



A HUMBLE SERVANT...
A WARRIOR
WHO WOULD
INSPIRE LEGEND.

KINGDOM OF SUMMER

PRAISE FOR
GILLIAN BRADSHAW

"Seduces us into accepting sorcery and
sanctity in King Arthur's England."
—*New York Times Book Review*

GILLIAN BRADSHAW

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In Memoriam
Lt. Col. and Mrs. H. R. R. Rouquette

The Britain of Arthur Pendragon



ONE

Dumnonia is the most civilized kingdom in Britain, but in the northeast, in January, it looks no tamer than the wilds of Caledonia. The fields are swallowed by the snow, with only the stubble tips showing pale above the drifts, and the sky is drained of color and seems to weigh upon the heavens. Beyond the cultivated lands—in the case of my family, beyond the river Fromm—lies the forest, dark branches and white snow mingling to form a lead-gray cloud along the horizon, mile upon mile of silence and the panting of wolves. In the summer, men and women ignore the forest. Fields are tended and the produce is brought to market, the oxen draw the ploughs, the horses the carts—but in the winter the wilderness hanging beyond the river looms large in the mind. Life is quieter, and a ghost story which a man laughed at in the harvest season suddenly seems horribly probable, for humanity and civilization look very small and light against that ocean of the cold.

My cousin Goronwy and I had no love for going out to the forest in January, but it happened that our householding needed more wood. That meant a trip across the ford with the cart, and two grown men to make it, so we had gone, and spent the noon-tide hacking away at the loose brush, only occasionally pausing to glance over our shoulders. We were glad when we could turn back with the cart piled high. We crossed the river again, and paused on the home bank to let the oxen drink. Goronwy sat holding the goad, looking on the sleek backs of the beasts, who, since we were impatient, must needs take their time.

I looked back across the river. The water of the stream was dark with the winter, and the afternoon sun lay upon it and upon the heaped snow banks, casting horizontal beams that shone like warlike bronze but gave no heat. The only sound in the world was the water whispering on the banks and the grunting of the oxen. It was three miles home, back to our householding, three miles back to the cow byres and hearth-fires and the faces of men. The thought left my heart hungry for it, but I let my eyes drift slowly down the black river and along the trees of the opposite bank. And because of that, I saw the horseman there before he saw me. A glimpse of crimson drew my eyes from the water, and then, a mounted warrior rode openly out onto the river bank in the heavy sunlight.

He had a red cloak wrapped tightly round him, one hand half-extended through its fold to hold the reins. Gold gleamed from his hand, from the fastening of his cloak and the rim of the shield slung over his back; the spears tied to the saddle, and the bridle of his great white stallion caught the light like stars. He reined in his horse by the stream, and together they stood a moment as still as the trees behind them, white and crimson and gold. I felt as if I had just opened my eyes and seen a being from a song I had loved all my life, or a figure from a dream. Then the rider turned his gaze along the river and met my own stare, and I came back to myself, and knew enough to become afraid.

“Goronwy!” I seized my cousin’s arm.

“Well, and what is it...?” He followed my stare and froze.

The rider turned his horse and came up the far bank towards us, the stallion stepping carefully, with a light, clean stride, delicate as a cat’s.

“Eeeeh.” Goronwy nudged the oxen with the goad and jumped out of the cart. The beasts snorted and backed up, breath steaming.

“Do you think we can outrun him?” I asked, annoyed with Goronwy and trying to prevent all the

wood from falling off with the jolts. "Oxen, against a horse like that one?"

"Perhaps he cannot cross the water." Goronwy's voice was low.

"You've laughed at tales of the Fair Ones before this."

"I laughed at home. Sweet Jesu preserve us now!"

"Oh come! He must be a traveler. If he's no bandit, he will only ask the way. And if he's a bandit there are two of us, and we've nothing more than death to fear."

"I fear that enough, without the other." The oxen shambled away from the bank, and Goronwy leapt back into the cart. "But who'd travel in winter? This far from a road?"

The rider reached the ford and turned his horse to the water. The stream was not deep, and came higher than the animal's knees, though the horse tossed its head at the coldness. Goronwy gave a little hiss and sat still again. If the rider could cross the water, perhaps he was not a spirit. Or perhaps he was. Either way, we could not outrun him.

He reached the home bank and rode up beside us and, as he did so, the sun dropped below the tree line and covered us with criss-crossing shadows. I saw more clearly as the dazzle and glitter vanished and could have cried for disappointment after such a shining vision. The horse, though splendid, had a long, raw gash across its chest, its bones showed through the hide, and its legs and shoulders were streaked with mud. The rider's clothes were very worn, the red cloak tattered and dirty, the hand of the reins purple with cold. His black hair and beard were matted and untrimmed, and he had clearly not washed for a long time. He might be a lost traveler, he might well be a bandit, but...

I met his eyes, and was shaken again. Those eyes were dark as the sea at midnight, and there was something to their look that set the short hairs upright on my neck. I crossed myself, wondering whether Goronwy might be right. My father always said that the tales of the People of the Hills were so many lies, and yet I had never seen a look like that on a human face.

The rider smiled at my gesture, a bitter smile, and leaned over to speak to us. He had drawn his sword, and rested it across his knees so that we could look at it as he spoke. It looked a fine, sharp sword.

"My greetings to you," said the rider. His voice was hoarse, hardly above a whisper. "What land is this?"

I saw Goronwy's hand relax a little on the ox-goad, and then he, too, crossed himself before replying. "Dumnonia, Lord. Near Mor Hafren. Do you ask because you have lost your road?" He was eager to give directions.

The stranger said nothing to the question, only looked at the fields beyond us. "Dumnonia. What is that river, then?"

"The Fromm. It joins Mor Hafren a bit beyond two miles from here. Lord, there is a Roman road some twelve miles eastwards of here..."

"I do not know of your river. Is the land beyond close-settled?"

"Closely enough." Goronwy paused. "Baddon is not far from here. There is a strong lord there, and his warband."

The rider smiled bitterly again. "I am not a bandit, that you must threaten me with kings and warbands." He looked at us, considering. "What is your name, man?"

Goronwy rubbed his wrist, looked at the oxen, glanced back at the sword. "Goronwy ap Cynydd," he admitted at last.

"So. And you?"

"Rhys ap Sion," I answered. It might be unwise to offer names, but we could hardly avoid it. I again met the man's eyes, and again I felt cold, and wondered if we were endangering our souls. But

thought the man human. He must be.

“So then, Goronwy ap Cynydd and Rhys ap Sion, I have need of lodgings tonight, for myself and for my horse. How far is it to your householding?”

“My lord, our householding is poor...” Goronwy began, a trifle untruthfully, since we are one of the first clans about Mor Hafren.

“I can pay. How far is it?”

“Three miles,” I said. Goronwy glared at me. “We are not so poor that we must be inhospitable, Chieftain.” Goronwy stepped on my foot, as though I were too stupid to understand what I was saying, but goaded the oxen, turning them back onto the rough track home. The stranger urged his horse beside us at a slow walk, his drawn sword still ready. The hilt gleamed gold, and a jewel smoldered on it redly.

I looked at that jewel and wondered what would come next. The man might yet be a bandit, but would a bandit have a splendid horse and a jeweled sword? He must be a member of some warband, the servant of either our own king, Constantius of Dumnonia, or of one of the other kings and nobles of Britain. If he was Constantius’s man, he probably would leave us in peace, and might even pay us, but if he served anyone else he’d be worse than a bandit. He had said, “I can pay,” but that didn’t mean that he would. Still, if he intended violence, there were enough men in the clan to deal with him, even armed as he was and largely unarmed as we were. If he were human. No, he must be human. And he hadn’t tried to kill us outright for the price of the cart and oxen, so perhaps he did only want a place to rest for the night. Perhaps he was a messenger, or on some special errand for his own clan, and had left the main road in his haste and become lost. Or perhaps he was recently outlawed. If he was a warrior...I wondered if we could get him to talk about it. An old longing took hold of me, a thing most of my clansmen leave behind with their childhood, and which I had tried to leave behind and been unable to do something to do with gold and crimson and the glint of weapons.

“Lord,” I said, after a long silence, “what road would you wish to be taking, come tomorrow?” It was as good a way as any to ask where he was from and where he was going.

He eyed me suspiciously, but I refused to be frightened. “That is of no matter,” he said.

“Well, Lord, if you’re in need of lodgings, we could tell you something of the roads hence and back.” Goronwy again kicked me quietly, not daring to tell me openly to be quiet and leave matters be.

“The roads do not matter to me.”

“Well, but they might to your horse.” Goronwy’s kick had only made me angry. “I seek only to be of service, Lord, but it seems your horse would walk the easier for a good feeding.”

He looked down at me, cold and proud, then looked at the arched, white neck of his stallion. He drew the hand that held the reins down the horse’s crest, and the animal flicked its ears. “My horse has the strength enough for a charge,” the rider suggested meaningfully, and looked back to me. I thought, though, he seemed rather anxious for the animal. “But tell me then, Rhys ap Sion, who seeks only to be of service, what way do you think the finest for horses?”

I was uncertain a moment, but recovered myself. “There is the Roman road, the one from Baddon to Ynys Witrin, past Camlann—and the one eastward, if the road doesn’t matter, to the land of the West Saxons, joins the first road to the south. Do you have no lord, Chieftain, to whom you are traveling?”

He smiled his bitter smile again. “I am the Pendragon’s man.”

Goronwy looked up at him sharply, catching his breath. The Pendragon was Arthur ab Uther, “Imperator Britanniae,” in the old title, “Emperor of Britain.” His warband was said to be the finest west of Constantinople. Not two years before, the Saxon invaders had been stopped, their strength shattered for some generations to come, at the great battle of Baddon. This had been worked by the

Pendragon and his warband, then and in the years before. Since that time, some members of the great warband had gone back to their own lands, some had been set by their king to fighting the hordes of bandits in the west of the country, and some had gone over to Gaul to aid Arthur's allies there, while many stayed with the Emperor at his fortress of Camlann. All the members of the warband were nobles, able to speak their mind to any king in the island, to command their share from the tribute paid to Arthur by the other rulers of Britain. Some of them were rulers in their own right. It was unexpected to have one of these men turn up in our own land, and that in mid-winter. I thought of what I had felt when I first saw this man, that he could have come from a favorite song. If he was of Arthur's Family, he probably did.

"May the due honor be yours, then, Lord," I said. "And I am not one to withhold it."

He looked at me keenly. "You feel no anger, then, for the Pendragon who raised your taxes?"

"None, Lord, for the Emperor who broke the power of the Saxons."

He smiled with a little less bitterness.

"If you are indeed the Pendragon's man, what brings you here?" Goronwy demanded, glaring both at me and at the other.

The rider glared back, cold and proud again. "It is not yours to question, man. Mind your oxen." He turned his eyes on the track ahead of us. Inwardly I cursed Goronwy, and I kicked him surreptitiously for his pains. He had shut the man up just when he seemed to be relaxing a little. I knew better than to suppose the direction about oxen was meant solely for Goronwy. Yet Goronwy surely had no more authority than I. My father, not Goronwy's, was head of the householding, and my father was generally inclined to support the Emperor, if with some reservations. Perhaps, if we gave him hospitality, the stranger would feel himself among friends and speak more freely. I wanted to hear him talk. Like a boy, I wanted to hear about Arthur's warband, the Family; about battles and kings and the struggle against the barbarian darkness. I wanted it like any child or like a man too stupid to know the difference between a pretty tale and the grasping, violent men whom kings and warriors are most likely to really be. I had always wanted to hear about those things, even when I knew myself a fool for wanting to, even when I was good at everything a farmer and clansman should be good at, and was too old to want such things, and had no call in my life for wanting. I had even wanted to be a warrior. Boys must be trained in that trade from their early boyhood, and they not infrequently begin fighting while no more than children of fourteen. Yes, and they die before they are twenty. But once I had thought that death might be worth it, and still, this man had but to ride across a river and I wanted it all again.

It would probably be better if this stranger said nothing. I had had trouble enough with my wanting before, and surely I was settling down now, with time. There was no call to stir the old demon up again. I was twenty-one, not old, but too much of an adult to run mad with the fancies of children.

The rest of our three miles passed in silence. The sun set in clouds, and the stars were clouding over. The wind was cold in our faces, stinging the eyes to tears. The warrior huddled in his cloak, finally sheathing his sword, though I noticed he kept one hand on it. My teeth were chattering when we reached the long, low-lying buildings of home and smelt the warm fires and food.

I jumped out of the cart at my own family's house, telling Goronwy to wait. He agreed with a grunt though he looked at our guest nervously. The stranger merely held his horse steady and looked at Goronwy and at the door.

My mother and the elder of my sisters were by the fire, cooking. My younger brother Dafydd was playing with the dog, while my grandfather talked to him. They all looked up as I opened the door.

My mother smiled. "Well, then, Rhys. We had thought the forest swallowed you. But we've kept

dinner despite that. Was it good wood you found?"

"Good enough. But we found more than wood, Mother. Where is my father?"

"In the barn. But what is it?"

"You'll know soon enough. Stay indoors." At this suggestive statement, my brother jumped up and began demanding, and two cousins ran up from some corner to see what about, but I grinned and ducked back out.

When I came into the barn my father was brushing down our little brown mare, the one that drew the cart in summer. He was humming softly, his thick hands quick and sure and gentle. I paused a moment, hand on the door, looking at his thick-set figure and wondering what he would do. My father is the head of our householding, of our family: all the descendants, to the fourth generation, of Huw and Celyn, some thirty-seven people in all. Our clan is not a high-ranking one, but we are prosperous enough, and recognized over the land south of Mor Hafren in Dumnonia. My father could speak in a quarrel and be heard, and men from other clans and householdings would come to ask his advice of crops and taxes and what to do about their neighbors' habits. He had always supported the policy of the Pendragon, and whenever others talked about refusing to pay the higher tribute which Arthur's warband required, he'd defend the Empire—but that was a different matter from taking a member of that warband as a guest, under constraint. My father never liked doing anything under constraint, and we were strong enough to dispose of one warrior. Still, we were a Christian householding, and my father was a Christian man, and believed in hospitality (within reason) and in courtesy. I shut the door quietly and walked towards him across the beaten earth floor.

"Well, Rhys, and have you stored the wood?" my father asked, without turning around.

"Never mind the wood. Father, Goronwy and I met up with a warrior. He says he's of Arthur's Family, and he wants lodgings for tonight. For himself and for his warhorse."

My father set down the straw he was using as a brush, straightened and turned deliberately, meeting my eyes. "Indeed. Where did you meet him?"

"At the ford. He crossed the river shortly after us."

"From the forest? Alone?"

"Yes. But he is not equipped like a bandit."

"Armed?"

"Well armed, I think. And I've never seen a horse as fine as his."

"Where is he?"

"In front of the house, with Goronwy and the cart."

My father caught up his lantern and walked out of the barn. I followed him.

The warrior was still sitting on his stallion, waiting, and Goronwy still looked uneasy. As we came up, I noticed that the door was open a crack, the firelight bright in it. My family was watching.

My father lifted the lantern high, trying to see the face of the dark, mounted figure. He was tense, could feel it, but his face in the lamplight was calm and steady. The light made his red hair, gray streaked as it was, look dark, and it cast his bright blue eyes into shadow. He looked young and strong, firm in his authority.

The warrior stared at him, eyes glinting through his tangled black hair. Then, slowly, he dismounted and steadied himself with one hand on his horse's shoulder. He half raised the other hand.

"Sion ap Rhys." He named my father in his hoarse voice.

"Gwalchmai ap Lot," said my father. "Ach, I did not think you would remember."

"I told you I would. This is your householding, then?"

"I am the head of it." My father slowly walked closer to the other, stopped. "And such as it is, Lot."

Gwalchmai, you're free and welcome to the use of it; indeed, the family is honored. Rhys!" He had turned to me. "~~You and Goronwy get the wood unloaded and the oxen stalled. Lord Gwalchmai,~~" he turned back to the other, "come into the house and rest."

"My horse," said the other. "I must see to my horse first."

"Rhys can..."

"I look after him myself."

"Oh, very well. The barn is this way, Lord. Rhys, first tell your mother to get something special for dinner—some of the ham, at least, and eggs, certainly eggs, and some of the apples—ach, she knows better than I. But some hot water? Yes, hot water. Well, go on then!" He started back to the barn and the other followed, leading his horse, limping a little.

I hesitated, then ran to the house, gasped out my father's message—unnecessarily, since the eavesdroppers had heard it themselves—ran back to the cart, leapt in, and told Goronwy to hurry up.

"But I don't understand it," complained Goronwy as he goaded the oxen, and then began to shamble towards the wood pile. "My uncle Sion knows that warrior?"

I shook my head, in astonishment rather than in denial. My father had said many things about the Pendragon, his warband and his policies, but the strangest was that once, as he was taking some wheat down to Camlann to sell it there, he'd given a ride in the cart to a young man whom he later discovered to be Gwalchmai, son of Lot, king of the Ynysoedd Erch, those islands north of Caledonia. The two had talked somewhat on the way, and my father had paid the other's lodgings for a night, ignorant of the other's identity. Afterwards he discovered that the youth had just escaped from the Saxons, and was on his way to Camlann to join the Family. "I knew, talking to him, that he would be a great warrior," my father would say when he told the story. "And I asked him to remember me. And that is pure pride, wanting to be known by a famous and glorious lord. But see, he is a great warrior. He was a good lad when I met him. Quiet, courteous, generous—perhaps a little uncanny, but... I wonder if he does remember me. I doubt it."

It was nine years since my father first told that tale. Then he had just returned from the journey, and Gwalchmai ap Lot was still an unknown. By the end of that same summer he was spoken and sung of over all Britain. Numerous tales, of varying probability, were told of him. He was said to have tamed one of the horses of the Fair Folk, an immortal animal faster than the wind, that none could ride but he alone. He was said to have an enchanted sword, and to triple his strength in battle. He could, it was said, cut down three men with one blow; nothing could stand before him. He was a favored ambassador of the Emperor, because of his courtesy and eloquence: they said he could charm honey from the bees or water from a stone. Whatever one chose to believe, he was one of the finest, probably the very finest, of Arthur's Family, which meant the best warrior in Britain, and, though it was generally agreed that there was something "a little uncanny" about him, he was admired from Caledonia to Gaul. But he remembered my father Sion, and he would be staying in our own householding as a guest.

"You've heard my father's tale," I told Goronwy. "That is the lord Gwalchmai ap Lot."

Goronwy eyed me and muttered something. I didn't ask what. I knew well enough he thought me rather mad, and likely he was right, but I was too excited to care. I do not think wood was ever unloaded faster than I unloaded it then, and when the cart was empty, I left it and the oxen to Goronwy. They were, after all, his father's oxen, not mine. I ran back to the house and, finding that my father and the lord Gwalchmai were still at the barn, I ran there, ostensibly to see if they needed help.

Our brown mare had been moved, and the white stallion had her place. My father had poured out some grain and the horse was eating this as his master rubbed him down, slowly and stiffly as though

the man were very tired. As I came up, he stopped, and asked me quietly if I could bring some hot water from the house.

“You don’t need to bathe the beast,” my father commented.

“He has been hurt. I need to keep the wound clean,” Gwalchmai replied. “Softly, Ceincaled, *mchroidh...*” he spoke soothingly to the horse in a language which I guessed was Irish. The men of the Ynysoedd Erch came from Ireland a generation or so ago.

I brought the hot water from the house and he cleaned the slash across the horse’s chest with it, still speaking to the animal in Irish. I wondered if it did understand, if it was truly one of the horses of the Fair Folk. It looked large and strong and swift enough.

“The cut is recent,” observed my father.

“We were fighting but yesterday afternoon.” The lord Gwalchmai finished with the horse’s wound and began checking and cleaning the animal’s hooves.

My father fidgeted. “You did not have the horse when I met you.”

The warrior looked up, and suddenly looked less uncanny. Almost, he smiled. “I had forgotten that. Yes, I let him go after I escaped from the Saxons with him. But he was a fool and came back to me at Camlann.”

“A fool?”

“Well, he is not a horse from this earth. He is a fool to stay here and have spears thrust into him for my sake.” He picked up the stallion’s off hind foot and frowned at the rim of the hoof, checking the shoe. Even I could see that the metal was worn. The horse lifted its head from the manger, glanced back, then resumed eating. Gwalchmai sighed and, setting the hoof down, stood up. “He is overworn. He slapped the stallion’s rump. “Perhaps I should stay here with him tonight.”

My father was offended. “You’ll do no such thing. Haven’t I just told my wife to cook a special meal, and all because we’ve you as a guest? The horse will be fine. I think, my lord Gwalchmai, you’re more overworn than he is.”

The lord Gwalchmai stared at him.

“By all the saints in heaven!” said my father. “Are you grown too proud to accept my hospitality?”

Gwalchmai made an averting gesture. “Not so, Sion ap Rhys, indeed! It is only...” He stopped abruptly, then went on, “Well, the horse will be fine, then, and I thank you for your hospitality.” He patted the horse again, said something else to it in Irish, picked up some saddle-bags, and the three of us walked up the hill to the house.

My mother had the meal nearly ready: fresh bread with sweet butter; apples, cheese and strong, dark ale were already on the table. A pot of ham and barley stew was cooking over the fire, and I could smell the honey cakes baking. Everyone in the house was waiting around the hearth: my aunt, with her three children (her husband had died some six years before); my two sisters, my brother, my grandfather and my mother. The rest of the clan, in the two other houses of our holding, were going to have to do without ham and barley stew, and come and see the guest in the morning.

My father introduced everyone, and the lord Gwalchmai bowed politely. There was silence and an uneasy shuffling of feet, and then my mother asked Gwalchmai if he wished to put his cloak aside, and wash before dinner. There was time, she said, before the stew was done. Gwalchmai stepped back a little, stiffly, shaking his head, so my sister Morfudd brought him some ale, and a place was made for him by the fire. My father seized a piece of the bread, smeared it with butter, and sat down, eating enthusiastically.

“It’s best while it’s warm,” he told Gwalchmai. The warrior nodded, and leaned sideways against the roof-tree. After a little while, he loosed the brooch that held his cloak, as though he felt the heat.

“More overworn than the horse,” my father had said. It was true: the man looked near to dropping. ~~“We were fighting but yesterday afternoon”—it was not good weather to be fighting in, nor to travel in, for that matter.~~ I wondered whom he had fought. There are plenty of bandits about to the northwest. Even in the summer I would take a spear if I had to go up the north road very far.

The stew had finished cooking and, when my father had asked the blessing, we crossed ourselves and set to. The stew was delicious, the honey cakes as good as they smelled, and everyone except the guest ate eagerly. Gwalchmai, though he complimented my mother very nicely and asked courteous questions about the holding, ate very little, and that slowly.

When we were finished, and the meal had been cleared away, my mother looked at the lord Gwalchmai and shook her head. “My lord, do give me that cloak a moment,” she pleaded. “That’s a great tear you have in it. I’ll mend it for you.” As he shook his head and began a refusal, she wrinkled her nose and added, “And the rest of your things could stand some mending and a good wash, my lord Rhys, why don’t you get some of your other clothes, so I can wash the lord Gwalchmai’s?”

I was a bit shocked by my mother’s forwardness, but the lord Gwalchmai only said, “There would not be time for them to dry. I must leave tomorrow morning.”

“Tomorrow morning? Well, if I hang them by the fire, they can dry by midmorning, and certainly you can stay till then. But you must stay longer, indeed you must. You are not well enough to travel in such weather.”

“I am well enough. I must leave early. Just show me where I can sleep.”

“Let me mend the tear in your cloak, then, at the very least. Come, it lets in the wind to chill you, and the snow to drench you, and I can mend it in no time.”

When Gwalchmai began another polite refusal, my mother, exasperated, seized the cloak by the front, unpinned it, and took it away from him. He stood back, hand dropping to the gold hilt of his sword. I noticed the glint of his chain mail under the woolen over-tunic—then noticed that the tunic was slashed and unraveling across the ribs, and that the edges of the tear were stained a darker red. My father also noticed it.

“So-o-o,” he said, surprised. “Your horse wasn’t the only one to take a spear thrust.”

Gwalchmai backed quickly to the roof-tree and drew his sword half out of the sheath. The blade gleamed with an unnatural brightness in the flickering light.

My father stood where he was, the blood slowly rising to his face, making it dark with anger. My mother looked at him, not at Gwalchmai, the cloak still in her hands. I looked around for a weapon.

“You have your hand on your sword,” my father pointed out in a level voice. I knew that voice: when I was a boy, it had usually preceded a thrashing for me.

Gwalchmai made no reply. Only his eyes moved, quickly checking the room, fixing on my father.

“You can put the thing away,” said my father. “I knew you for two days, nine years ago, but I believe that in that time you consecrated the thing at Ynys Witrin. You should not be so ready to let blood with a consecrated weapon. Especially the blood of your host.”

Gwalchmai flushed slightly, and stared at my father for a long moment. Then, abruptly, he sheathed the sword. His hand dropped from its hilt and hung loosely by his side.

My father hurried over to him. “Let me see this wound of yours.”

The warrior looked at him a moment, then made a helpless gesture and began unfastening the tunic. My mother, lips pressed firmly together in disapproval, put some water over the fire to heat.

It was a painful-looking wound, a slash across the ribs on his right side. Gwalchmai drew his under-tunic off over it carefully, and set the garment on top of the mail-coat. His torso was criss-crossed with old scars already, more than I cared to think about receiving, mostly on the right side of his body.

My mother shook her head, took a clean cloth and began cleaning the cut. She paused a moment, and he sat down by the fire. He was thin, and shivered a little. The look on his face was terrible exhaustion and humiliation and, almost, despair.

“Why did you try to hide it?” my father demanded angrily. “You can’t go traveling with that. You will have to stay here.”

Gwalchmai shrugged, winced at the movement. “I have already traveled with it. Most of today. I know, well, most...farmers would...kill a man of Arthur’s, if they knew it were safe to try. Ach, almost everyone this side of Britain hates the High King.”

My father’s face again grew dark with anger. “I would not kill a guest of mine if he were my worst enemy, even if he were fit and strong and ready to do me injury, and not sick and wounded. I am not like to kill a man I met as a friend, no matter who his lord is. And I support the Emperor.”

Gwalchmai looked up at him steadily, then, very slowly, he smiled. “Forgive me. I did not even think, nor pause to look at you. You would not.” He drew a deep, sobbing breath. “It has been a long, long time.”

“Since I met you?”

“I was not even a warrior then. One forgets how people act. Ah God, Sion, I am weary.”

“Stay here, then, till you are rested.”

“I will pay you.”

“Sweet Jesu be merciful! When a guest of mine pays me, I will sow my fields with salt, so witness me Almighty God, and all the saints and angels.”

Gwalchmai smiled again, and a light seemed to touch his dark eyes. “I had forgotten such people,” he said, very softly, to himself more than to us. “And I deserve nothing of it. Sweet Jesus is indeed merciful.”

I sat and looked at him as he sat cross-legged in the red light of the fire, with my mother bandaging the wound. Not what I’d expected for so glorious a warrior. I realized, as I looked, that he could not be too much older than myself. His face, under the dirt and matted hair, was still young and very good-looking. But it was already marked by pain and disappointment. He seemed so much older, so suspicious and controlled until now. I looked about at my family, a close circle in half-light and war’s shadow. Yes, it was good. I could afford to be young; I had one place, a good place, a place worthy of love.

But yet something in my heart felt like a sparrow caught in a house, which flutters about the eaves looking for the clear sky and the wind.

TWO

The lord Gwalchmai slept very late the next morning. When he woke, he bathed, washed and trimmed his hair and beard, and put on some of my clothing to go and look at his horse. My trousers and tunic were loose on him, and just a bit long as well, but my mother had confiscated his own things and was working on them, shaking her head over their condition as she worked.

The white stallion stood comfortably in our barn, devouring our grain and ignoring all the other animals there except our brown mare. Gwalchmai argued with my father about the grain.

“The cost of the grain must fall to me, Sion. Warhorses are costly to keep, a luxury for their owners. No host is obliged to provide luxuries for his guest.”

“A warhorse is no luxury for a warrior who fights from horseback. I have the grain; let him eat it. And my father kept his stand, despite the other’s persuasive arguments.

The warrior also checked his mount’s hooves again, and again looked concerned over the shoes. “Are there any blacksmith nearby?” he asked, hopefully.

“None professionally, at this time of year. Some come by when the weather’s warmer, and set up their stalls on market days. But we could shoe your horse for you. My nephew Goronwy’s a fair hand at that.”

“It would be well if he could. And could he also, perhaps, mend my coat of mail?”

“Ah, that’s harder. Very hard, I should think.”

“It need not be a complete repair just now. Simply a few links worked in sideways to keep the rest together, on the line where the spear broke it.”

“You can tell Goronwy what you want, and see.”

Gwalchmai nodded, and we started back to the house. My father excused himself outside the barn and went to check on the cattle in the byres.

“How did the spear break the mail?” I found myself asking, as we trudged up the hill. “I thought chain mail would keep a man safe.”

“It was a thrusting spear.” I must have looked blank, because Gwalchmai suddenly smiled and explained. “Chain mail will keep off throwing spears, provided you’re not too close to the thrower and they’re not using a sword. But a thrusting spear, or the point of a sword, or a hard, straight blow with a good sword, will cut mail like leather. You’d expect more of the stuff, knowing the price of it, wouldn’t you? Still, it’s a deal better than the next best.”

“How much did you pay for yours?” I asked, curious.

“I didn’t buy it. I took it from a Saxon chieftain.”

After killing him, of course. A hard, straight blow with a good sword? I looked at the jeweled hilt of Gwalchmai’s sword, glowing against the gray of my second-best over-tunic. The gear of war has a beauty which had spun a glitter of steel and bronze and bright banners over all my thoughts of it, ever since I first saw a party of warriors ride down the south road from Caer Legion to Camlann one summer morning. But, after all, that gear and glitter were only the tools of a trade, and that trade was killing or being killed. Why should I consider it glorious? I was old enough to know better.

The sword was still very beautiful.

Gwalchmai ate somewhat more that evening than he had the night before. He thanked my mother for

the meal, very courteously. The hoarseness was gone from his voice, but he still spoke softly. Morfudd, the elder of my sisters, was very quick to notice anything he might need, and watched him demurely but with a glint in her eyes. I knew she would discuss him with my other sister later. I could see why a woman would. I suddenly thought of my own face in contrast. Not the sort, I feared, to inspire that kind of look from women. More the kind that evokes sisterly confidences, and from women other than my sisters. No, not ugly, but big-boned, red-headed and blue-eyed like my father and irregularly freckled in summer. Everyone always observed that I looked honest. An honest farmer of a reasonably prosperous clan, of an age to settle down with some honest wife and continue the clan. Gwalchmai's face was fine-featured, with high cheek bones and dark eyes, his beard, now trimmed down close to the jaw, making his face look even narrower. He looked like what he was, a warrior and twice royal. Why should I feel that that was so much more than what I was? Britain could do without warriors more easily than without farmers, and kings and their clans come and go, while my clan has farmed the land around Mor Hafren before the Romans came.

But with Britain as it was now, if the warriors had not fought, the only farmers about Mor Hafren would be Saxons, and I and my clan, if we lived and stayed free, would be looking for land among the mountains of Gwynedd, or across the sea in Less Britain. The Pendragon had saved us, and the man who sat across the table from me refusing the ale Morfudd was offering him, he had fought against the darkness...

I was the one who ate only a little at that meal. My mother gave me a hard look as she took away my plate, a "come-and-tell-me-about-it-later" look. I wondered if I could. "Mother, when this warrior goes off again, I want to go with him. I want to see Camlann and Saxons and war; I want to abandon my family for the sort of thing this Gwalchmai has embittered himself with." No, it would not do, was a child's plea, an absurdity, and it was impossible anyway. It was just as unlikely that Gwalchmai would be willing to take me as that my mother would be willing to let me go.

We sat down by the hearth fire, and Gwalchmai asked my father polite questions about the householding and the clan, and the land around Mor Hafren, and the last harvest, and listened very attentively to the answers. It took my father a while to work the talk about to his own questions. He eventually did it, though.

"...set them out to pasture when the snow isn't too deep, even in the mid-winter. But now, well, too cold for anything of the kind, and they won't leave the byre. Cleverer than humans that way. Or than some humans."

"I am not clever, then?" Gwalchmai looked serious, but his eyes were a trifle too bright.

"You are traveling at a time when sensible men sit by the fire."

"I am sitting by the fire now."

"But what we had to do to put you there! Truly, lord Gwalchmai, when did you set out, and why?"

"As to the when, at the beginning of November; as to the why—I am looking for a woman. She may have come this way, eight years ago, in the late autumn. A fair-haired woman, who rode a brown mare and was followed by two servants, one of them an old man with half an ear missing. She had blue eyes, may have worn blue, and spoke with a northern accent."

"A noblewoman?" asked my father. "No, I've not seen nor heard of such a woman. But why are you looking for her?"

"I...owe her something. I have not had the opportunity of repaying her, while the war lasted, and now that we have peace in Britain, I am trying to find her again."

"In the middle of winter? Who is she?"

Gwalchmai looked down. "Sion, it is a complicated tale, and a long one, and one not greatly to my

credit.”

My father shrugged, fumbled at the foot of his stool, and picked up a piece of wood he had been carving into a cup. “As you please. But, if the tale is long, we’ve this night and the next, and on to that wound of yours is healed, my lord.” He stopped, his eyes meeting Gwalchmai’s. “Why does it trouble you so?”

Gwalchmai smiled. “Because it is a bitter memory.” We were quiet for a moment, and then he went on abruptly. “I loved that woman once, and wronged her.”

My father eyed his cup, and began to whittle at the rim, studiously avoiding Gwalchmai’s eyes. “Are you still love her?”

“As God witnesses me, yes. But I must seek her forgiveness at the least. I did not ask it when we parted, and I had brought great suffering onto her.” There was another long silence. Gwalchmai looked at his hands, the long fingers twined together on his knees. “You’ve a right to hear the tale, Sion and Rhys, if you wish it. I’ve no right to conceal the matter to save my pride, or to preserve an honor which I forfeited to her. And I also owe you a debt.”

“Mm. Of trust,” said my father, beginning to carve properly. The knife made a soft *chk*-ing sound. “I should like to hear the tale.”

Gwalchmai looked up and into the fire, as men do when they summon their memories of an event and wonder how to set the words to it. He rubbed the palm of his sword hand against his knee, slowly, as though something clung to it.

“I suppose, then, that it began in the spring, eight years ago,” he said. The wind rustled in the thatch and my mother’s needle glinted as she sewed. Gwalchmai straightened and sat motionless, eyes still fixed on the fire. “Eight years ago, in the spring of the year, my lord Arthur sent me on an embassy to Caer Ebrauc. The old king, Caradoc, had died, and his nephew Bran ap Caw, the eldest of the twelve sons of Caw, succeeded him. All the sons of Caw were enemies of Arthur over some blood feud begun when my lord seized the High Kingship, so my lord feared that Bran might begin a rebellion. This was during our northern campaign against the Saxons of Deira and Bernicia and the other northern kingdoms. The campaign had till then gone well, and the Saxons were feeling the force of our raids, but to no greater degree than that which made them determined to have revenge on us. They were much stronger than us as they ever were, especially when they leagued together, but we had moved about, striking where they least expected it, and raided until they had had to go hungry a bit through winter. It would take another year at least, though, before they would have to make and keep terms, and a rebellion by one of the British kingdoms at that point could be fatal to us. My lord had to send an ambassador to Bran to try his mind, and to conciliate him. He chose me.”

“You were fairly young at the time.” My father gave him a sharp look. “That was only a year after we met you.”

“I was just eighteen.” Gwalchmai smiled. “But my lord had to send one of his best warriors, or Bran would be insulted. He couldn’t send Cei or Gereint or my brother Agravain, because they’d be liable to throw wine in Bran’s face the moment he hinted any insult to Arthur, which would hardly conciliate the man. He couldn’t send Bedwyr, because he is a Breton and only moderately well-born—though a nobler man never breathed upon the earth—and Bran could be insulted at that, if he chose to be. He told me all this when I pointed out that I was too young. He sent me.”

“Gwalchmai the Golden-tongued,” murmured Morfudd coyly.

He laughed, glancing at her. “Cei first called me that as a joke. Well, I set out for Caer Ebrauc from King Urien’s fortress in Rheged, I, and two others from Arthur’s Family. The roads were bad, and it took us some seven days, though we all had fine horses. The apple trees were beginning to blossom

though, and the woods were becoming green. My horse Ceincaled ran like the sun on the waves. ~~thought it very good to be alive, to be young, to be Arthur's warrior—the last was still new to me.~~ I had no great concern for Bran of Llys Ebrauc. I could not in my heart see how any man in Britain could oppose Arthur and his Family. There is no one like my lord Arthur the High King, and no warrior leader so great in all Britain.

“But, when we reached Caer Ebrauc, I began to see that Bran might be a danger after all. The city was one that the Romans built to keep their legions in, and it has a great wall, still strongly fortified, and a great deal of room for warriors, while the land about it is rich and well populated. The town behind the wall is more than half abandoned, like any other town this age, but it is prosperous enough. The king's warband stays in one of the old Roman barracks, instead of in a feast hall or their own houses. It is a large warband. Mostly foot fighters, not cavalry, but still, some five hundred trained, well-armed warriors. And Ebrauc could also raise an army from the subject clans, while Arthur had to rely on his subject kings for that, and they are not easily to be relied upon. I rode into Caer Ebrauc with greater care than that with which I had ridden up to it.

“Bran lived in the palace of some ancient Roman commander, which had last been repaired by some vicar of the north a century or so ago. I and the others would stay with him, as fitted our rank. We stopped in front of this palace, gave our horses to the grooms, and tried to see that our luggage was put somewhere safe before we went in to see Bran. While we were busy arguing with the servants, a groom came out of the palace and went over to the grooms to see that the horses were stabled.”

He fell silent for a moment, then shook his head. “The sunlight was as clear as spring water over clean sand, and the doves were cooing on the broken tiles of the roof. She walked like the shadow of a bird on a clear stream. Her hair was the color of broom flowers. When she reached the horses, she fell on my eyes on her, and turned around, and blushed when she saw me watching. Then, the servants had the luggage, and we were being shown in to the king.

“I felt like a harp-string which has just been plucked. I wanted to make a song about the way she moved. I think my blood was singing. But I had to still myself to speak with Bran.”

“Was she very beautiful?” asked Morfudd eagerly. My mother looked at her sharply. Gwalchmai stared a moment, then looked away and shrugged.

“She seemed so to me. Others have told me, no.” He paused, and added harshly, “Her nose was too long, her teeth too big, and she was thin as a fence post.”

“But you said...”

“I said! Well, but there was the way she moved, the way she lifted her skirts to run a little, and she turned her head, and the light that slid across her face when she smiled. Let her stand still, and you might call her plain; but when she moved, or spoke, she was like a skylark above the hills. She it was that made herself beautiful, not the beauty given by nature.”

He looked back at the fire, clenching his fists, and spoke as though it caused pain—which, for a man such as he, it doubtless did. “And that was all. I wanted to see her again, and thought that I desired her, but I didn't particularly care if I knew her name. It was the way we talk of such things. I had never, well, she made me feel a great thing, but I had no thought that she could feel, too. God forgive me, but I wanted to enjoy myself and give nothing.”

Gwalchmai gave my father a straight, fierce look, then unclenched his hands, rubbed them together, and went on. “I went and talked to Bran of Llys Ebrauc. It was a fine combat of words. He kept suggesting or hinting deadly insults, and I kept twisting them about into straightforward questions and harmless comments, and both of us hinted at the political implications unceasingly. In the end, Bran asked me how long I intended to stay. My lord had told me, ‘Stay there as long as the situation

requires,' and it was plain to me that the situation required me to watch Bran constantly. So I replied, 'By your leave, I will stay until my lord enjoins my return.' Bran didn't like it. He knew that I couldn't prepare any rebellion while I remained in Ebrauc, and he did not dare to order me killed, for fear of my lord's vengeance. I could see him trying to think of some way he could say that I had insulted him, so that he could command me to leave; but he had no reasonable pretext. So he told me he would give a feast that night, to welcome me, and that all of his were mine for the using, and so on. I was glad to get away from him. But, when I lay down to rest before the feast, I thought again of the girl. It seemed to me that she must be one of Bran's servants: she had been plainly dressed, and had been seen to the horses. Bran had made an offer of hospitality, and I thought, 'If we must stay a while, perhaps I will take him up on it.' I fell asleep wondering what she would look like when she smiled.

"She was, indeed, at the feast. She came in on the left side of the hall, to pour the wine for the high table, and she wore a dress of blue silk fastened with gold, and more gold in her hair. Bran smiled at her, and said, half-laughing, 'Why, the moon is rising!' and she smiled back and filled his glass. The man next to me whispered, 'That is Elidan, daughter of Caw, the king's sister.'

"And that, I told myself, is that. I could spend my time with serving girls, if I pleased, but Elidan, daughter of Caw, the king's sister, was not to be touched, and most especially not to be touched by her brother's enemy.

"She poured the wine, and sat down beside Bran, taking the queen's part, since his own wife was dead in childbirth. After a little while, she rose again to refill the glasses, and when she came to pour for me, some of the wine spilled. She gave a little gasp and nearly dropped the jug. I caught the side of it to steady it, and my hand touched hers, my eyes meeting hers as I looked up. She blushed again, and I could feel the trembling in her hand. The wine shivered, light and dark rippling on its surface.

"I let go the jug. After a moment, she filled my glass, curtsied and went on down the table. I watched her as she went, and my blood was singing again.

"We stayed at Ebrauc, and Bran and Bran's people by and large ignored us. Some tried to quarrel, but both the men I had chosen to come with me knew how to pretend they hadn't heard, or even that they didn't care. Still, it was no pleasant place for us, and I wished fiercely to be back with my lord Arthur fighting. I knew that the Family had been gathered, and had raised the standard and ridden off to war. They were all there, my brother Agravain, my friends Cei, Bedwyr and the rest; and I sat about at Llysoed Ebrauc, a dead weight on the earth. I knew that Arthur wanted me where I was, and that it was an honor to be trusted with such a task—but it was early May! I could have killed from sheer frustration.

"And then I had a chance meeting with Elidan, and forgot all else.

"About a week after my arrival, I went to the stables to see to my horse, and she was there, looking at the horse. I had not seen her since the feast. When I came up, she blushed again, and backed off from the stall.

"'You needn't be afraid,' I told her, 'he won't hurt you.' She looked at me, gave a little bow with her head, and stood still. I went into the stall and caught Ceincaled's halter, and he snorted and nuzzled my wrist. 'See?' I told the girl. 'He is very gentle.' Still she said nothing. 'Would you like to come and see him?'

"She edged closer slowly, coming into the stall on the opposite side of the horse. Very carefully, she put out a hand to pat his neck. He eyed her and flicked his ears forward, and she smiled. I thought it was the first time my eyes opened, when I saw her smile.

"'Is this Ceincaled?' she asked, in a low voice like the sound of a soft note on the pipes. 'Is it true that he is of no mortal breed?'

"I told her yes, it was true, and, when she questioned me and smiled again, I told her the whole story.

I am not in the habit of telling it, and certainly not as I told it then, to impress. But it had charmed her enough for her, and she listened with her eyes shining and her lips slightly parted.

“‘So I am blessed with the finest of horses,’ I told her, when I finished the tale, and, before I myself knew what I was saying, I went on, ‘Though he needs exercising, as any other. Do you know of a good place to ride, my lady?’ ‘There’s Herfydd’s Wood,’ she replied. ‘A very lovely place. There are open meadows in it, too, where horses can run.’ And then she paused, and added, ‘I am taking my mare there this afternoon, if you wish me to point out the way.’ ‘I would indeed wish it, and would be grateful,’ I said. ‘And grateful also if you would show me this wood.’ She stammered an assent.

“There was nothing in this beyond courtesy, nothing to make anyone suspect. She had her servant with her the while. But we could talk. It was a glorious ride. I have no recollection of what we spoke of, merely that I talked a great deal and made her laugh. Her laugh was like the flutter of a bird’s wing, and it set my mind flying. When we returned to Ebrauc, I asked her if she knew of other good places to ride in, for, though I had enjoyed Herfydd’s Wood, variety is a pleasure. She said yes, there was Bryn Nerth, which she could show me, if I wished. Thus we rode together the next day, and the next, and the next as well. The world seemed to me like the laughter of sunlight in the trees, a shimmer and light dancing.

“But after five days of this, at the time we had set for our ride, she appeared with a set, chilled face and told me that she could not take her mare out that day. I argued with her, and she made excuses and left. I went out alone in the end, very angry, and rode at a full gallop until Ceincaled was sweating and eager to stop, and that is a long way. It was plain enough why she had not come. Bran had begun to suspect—not remarkably—that this riding together was not just courtesy; and he had spoken to Elida. He had warned her or commanded her against me. I told myself that I shouldn’t have asked her to come with me in the first place. It was madness to desire her, and to cherish the hopes I did. Her brother was very fond of her—and she was fond of Bran, if it came to that. Even if my interest had been anything permanent, which it was not, still it would have been impossible. One cannot contract marriage alliances with one’s lord’s enemies. And if it were not a marriage, Bran would have good reasons in his rebellion. I owed it to my lord Arthur, to my honor as a guest and an emissary and his respect as a Christian noblewoman to leave the girl alone.

“I resolved to be no more than courteous, and I kept my resolve, too—for a week or so. But I held her in my mind at night in my dreams, and when I played the harp alone I found myself singing of her, and I began to wonder how we could fool Bran; and I could think of many ways. And then one day I saw her in a corridor in the palace, alone, and without thinking I seized her wrist and said, ‘I will be riding Herfydd’s Wood tomorrow after lunch,’ very softly into her ear. I let her go and walked on, feeling her eyes on me as I went. I cursed myself afterwards for saying that, and resolved that I would not go to the wood the next day. But I went. I spent an hour or so riding about the wood, alone, then turned back in disgust—and met her near the wood’s edge. She had only one servant with her, an old man with half an ear missing, and he wore a look of great reluctance.

“I leapt from my horse and ran over to catch her mare’s bridle. ‘You came,’ I said: it was all I could say. She looked down at me gravely and nodded, then let go the reins, kicked one foot from the stirrup and jumped from her horse. I caught her as she jumped. The wind touched her hair, but her eyes were still, stiller than the sky and as deep. I felt as though the force that drives life itself had touched us that we stood between earth and heaven. I could feel her heart beating through her ribs as I held her like the heart of a wild swallow, and I was filled with the wonder of it. All was astonishment. We stood and looked at one another, and it was as though we looked into a gulf of light, a fire burning beyond the deep places of the world, or gazed at each other through the blur-edged reality of some

vision. But she was there, and in my arms, a thin, strong body and solemn, blue eyes and straight, fair hair. ‘You came,’ I said again, and I kissed her.

“‘Yes,’ she said. ‘I came.’ She turned to the servant and said, ‘Hywel, could you stay here and watch the horses?’

“The old man nodded unhappily, and we walked off together into the green silence of the forest.”

Gwalchmai fell silent, and sat resting his head on his arms, leaning forward to stare at the low fire on the hearth. My father was motionless, his carving knife a still line of brightness in his hand. Only the wind still made its hollow sound in the thatch.

Morfudd stirred first. “I think that is beautiful,” she said dreamily. “Beautiful.”

Gwalchmai straightened abruptly, throwing his head up and giving her a fierce dark stare. “Beautiful! Och, King of Heaven, beautiful? Woman, it was a very terrible thing.”

“You loved her very badly,” said my mother matter-of-factly, beginning to sew again. “And it seems that she loved you. You were both young. Such things are terrible enough.”

“It was badly that I loved her,” he replied bitterly. “And the worse because she did love me, while what did I love? A beautiful feeling! Dear God, I didn’t care if it destroyed her, and, if it came out, it would. I took advantage of my position as a guest in Bran’s house, I betrayed my lord’s trust, I betrayed her and I betrayed my own honor. I treated a king’s sister like a common whore, and it was the worse because she loved me. Afterwards, that first time, she cried. She wouldn’t tell me why until much later, and then she said, ‘It was because I knew I loved you so much more than you loved me and because of my honor.’ She risked everything for me, and I...beautiful! Lord of Light, have mercy.”

“You’re overstating it,” my father said.

“I wronged her greatly.”

“You wronged her, yes. But there was no need for her to come and meet you. Any girl would know what you meant, and any girl of sense would not have gone.”

Gwalchmai looked back at the fire, linking his hands together and only replying with silence.

“If you feel that way, why didn’t you marry her?” asked my mother.

A shrug. “Later I wanted to. Much later. Too much later. After I had killed her brother.”

“So there was a rebellion?” asked my father.

He looked up at us. “I thought all the world knew of that. Well, the north must be more aware of these things than Dumnonia.”

“I have heard that you killed Bran of Llys Ebrauc,” I volunteered. He gave me a questioning look. “There was a song,” I explained.

“Trust Rhys to listen to songs,” muttered my father. “Well, so Bran found out?”

Gwalchmai leaned forward again, his elbows on his knees. He still spoke carefully, anxious that we should see the worst of it. “No. The rebellion had nothing to do with it. We were very discreet. After the first time, we didn’t see one another for a while. I was angry with her for crying, and because the thing we had was so much more solid and mortal than the vision of it I had at the first. But, after a little while, when I had been thinking of it and of her for a time, I sent her a message through her servant Hywel, the old man. He had been with her since she was born, and didn’t like the business at all, but she’d told him she’d go alone if he didn’t come, and I gather he wished to protect her reputation as much as he was able to. She was accustomed to go riding with only one or two servants—Ebrauc is safe enough that a woman can do that, near the fortress—and we would ride out in different directions at different times, meet at a set place, and then return, again at different times. We were very careful. We spent most of the summer in this, until about the middle of July. Then one of

Bran's men successfully picked a quarrel with my companion Morfran. He is a fine man, brave and steady and quick with his tongue, but has no looks at all and is well-used to hearing of this, which is the reason I chose him for this mission: I knew he would not fight over every trivial slur. But some insult was offered which no nobleman could ignore, and there was a fight. Bran's man was killed. Bran summoned me to see him—summoned me, as though I were his own man and sworn to obey him. He demanded reparation, and by that he meant not a blood-price, but Morfran's life. I refused, of course, and Bran then had the excuse to command me to leave Ebrauc. He added to this command some Roman sentence of exile, by which I and my companions could be killed if we returned. I knew very well that, as soon as we had gone, he would summon his warband, equip it, and raise his army for a rebellion.

"I spent a great deal of time wondering whether I could have prevented it by closer attention to Morfran and the other. I had not precisely ignored them, but I hadn't known of the fight until it was done with and Bran's man was dead. There was nothing to say, 'This you should have attended to; thus it could have been prevented,' and yet I do not know, and cannot know, whether I could have managed it better if it had not been for Elidan. I was angry about Bran's order, and angry with myself when I left. I was angry with Elidan on both accounts, and yet I longed to see her to say farewell. But on my departure was hurried, and though I looked for her until I almost forgot discretion and went about asking for her, I could not find her, and rode out of Llys Ebrauc angrier than before. And I was thus angry when I met her on the road.

"She rode out of the wood beyond the wall, on her brown mare, with Hywel after her. She was wearing blue, and the wind caught at her hair so that she looked like a feather blown on a bright gale. My companions stared at her. I had not told them about her, afraid that they might make jokes, and that to the wrong people.

"She drew rein on the road, and her mare champed at the bit and sidled towards the bank. She patted its shoulder with one thin hand.

"'So you are going,' she said.

"'I am going,' I replied, angrier than ever because she was so beautiful and so daring. 'By your brother's order.'

"She looked down and fidgeted with the reins; looked up again. 'God go with you, then, my falconer,' she said.

"It hurt me that she should call me that. I had once asked her not to. Though my name means 'hawk' my mother used to call me by it, and the memory of that is most bitter. She is very terrible and dreadful, my mother Morgawse. 'God may well go with me,' I said, 'for certainly he will not stay with the injustice of Ebrauc.'

"At that, she too flushed with anger. Morfran looked at her and suggested that we take her hostage, which made her straighten and glare at all of us; but I shook my head.

"'Oh, indeed,' said Elidan, 'I am not to be a hostage, by your mercy, my lord. Come, I know that there will be war, Gwalchmai ap Lot. My brother wants it. It would be better if I could, as a hostage, prevent it; but no one can prevent a warrior from killing. You care for blood too much.' I did not know where such words came from, and I stared at her in astonishment. She urged her horse closer, and she leaned over to catch my hand and press it to her forehead. 'But I love you, and I love my brother Gwalchmai. Do not you fight him. Promise me that you won't hurt him. Promise me that you will speak to your lord the Emperor about him, and tell Arthur that if Bran ap Caw swears a peace, he will keep it. But promise me that you won't kill Bran, most of all promise me that.'

"I snatched my hand away. I was thoroughly enraged by this slavish pleading for her brother. 'If you

brother wishes to play the treacherous fool, that is his affair, and he must be prepared for whatever consequences my lord imposes,' I said. 'My lord knows far better than I how to deal with rebels.' But when she turned white, and looked at me with a strange, chill look, I had to add, 'But for my part, I will not kill him. I swear by the sun and the wind, I swear the oath of my people I will not. And...my lord Arthur is merciful.'

"She pressed one hand to her forehead, drawing the hair aside, as though her head ached, and she nodded. 'God and his saints preserve you then, Gwalchmai.' We looked at each other for another long moment, and I tried to find words that would make it a sweet parting, but I could think of none. She nodded and urged Ceincaled on, and he started into a canter and left her there. At the first bend of the road I looked back at her, a quiet figure in blue on a quiet brown horse, and I thought of what it meant for a woman to hazard herself thus to say farewell, and wished I had been kinder.

"'And what was all that?' asked Morfran, driving his horse next to mine. I shook my head, and he smiled at me knowingly. 'Her falcon, she calls you? The daughter of Caw, the king's sister. Well, well, and that should be a thorn in the shoes of our friend Bran. You golden-tongued goshawk, why didn't you tell us? I'd like to make a song for the beauty of it all. A song about the hospitality of King Bran of Ebrauc!' And he began to make jokes about Elidan. I felt awkward, angry, and, after a while, I laughed."

Gwalchmai had been playing with a piece of kindling: he threw this suddenly into the fire, and drove the heel of his hands against his eyes. My father set down the cup and his carving knife and stood, took a step towards our guest, then stopped again. "Lord Gwalchmai," he said gently, "you need not tell us this tale."

Gwalchmai looked up again. "It is well that I should tell it. It is right that the shame of it should be known."

"Say nothing further tonight, then. It is late, and you are tired."

"I am. And I thank you for your hospitality, Sion."

"What we have, you are welcome to. Sleep well, my lord."

"Sleep well."

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