he quickly drew his dirk and prepared to attack again. Myridin walked over the river to stand by Niviane's side; he also chanted a great enchantment as he moved. His hand affectionately slipped into Niviane's as he arrived; she smiled at its presence. Artur felt the power of his opponent's rage surge into him; it was as if he suddenly had the strength of two men as he sprung forwards throwing back the mantle of cloth that had momentarily enveloped him.

Urien was suddenly at his side, dashing out from the forest and thrusting his hunting spear at the Saxon knight; the spear's tip was skilfully deflected by his opponent. Artur smashed his fist into the Iron rimmed helmet of his distracted opponent, instantly regretting the move as his hand throbbed with the blow. But he felt invigorated by his new found strength and driven by his growing anger and desires that flooded into him through the sword. Artur came in close and plunged his dirk through the man's belly, catching his sword arm as he fell forwards with his guts

ripped open and exposed. Artur stabbed him again and again until his anger finally ebbed out of him as quickly as Accolon's blood flowed from his wounds. Urien swung his horse about dismounting.

'Are you ok Artur?' for a moment a crazed look still held on his face, but soon the colour returned to his cheeks, 'Yes, I think so,' he murmured. Urien reached forwards ripping the mask from the corpse. He looked down into the face of the dead man.

'I know this man,' he stated solemnly.

Morgan's words rang in Myridin's head again and again as he pulled himself up from the cold floor, he looked around the room for her, yet she was not there.

'You will feel what true loss is, the same as I did with Accolon.' The words faded as if he had merely dreamed them or had just felt a shimmer of her thoughts? He was confused at what he was doing on the cold floor or how he had gotten there? Myridin looked over at the open window; the sun was low in the sky and not far from setting. Had he really been blacked out for the entire day and what had happened in between? Where was Lady Morgan? These were the first questions that he asked himself as he came to his senses. He felt unbalanced as he raised himself to his feet and his eyes fell upon the goblet of juice that he had consumed – it must have been drugged in some way. What was the point in that he wondered, for he had lost nothing more than a day. It was obvious that it had been Morgan, for she had asked him to meet with her early and the apple juice was already on the table when he had entered. He had mentioned to her on several occasions that he enjoyed apple juice to freshen the pallet in the morning. He considered their recent entanglement and doubted that she had any knowledge of the magic he had used to aid Artur or his personal involvement in his part in Accolon's death, for as far as everyone knew Artur took the full credit for that deed. If she did have some unknown inside knowledge of his involvement she would have surely used poison against him rather than just a sleeping draught. Myridin searched his mind for the answer, finding nothing but his own anger at being duped so easily. Urien and his wife had arrived late last night; they had hurried to Artur's side after hearing the news of his wife's abduction. Gwen had been out riding when the War-band of Picts had surrounded her and abducted her earlier in the week. They had been riding close to home in lands thought to be safe. One of Gwen's bodyguards had lived to tell the tale of their ambush; he had fought them hard but there had been too many and he had soon been overwhelmed. They must have thought him dead from the final blow that robbed him of his consciousness – but he had soon come around from his concussion and hurried back to raise the alarm. It had taken all of Myridin's powers of persuasion to get Artur to halt his pursuit. The Picts were away and into the highlands before there was any chance to raise a force strong enough to pursue. Blindly rushing after her would have been a foolish move, for if the enemy was daring enough to snatch her from outside her home, then what else might they have waiting up their sleeves. Her location was not beyond Myridin's sight, so he had managed to convince Artur that it would be better to wait and gain strength rather than rush in after her unprepared. Artur had already begun to raise levies when Urien and his wife had arrived. Myridin left the guest room where he had met Morgan that morning and walked down towards the great hall, taking a short cut through the kitchens he noticed the commotion going on in the household. A shrieking woman ran past him, followed by a soldier dressed for war. The man suddenly halted wide-eyed at Myridin's appearance before him.

‘I thought you had gone with Lord Artur,’ stammered the soldier. Myridin disliked the man’s tone – Artur had left? Why?

‘What do you mean Artur has gone? Gone where? I told him to wait for me and yet you now tell me he has departed without me, how could you let him go?’ Myridin questioned with a tone of accusation.

It was hardly the soldier’s fault and yet he instantly stood up for Artur. He was a minor noble and a familiar face of the Court to Myridin, although he could not correctly place his face to his name. The soldier challenged him back defending the actions of his Lord.

‘He had no choice, they took his wife – what the hell was the man supposed to do?’

‘Do?’ Myridin questioned loudly, ‘Do as I bloody well said – I told him to wait, I could have sorted out this situation given a little more time.’ The soldier shifted nervously on the balls of his feet as he waited for his chance to speak between Myridin’s grumbling. The soldier held rank in the army and was not used to being talked at in such a way. The man was not to know the full extent of what Myridin had faced. The events of the last few months had been challenging to say the least. King Lot, a former ally and king of the lands to the north had been exposed by his own as a traitor. The truth behind his support in allowing the Saxons to gain a foothold in his lands had recently been revealed to the alliance. They had been fighting the invader whilst their cause had secretly been supported by him. Lot had conquered the Picts years before with the aid of the alliance of kings and set himself up quiet nicely as their chieftain; finally bringing a taste of peace between their people as a puppet king. Unfortunately the puppet had a different play to that of the alliance. Had this all been pre-planned Myridin wondered? Lot originated from the Picts, but he had been smuggled out of the region as a child to protect him from his over zealous kinsmen. He certainly had a rightful claim to their throne, although there were some obvious divisions amongst their people. His people had not warmed to their returning master and his foreign ways and the alliance had been needed to remind them exactly who held control of the land. What did it matter now? After they discovered he was also aiding the Saxons the alliance of armies led by Artur smashed his forces and chased him from the mainland. He had thought that he could escape them by fleeing to the islands of the far north yet Artur was one step ahead and had already prepared a naval force. He surrounded the island leaving Lot no escape route other than that of the underworld. The final battle was brutal and Lot by all accounts had died well, yet his sons had not been present to share his fate.

‘Yes,’ Myridin said out loud after reviewing the facts in a fraction of a second, it was likely one of Lot’s sons was behind the abduction of Artur’s wife in revenge for their father. The soldier disturbed Myridin’s thoughts – there was still urgent news that he needed to deliver, for he had fought alongside Artur this day.

‘There was a battle as they moved to free Lady Gwen and Artur has been seriously wounded.’ Myridin raised an eyebrow at the news. The soldier continued,

‘It is very serious and... I think my lord may not last the night, I have seen many wounds given in battle and I fear this wound may be his last. You must come with me at once; perhaps you can save him with your magic? Prepare fresh horses,’ he shouted out through the doorway to the household servants; his gruff voice instantly brought a reaction from the staff.

‘If we hurry, we could be there soon; it is not far they ambushed us at the river.’ Myridin had not realised at first just how severely wounded his friend had been, the Battle Lord had incurred many wounds and injuries during his years of campaigning

and Myridin had almost grown to think of him as being indestructible. Myridin's face dropped with the news as the soldier's words sunk in. He stared past the neatly trimmed beard and long nose of the man, looking deep into his eyes, hoping that he had somehow misread the situation. If Artur died his position in the household of Ryderrch would become most awkward and very dangerous indeed. King Ryderrch had only taken him in on Artur's advice. He had made many enemies in his time at Court and with Artur out of the picture they would not hold back their grievances long. He had been taken in by Lord Ryderrch one of the thirteen Kings of the alliance after urging his former master to rise up and turn against him. It had been Artur alone who had convinced them all to seek Myridin, but not to harm him for steering his lord against them, rather make him their ally. Artur had spent time in the company of Myridin as a young man when he had been used as a royal hostage to bring peace between their clans. The move from Artur's father had been doomed to failure, but his son had been returned by Myridin's persuasion before the hostilities had broken out. The Druid had foreseen the spread of this new faith and had urged his lord to fight; it was dangerous to the dwindling magic of the Druids. The spread of this new Christian faith was smothering the old powers and Myridin had sought to adjust the balance of power. The problem was that he had misjudged the situation when he incited his former lord to rise up and bring battle against the growing alliance of kings. It was a move that led the last of the great pagan chieftains to their deaths and quickened the spread of this new power. His action and their defeat had taken him to the edge of madness and despair but eventually after he roamed the forest like an animal he eventually came to terms with his actions. In the moment when his former lord had needed his aid the most, he had held back his magic at the last minute on a whim, condemning his former comrades to death. He had seen a new light in the ranks of the enemy, a new hope for their people. In that moment he bathed in the reality that he could not stand against the giant wave that came thundering against them. Amongst the ranks of the men they had faced stood Artur, returned by his own deeds to face them. He had stood taller than any other man, maybe not in stature as a youth but in potential at least.

He was beginning to piece the puzzle together, but the soldier pulled him back to the present by shaking his arm,

'Are you alright? We need to get going Artur needs you.' Myridin scratched his chin, then asked

'Hmm, who exactly gave the command to leave Camelot on this fool's errand?'

The soldier looked puzzled,

'Why you did? Lady Morgan passed on your message to gather men and meet you at the river, Artur was expecting to meet with you – she said you had gone ahead to clear the path,' replied the soldier confused. Myridin's fist clenched tight as if to contain his anger. This situation had been tailored by another skilled in manipulation.

He understood clearly that if Artur departed this world then so must he, perhaps Morgan was trying to thin out the field or maybe it was just plain vengeance for her slain lover. They hurried away to the courtyard and the horses as the soldier stressed how little time Artur may have, but Myridin instead ignored the man and diverted back inside the keep to his quarters. He reappeared shortly carrying a large canvas bundle. The soldier watched him suspiciously.

'Where exactly was the battle?' Myridin asked and the man and Elic replied describing the location of where the battle was fought. They had been attacked as they entered the territory of the Picts. Myridin knew of the location where the hillside met the river on the northern border of Dalriada.

‘There are quicker ways to travel than a horse,’ Myridin dropped a small diamond to the floor and murmured several inaudible words. His use of magic would drain a little more from the dwindling resource, but the situation was urgent and warranted it. A blinding light filled the courtyard and the horses scattered in panic.

Myridin stepped through the Portal into Avalon; he first needed to visit Niviane before seeing to Artur, his diversion to her would be twofold. She was a skilled healer, far greater than his own ability in this area and she would be able to appraise his wounds better. If he was indeed beyond her help their time to depart this world would need to be rapidly advanced, he would also need to secure the sword for he needed its power to escape. He had spoken to her on occasion about leaving this world before.

‘Let’s be realistic Niviane, our time here is limited, have you not noticed how our powers decline with each year? Our resources are all but depleted, after the last of the Druids bleed the earth in their pursuit of revenge there is little power left to command. Soon it will be a time for just men. Our kind are finished.’ She nodded understandingly she had felt the decline as well.

‘I believe that I have found a place for us to go, but we cannot leave it too late or we will lack the power to depart. I discovered its pathway a long time ago, but at first thought it beyond my reach. I discovered a reflection in a cave not far from Camelot; its entrance is concealed beneath a waterfall. Inside its walls are lined with many shards of crystal, but not all originate from this world. When lit by torchlight it presents the most wonderful display of colours and light. I looked into one of the shards, instead of my own reflection I saw a pin-prick through the fabric of the universe. It was but an echo of a world created at the same time as our own; but it was evidence enough that another world existed and even from here I could see the traces of magic emanating from that world. I thought it impossible to ever reach it; that was until I found the power in the sword.’

‘Tell me about the power of the sword?’ she enquired. Myridin had explained more about the ancient power to her and she listened absorbing every little detail of his knowledge. Myridin could remember that day well, for it had been the very same that they had first made love.

‘Come quickly my love, gather what you need – we must leave.’

The portal of transport opened amidst the carnage of fallen bodies and war. Myridin alone walked from it, his face clearly showed his horror at the gore and destruction that surrounded him. Hundreds of men lay strewn in the awkward positions where they had fallen; several familiar faces were noticed amongst them with regret. It was evident that Artur’s force had been the smaller of the two but not the weakest judging by the amount of bodies strewn across the muddy riverbank. The painted bodies of the Picts littered the riverside to the bottom of the hill, most likely the initial source of battle – a point of ambush as they crossed. Men still stumbled about the bodies looting the dead and finishing any stragglers. This had been no battle - it had been a struggle for survival in a well laid trap, yet somehow against the odds the Britons had pulled through.

‘Artur, where is Artur,’ Myridin demanded of a passing soldier that stumbled amongst the sea of bodies and plunged his lance through every Pict he found. The man’s distant eyes looked up from his blood splattered face, he pointed down at the group of men at the riverbank. Myridin quickly dashed down the hill, traversing the

bracken that hindered his path. Artur was indeed there propped up in a friend's arms, his legs dangling in the mud. Myridin's first reaction was one of anger,

'Who stood against him?' Myridin asked.

'It was Mordred, son of Lot. And he paid with his life,' replied the soldier that he had already past and had turned about intrigued by the newcomer. The soldier continued to follow him down the slope and moved to impale another Pict that still showed signs of life. Myridin held his head as a vision flooded into his mind, he stumbled to one knee. His visions would often come and go as he met people, yet this one hit him like a sack of rocks.

'Are you alright old man?' asked the nearby knight.

'Of course I am and now mind your manners and less of this old man business, I don't look my age and only stumble after seeing you in a vision, now out of my way.'

'What did you see?' asked the soldier as he pulled his lance from another corpse.

'Nothing different than I do now, blood and bodies – just a lot more of them, you will live to be a dangerous man, now step aside or at least help this 'old man' across the mud.' The soldier took his arm and guided him the short distance through the deep mud to where Artur lay surrounded by his men. Myridin shouted at Artur as he lay on the wet ground, the crowd of watching men surrounding him were obviously disgusted at how he addressed their Lord.

'Why did you ignore my warnings – I told you to sit tight, you bloody fool,' a nearby soldier grabbed Myridin's arm,

'That's no way to talk our Lord,' Myridin waved his hand in front of the soldier and the man fell forwards unconscious to the floor. The crowd instantly backed off a pace.

'Don't you dare touch me,' he could feel his own anger rising.

'I'll talk to Artur exactly how I please. Now stand back... Artur, what possessed you to ignore me?' He looked down at the wounded man; a spear shaft was snapped and jutting out from his stomach. It looked nasty close up. Artur struggled to lift his head as he attempted to look up. The faintest curl of a smile creased through his pain wracked face – he was beyond words but pleased to see his old friend. Myridin had known this before his arrival; he knew that this was going to be a grim visit and was prepared. He and Niviane had sought out Artur's spirit together shortly after his arrival at Avalon; they had found him standing on the bridge of death. Together they had reviewed his wounds from afar. They were obviously fatal – yet with his bowels opened up it may take him hours to die a slow lingering death. With his heart filled with sorrow he had sent Niviane ahead, to prepare for their departure; everything else they did here this day would merely be for show. A boat had been sent for to take the War Lord to Avalon, where Niviane's sisters would tend to Artur in the best way – a strong drink that would quicken his passing was already prepared but it would not be good for his men to witness the truth. Myridin came in close and spoke directly to Artur,

'You did not dwindle the power of the sword Artur, it was the greatest gift that I could give to you old friend, but now it must go back from whence it came. Give me the sword, I will see to its return.' The great weapon lay across Artur; he made no reaction to his words, so Myridin whispered two words when the small crowd around him were looking down at their commander and Artur's arm flicked up, pushing the sword towards him.

'Your lord has given me his blessing.' Myridin stated. 'Thank you my Lord, I will see to your last wishes, I will put it beyond the use of the enemy.' Myridin bowed

with genuine dignity, he looked up and across at the river as a six oared boat moored up on the bank, Niviane's sisters were at the oars. Myridin picked up the sword and directed the men to load their leader onto the small vessel, Niviane had done well. Artur raised his hand with a last effort of his strength as he was placed into the boat. The current of the river strained at the stern of the boat jostling it in its mooring. A soldier that had carried Artur onto the boat placed his ear to his Lord's mouth and listened as he managed to whisper some faint words. The soldier stood upright and shouted back at Myridin.

'My Lord asks that you make promise to save Lady Gwen,' he said with sadness as he had felt the weakness in Artur's gasping voice. Myridin turned and began to walk off without any response, he shouted out to the remaining soldiers; follow me and bear witness to your Master's wishes.' The soldier tending Artur on the boat shouted out after the magician as the boat began to cast off.

'Why does the Merlin fly off with no reply? What say you Myridin to your Lord? What say you to your friend?' Myridin halted in his trail for a moment and cast a short enchantment; he could feel the thinness of the magic surrounding them. Artur slumped backwards.

'Fear not Bedwyr, your Lord Artur rests, my magic eases his pain and he will remain alive, but with the stillness of death until his arrival in Avalon. Stay with him. When he wakes he shall be the king he always sought to be. Tell him, that I shall use every grain of my power to see her safe return and tell him that the sword will be returned into the hands of the lake. Both should put his mind to rest.' With that Myridin turned his back on the boat and walked off, a crowd of soldiers followed. He was walking to the body of water where he had arranged to meet Niviane, everything should be in place. He could not afford to lose the sword; its powers were necessary for his own needs. His words to Bedwyr played deeply on his mind as he walked. How could he tell his friend that his wife had perished at the hands of the Picts? He had attempted to rescue her days before after initially finding out about her abduction, it was what any friend would have done. He could still hear her gurgling screams in his ears as the woad painted man drew his dirk across her throat. It did not matter how many he slew after that deed was done. How could he tell his friend that his attempted rescue had brought about her death? It had been why he had delayed Artur's pursuit. If only he had told him then, he may have at least saved his friend's life and that of his brother and the many more men who had died this day. He wondered how long it would be before the rumours and accusations caught up with him, how long before human nature took over and the cold steel would strike him in his back? He had seen a fragment of the future, a betrayal and a sword thrust through his back and did not wish to hang around for it. No, he would not have it this way; he knew it was time to leave this world for good.

'Now here we are,' the men stood crowded behind him – he looked nervously at their hands as they fidgeted near their belts – how far forwards had this glimpse of the future been? Could he trust in his visions? His last reading of the future had foretold him that Artur would be the greatest of all Britons and look how wrong that had been and yet he knew he was rarely wrong, some other force was guiding his hand.

'By order of the Dux Bellorum, your Battle Lord, I place his symbol, this steel beyond the hands of any man from this world. I will commit the sword to this lake for it has no bottom other than the depths of hell.' Myridin could feel the resentment growing in the men as they stood watching him, each one of them thought that he should have claim to the sword or that it would weaken their position without it. In

truth if the sword remained it would likely tear the alliance apart. He pronounced loudly to the watching crowd,

‘I hand the sword back into the hands of the Lake.’ Niviane walked slowly out from the water of the lake, her dress seemed to flow with the sway of the water. Her hands were outstretched as she approached the magician. She had been waiting concealed behind the nearby reed bed for over an hour in a small boat and now she shivered with the coldness of the water that she had just slipped into as she waded around to confront the men. She would have rather of used her magic to walk across the surface of the water than through it, but they had to save every last morsel of their magic for their final escape, besides the water served their purpose today. Her feet followed the trail of a rope that had been weighted down and ran under the surface of the water.

‘Take it,’ he commanded and she removed the greatsword from his hands. She turned and began to wade out deeper into the lake stopping as she appeared to lose her footing and stumble on a rock submerging herself under the water. She recovered herself without a word, raising Excalibur out of the water and high above her head in a final salute. With an almighty swing she cast the sword far out into the lake, into the deepest depths of the water. Without a backwards look she moved off following the rope back to the reeds before moving under the water and dragging herself back to her concealed position by the underwater rope. Their illusion was complete; no man would dare go after the sword now. What the eye saw the mind would believe. Many among the watching crowd gasped with their displeasure as the sword disappeared into the deep water. How could they give up the flame-sword? They had lost both their leader and his mark of power in the same day, there would come a day when they would curse the name of Merlin.

A day had passed and the tension within the high walls of Camelot had risen to boiling point, everyone felt angered at the loss of Artur and the sword. Although ready to leave them all to their own fates, Myridin did not want to desert them until he was sure that they had a fighting chance for the future. Today they would vote on the new Dux Bellorum, a new Warlord was needed to steer the helm of this stricken vessel. Myridin had avoided contact with others as much as possible, he had seen the thoughts of the people surrounding him, he did not need his presence rubbed in their faces to antagonise them into any rash moves or impulses; some did not need such prompts for their hatred of him already ran deep. He had passed his time constructively, probing their feeble little minds and planting his latest suggestion; Urien would win the vote today. He was the obvious choice – he was a brilliant tactician and deadly in battle, there was a reason why Artur won almost every battle they conducted – Urien was normally at his side. He had also chased through their minds, looking for any evidence of Morgan’s influences, surprisingly he found none. Since misleading her brother into pursuing Gwen she had not been seen and her husband appeared unbothered by her absence. Myridin had considered staying just to hunt her for the path of vengeance that she had dealt to his friends, but Niviane convinced him that it would be foolish, for his one resource – Magic which he would need to track her down was running low. He was sure that Morgan had some ability in the art that she had somehow concealed, yet if his powers were running short, so would hers. He concluded that if she remained here it would not be long until her powers were also benign; so in theory she would present little threat. No, he had decided it was time to forget the feuds of this world and after the vote it would be time to weave his last illusion and leave. He had decided it was better to appear a

hero in his last act rather than just skulk off into the night, besides he had secretly enjoyed his showmanship at the lake. He raised himself from his seat and left his room. Slamming open the doors to the great hall he began to shout out at anyone who would listen. The line up of lords and kings looked up surprised at the interruption. They had just finished their vote and Myridin could see their contempt at his appearance.

‘Ok, listen up my fine gathering of nobles,’ he bellowed out, ‘I know what you are all thinking; I have seen your thoughts. I know that you all hope to god that there was some way that you can recover the sword, so if you all feel this way I will attempt to use my magic to claim the sword back from the lake. I will do this because I have seen the future and the dark sails of the invader draw ever closer. Your rightful leader, king Urien will need the sword to lead you on to future victories.’ He stomped out through the halls, raving his repeated prophecies for all to hear. He drew quite a crowd by the time he passed outside and through the gates as he marched off down towards the water.

‘Lady of the lake come show yourself, I come to claim back Artur’s sword, I come to claim the fire-blade for Urien the rightful king.’ Niviane rose from the water ahead of him, and the crowd gasped in awe. It was time to use the last of their magic and this little play was developed by Myridin for the crowds benefit and for what he deemed as a fitting end.

‘Turn back Merlin, turn back or I shall do more than clip your wings – you cannot have it ... for the sword rests now with Artur. I can see the fate of the things to come as clear as day. Your king, Urien – he does not need such a weapon to turn back the invaders for he shall inspire the most powerful weapon – the faith and determination that pumps inside each and every one of us Britons who refuse to kneel on bended knee before both Saxon or Pict. Faith will be our weapon from this day forth,’ Niviane stated loudly and an echo of approval murmured from the watching crowd.

‘Rubbish, I stand for the people,’ Myridin replied, ‘I command you, hand over the sword She-witch. If I fail in this task today there is not a single man who could stand against you.’ He cast an illusion that conjured up a bolt of lightning from his hand that flew at Niviane. He lacked enough power to make it as truly impressive as he had hoped, but it impressed the crowds all the same. Niviane deflected the illusion of the lightning bolt and retaliated.

‘You would dare attack me for the sword, you foolish man. I banish you from this world forever. A great gust of air blew Myridin backwards forcing him backwards against a large oak tree. He put on his best struggle as he acted out his final fate.

‘I condemn you to the tree – you will remain there trapped forever to contemplate your mistake in raising your hand against me.’ A flash of light blinded the crowd and both Myridin and Niviane had vanished.

Inside the depths of Myridin’s hidden cave the great crystal stalactites protruded down reflecting the glimmer of his torch. The light and shadows danced across Myridin’s features giving him an almost demonic look in the flickering light as he brooded over the spell he was about to cast. They both knew that he would get only one shot at this. He held the enchanted greatsword Excalibur in his hands and looked into the depths of his own reflection in the polished blade. Niviane had switched the blade with Accolon’s forged blade when she had stumbled and fell in the cold waters of the lake. She had placed the biggest weight at the end of the underwater rope. He

swung the sword about and impaled it deep into a bed of sparkling crystals; its bright magic spread and lit the cave to an intense brightness on impact.

‘Nice speech Niviane, very stirring – but I think you laid it on a bit thick towards the end. Still, well done, you defeated the mighty Merlin,’ he laughed.

‘What do you expect from a She-witch enchantress such as myself? Really, you should speak higher of your future wife.’ She replied sarcastically. He began to concentrate drawing in the remaining essence of magic through the sword. His repeated spell grew louder and louder until the walls of the cave began to vibrate. Suddenly they were knocked to the floor as a vortex of power erupted before them, the rift to another world was opened. He reached down and withdrew the sword from the stone.

‘Come my dear, it is time to depart this world – there is another where our magic will not fade so easy. This is the end for us here,’ Myridin suggested. Niviane shook her head,

‘No my love, it is the beginning.’

The End