

25TH ANNIVERSARY EDITION

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IN TIME
ATLANTIS

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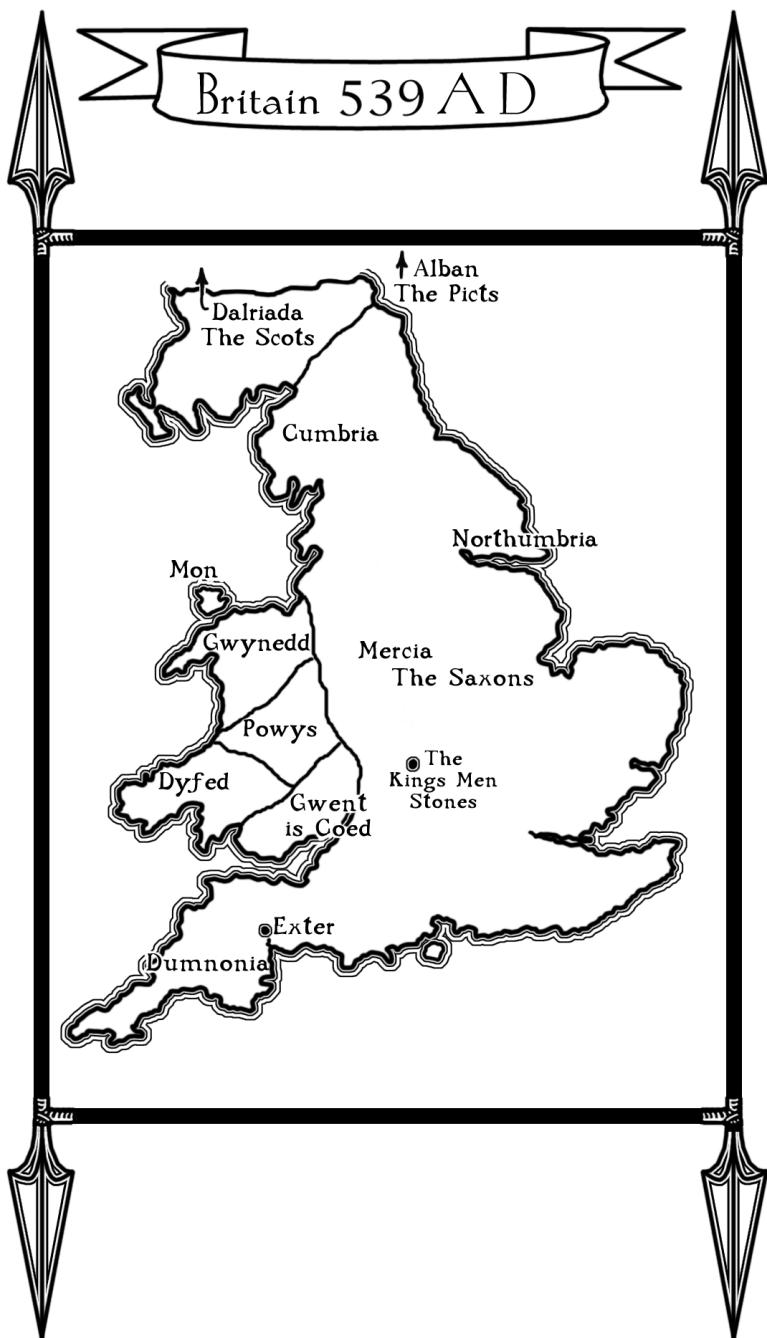
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CHARACTERS OF THE DARK AGE

Queen of Gwynedd	Tory Alexander
King of Gwynedd	Maelgwn
High Merlin	Taliesin Pen Beirdd
Prince of Gwynedd:	Rhun
King of Powys:	Calin Brockwell
Queen of Powys:	Katren
King of Dumnonia:	Catulus
Ruler of Dyfed:	Vortipor
Ruler of Dalriada:	Fergus MacErc
Ruler of Alban:	Cailtram
Ruler of Mercia:	Ossa
Eldest Son of Ossa:	Ongen
Youngest Son of Ossa:	Eormenric
Daughter of Ossa:	Aella
Maelgwn's Champion:	Tiernan
Tory's Champion:	Ione
Maelgwn's Keeper of Rec:	Rhys
Maelgwn's Rep. Aberffraw:	Angus
Court Bard:	Selwyn
Maelgwn's Squire:	Tadgh
Brockwell's Sons:	Bryce, Blain, Owen, Cai
Rhys' Son:	Gawain
Tiernan's Son:	Gareth
Rhys' Wife:	Jenovefa
Vortipor's Daughter:	Bridgit
Sir Angus' Daughter:	Javotte
Sir Angus' Wife:	Alma
Ossa's Crone:	Mahaud
Mahaud's Pupil:	Vanora



PART ONE

LIFE

1

OSSA AND THE ELDER TREE

The night was dark and the storm was fierce. Onward they rode at the mercy of the howling winds. The open plain offered little shelter for Ossa and his band, but they pressed on in the hope of finding a refuge nearby.

The whole of Saxony had been ravaged by storms for months. Unharvested crops lay rotting in the fields from Northumbria to Kent, whilst the menfolk struggled to divert the worst floods in their settlement's history. Meanwhile, the rain just seemed to avoid the lands belonging to King Maelgwn and his allies; the western kingdoms had reaped enough produce to sustain them the length of ten seasons.

Why was the Goddess compelling him to make war on her native people? If this rain persisted, Ossa's winter stores would not see his army and kin through the Fall. Perhaps the Great Lady sought to test his oath, but if there was not some sign of relief soon, Ossa felt he'd be forced to go back on his word to her. Every day the Saxons grew weaker, whilst the neighbouring Britons grew strong.

The time-worn Saxon warlord was not so old that he'd forgotten the battle at Arwystli. How could he forget when he'd lived in the shadow of defeat every day since?

The moment any Saxon, Angle or Jute makes war on my native people, thou shalt all be driven from this land.

Twenty years had come and gone, and still the prophecy of the Goddess remained chiselled in his memory.

If thou cannot live here in peace with us . . . thou shall not live here at all.

Ha! Ossa scoffed at the echo of her words; flooding his lands and starving his people was not his idea of living together in peace.

The promise of the Goddess' wrath had subdued his advancement into the

west because he still feared her might. However, his youngest son, Eormenric, believed the sorcerer of King Maelgwn of Gwynedd was to blame, the one they called Taliesin. Eormenric felt that the Merlin was as responsible for Ossa's tribe being tricked into defeat at Arwystli twenty years ago, as he was for the sad predicament of their lands this day. It was known that Taliesin had used wizardry in the past to enchant the very elements to war. Ossa had seen this first-hand, as had Octa, his father, before him, thus Ossa felt there could be some merit in Eormenric's theory. Octa had waited his entire reign for the aging wizard to die, as had Ossa, but it would seem the Merlin had found a way to cheat even death.

I shall be seeking a way to cheat death myself if I don't get out of this blasted rain, Ossa considered, as the gale force winds threatened to blow him from his mount.

'My Lord.' One of the soldiers directed Ossa's attention to a white light up ahead.

As they neared it, the light turned a deep red and the band of Saxons slowed their horses to a halt.

'What dost thou thinkest, Lord . . . sorcery?' The young soldier was wide-eyed with amazement.

'Perhaps.' Ossa was intrigued. 'Wait here.' He dug his heels in and went to investigate.

Eormenric, feeling he was the only man present who could get away with disobeying the order, took off after his father.

Ossa stopped and dismounted, still some way from the light's source. When Eormenric rode up to join him the Warlord became most disgruntled. 'Go back to the men. Who shall take charge if something should happen to me?'

'No harm shall befall thee.' Eormenric decided to push his luck and sprang from his mount. 'I am here,' he explained in a cocky manner, which Ossa couldn't help but admire.

'Oh alright . . . but stay alert.'

Lightning lit the sky above, awarding them a better view of the area. 'This place be marked as sacred.' Ossa noted the large stones that encompassed the seething spring of misty red.

'I think thou art too easily spooked,' Eormenric whispered in jest as they crept closer to the circle, seeking cover behind a tree that grew just outside it.

Ossa's brow raised at his son's blatant scepticism. 'Had thou ever seen true sorcery at work, thou would be of a different mind.'

Eormenric looked to the blackened sky and held out his hand, which was instantly filled to overflowing by the teeming rain. 'I have seen it.'

Indeed. A malign whisper echoed past them. And what defense dost thou have against it?

Eormenric, startled at first, became irked when he couldn't spy their voyeur. 'Show thyself,' he demanded.

Ossa clasped a hand over Eormenric's mouth, recognising the evil accent. He knew the voice belonged to the wicked old crone named Mahaud. At one time, she had been ally and sorceress to a fallen compatriot of his, Chiglas. But they had all parted company when the treacherous king's capital city in Powys, Arwystli, was taken by Maelgwn Gwynedd and those now known as the Twelve Masters of the Goddess.

'This witch can set a man ablaze by the very thought of it,' Ossa hissed quietly. 'So hold thy tongue, lest we both end up naught but flaming corpses.'

If I had wanted to kill thee, Ossa, I would have done so twenty years ago.

Ossa and his son jumped away from the tree they huddled behind, as the voice seemed to be coming from within it. 'Really . . . then why did thou not finish Maelgwn Gwynedd, instead of allowing him to destroy the king and kingdom that thy magic wast supposedly safeguarding?'

The Goddess be too powerful to assault directly. But I believe she can be overthrown . . . indirectly.

'How?' Eormenric could not contain his curiosity.

'Ask nothing of the foul hag.' Ossa belted his son for his ignorance and led him away.

I can wait, Warlord. Come back and see me when thy kingdom hast turned to a lake. Her dry, confident tone filled Ossa with great loathing. She could feel his hatred brewing. How attractive this emotion was to her; it was the ticket to her release.

'Thou cannot help me, witch. One so evil cannot be of help to any man.' Ossa turned back and roared, ensuring that he was heard.

Be that so?

The teeming rain eased to a light drizzle and the winds just died away. Ossa and Eormenric were stunned to a standstill.

'Perhaps we art being a bit rash, Father. Be this . . . Taliesin any different?'

'Taliesin doth not disappear when the odds art against him,' Ossa snarled at the elder tree, none to eager to admit that the witch might be of use to him.

Self preservation, she explained. I told Chiglas it was suicide to withhold the payment he had promised thee. And kidnapping the Queen of Gwynedd was not my idea of a brilliant move, either! I was not about to hang around and suffer the repercussions of Chiglas' feeble-minded decision making.

'Well, if thou could not defeat the Goddess at Arwystli, what makes thee think that thou could defeat her now?' Eormenric received a pat on the shoulder from his father for having asked a valid question.

I just calmed a storm of her making, did I not?

'Aye,' Eormenric acknowledged, cocking an eye. 'So thou did.'

She hadn't, as the storm had been of her making in the first place; the witch had a real knack for twisting the truth to her advantage in this manner. There were certain creatures from the deva kingdoms between the earthly plane and lower realms — where Mahaud was currently biding her time — and, just because *she* was banned from functioning within a first plane reality, some of her fellow archfiends did not mind whipping up a storm at her request. They enjoyed nothing better than wreaking havoc for havoc's sake.

The Dragon can be destroyed from within . . . I have foreseen this.

The dragon was the guardian spirit of Britain; thus she referred to Maelgwn, King of Gwynedd.

'Then why not just do it, and put us all out of our misery,' Ossa smirked.

That would give me the greatest of pleasure. The crone was growing impatient with him. But as I have been banished from the earth plane, I am finding it a bit difficult!

'Oh! . . . I see.' Ossa delighted in her problem. 'And what guarantee do I have that thou shall not turn thy sorcerous ways on me, should I free thee?'

Without a patron to serve, I am without purpose . . . I have no direction, no cause for being. I desire the downfall of Maelgwn Gwynedd more than the entire populace of Saxony combined . . . including thyself, Ossa.

The malice Mahaud bore for the High King of the Britons was made plain in her harsh inflection. Although Ossa was curious to learn her reasons, he hadn't ruled out the possibility of trickery. 'Why dost thou despise the Dragon so? Because of Chiglas?'

She laughed hysterically, then stopped abruptly, her mood becoming altogether more sinister.

I think not. Maelgwn Gwynedd, his whore of a Queen, King Brockwell of Powys and Myrddin were the ones who had me exiled to the lower etheric world. But I have been watching them from my timeless prison cell and they all possess certain flaws in their nature that, with just a tiny bit of encouragement from me, could cause divisions in the Dragon's kingdom and restore the perfect little world of the Britons to the chaos of yesteryear. There shall be fine plunder and spoils for whomever releases me to spin my web of retribution. With me to enchant, no one will even suspect foul play until their defeat is complete. I shall make Maelgwn Gwynedd look so wretched in the eyes of his people that he shall be remembered thus for all time. The ways of the Goddess will be cast aside once more, and my Lord will be the hero in history's eyes.

Ossa and Eormenric were mesmerised by her ploy, but it still sounded too good to be true. 'And what shall become of thy compatriot after the Dragon's defeat?'

What kingdom dost thou fancy, Warlord? The possibilities art endless.

The voice of the enchantress was so inviting; she made it sound so easy.

This was the ally Ossa had been waiting for, his key to the greater mysteries of this land. 'If I agree, what must I do in order to release thee?'

Dig under this tree and there ye shall find a cauldron buried with a map. Do not open the cauldron, but take it directly to the house marked on the map. A woman lives there who was my prize student until Taliesin stole her away and brainwashed her with all his positive nonsense.

'Vanora,' Ossa surmised. 'The daughter of Chiglas.'

Aye, she confirmed in encouragement, pleased that he was seriously considering her proposal. Now, although she may appear as pure as the virgin snow, all ye must do to bring her to her senses be to lift the lid from the cauldron and persuade her to look inside. Vanora will know what is required for my release and will devise a means.

2

LUGHNASA – THE GATHERING

The month-long festival of Lughnasa had always been celebrated by the native Britons to honour the harvesting of their yearly crop. But for the past twenty years, the feast of the God of the Sun also commemorated the signing of the pact that now bonded each British kingdom to the other. Every year these great kings and leaders met to discuss their progress and the problems facing their alliance. This gathering was held at Arwystli, in Powys, for it was the most central point of allied Britain.

In addition to the normal festivities that such an occasion would suggest, Arwystli was also celebrating the twenty years of prosperity it had seen since Powys had been freed from the tyrannous reign of King Chiglas. Powys had then entered into an alliance with neighbouring kingdoms, under the guidance of Chiglas' successor and its current ruler, King Brockwell.

Brockwell was the great-grandson of the famous warrior, Cunedda, as his predecessor Chiglas had been, and although Brockwell was originally a son of Gwynedd, the people of Powys adored him. For this king was of good heart and possessed a fearless disposition. Nominated by the Goddess to lead Powys out of darkness, lead them out of darkness he did. The kingdom's fields overflowed with the bounty of the Goddess and peace had prevailed in the wake of the eons of turmoil their forefathers had known.

Brockwell's Queen, Katreñ, was the epitome of a rags to riches story. Born the daughter of a simple farmer, she had elevated herself in society through her acts of bravery for king and country. The first female warrior to be initiated into the 'circle of twelve', known as the Warriors of the Goddess, she had won her social standing and the heart of Brockwell during the debacle of Chiglas. As tiny and petite as she was beautiful and chaste, Katreñ had blessed the kingdom with three fine, strapping sons to succeed the king.

Her eldest son, Blain, aged eight years and ten, was heir to the throne of Powys. Owen, her second-born, was five years and ten, and Cai, her youngest, was two years and ten. The eldest son of King Brockwell was Bryce, aged five years and twenty. Bryce was the adopted half brother of the other three, who, due to a confusing set of circumstances early in life, also carried the title Earl of Penmon (his father's estate in Gwynedd). Bryce would have been the heir to Brockwell's throne in Powys had he not been illegitimate. But as it was, his three younger legitimate brothers all had the right to claim the crown before him.

Though the Queen had not borne Bryce of her own loins, she loved him dearly. So much so that she found herself favouring him over the others at times — for how could she help but feel responsible for doing him out of his inheritance.

Tory had a lot on her mind as she followed the maid to the High King's chamber at Arwystli. She'd been mindful of the sad state of the lands that lay in the east, and an updated report had her worried.

For it seemed somewhat suspicious to her that the farmland of their foe could be so badly ravaged, when the allied kingdoms under her husband's rule had reported a greater yield than ever before. Undoubtedly, the Saxons had figured a way to pin the blame for their misfortune on allied Britain. *They'll be blaming it on sorcery, most likely.* But whatever the cause truly was, this imbalance had to be rectified or it would plunge Britain into war.

I shall put this forward at the meeting. For if we do not attempt to aid these people, they will surely set about to take what they need to survive the cold seasons.

Tory's word was second only to the High Merlin of the Druids during these annual meetings of the alliance, and she was the only woman permitted to attend. For she was the chosen representative of the Goddess, through which the divine mother spoke in council to guide the leaders of Britain.

‘Thy room, Majesty.’ The head maidservant announced, as she entered and stood aside for the High Queen to enter. ‘I have prepared a hot bath, just as it pleases thee.’

‘Many thanks, Ganivra. This place seems like a second home these days.’ Tory breezed into the room, placing aside her hand luggage and making herself at home on the lounge.

‘We aim to keep it that way, Majesty. King Brockwell does look forward to thy visits.’

‘As do I,’ Tory assured her.

‘Majesty?’

Tory turned in her seat to find Katren poised in the doorway, the skirt and sleeves of her gown still caught up in the vacuum of her hasty entry.

‘Why did thou not send a messenger ahead?’ Just for a second, Katren

appeared disappointed. 'I wanted to greet thee upon thy arrival.'

Tory stood as Katren approached with her arms outstretched. 'Oh Katren, thou art well aware of how I detest formality.'

The Queen of Powys beamed with excitement as she embraced the High Queen. 'And thou art well aware of how I adore it.'

'I much prefer to be welcomed in this way.' She held Katren at arm's length to look at her.

'It feels like an eternity since last I saw thee.' Katren was so overjoyed that she burst into tears. 'I do miss thee so . . . and the Masters.'

'Well, here I am.' Tory smiled. 'And please, stop calling me Majesty.'

'But, Majesty! Thou art the High Queen of Britain now.'

'Katren!' Tory found it hard to believe that anyone could be such a stickler for ceremony. 'Okay . . . I forbid thee to call me anything but my given name.' She grinned, satisfied that she'd now get her own way.

'If that be thy will.' Katren gave in gladly.

Tory resumed her seat, half expecting her friend to settle beside her. 'How fares all with thy kin?'

'Well, actually, my boys are awaiting an audience just outside.' Katren waved a finger over her shoulder. 'Should I summon them in?'

Again Tory was surprised at her. 'Why, of course!'

Ganivra left them at Katren's word, and the next moment all four brothers came striding through the door. Bryce approached Tory first, as he was best acquainted with the High Queen.

'Sensei, welcome.' He bowed deeply before her, his hands clenched in front of his solar plexus as they did in Mastery.

Bryce had replaced his mother in the 'circle of twelve' at the age of five years and ten, making him the youngest initiate to date. Ten years down the track, he was one of the finest warriors Tory had ever trained.

Tory returned the gesture in a not-so-formal fashion and then hugged him. 'Dear Bryce, I do swear thou art the spitting image of thy father at times.'

I have need to speak with thee. Bryce bethought her, knowing his sensei would hear him if he willed it hard enough. He then stepped aside for Blain and smiled, as if he'd thought nothing of the like.

A feeling of urgency accompanied his message, but Tory inquired no further; she would know the all of it soon enough.

'Majesty.' Blain came forward and bowed in the regular fashion. 'I have need to speak with thee — '

'Wait!' Tory held out her hand. 'Let me guess. Thou hast heard that there will soon be a position within my circle of twelve, and it be thy wish to compete for the seat.' Tory raised her eyebrows as Owen and Cai confirmed her guess with a 'Gosh!'

Blain staggered back, grinning from ear to ear. 'Majesty, thou art a wonder to me . . . those were the exact words I would have chosen.'

'Indeed.'

'So what be thy answer?' His piercing blue eyes compelled her to speak.

These eyes were one of the more distinguishing features of the Brockwell clan — all the sons had inherited them. Although Bryce and Blain had their father's long dark curls, Owen's hair had shimmers of his mother's coppery colour, and Cai was as fair as they come. Bryce had grown taller than his father, who only stood around one hundred and sixty centimetres, and, although his brothers had yet to reach their father's height, they would all maintain the same stocky build when fully grown. The only other unmistakable feature Calin Brockwell had passed down to his sons was that of the dimple on his chin, though Bryce and Cai were the only recipients.

Tory teased Blain with her pondering. 'Maybe. I shall think about it.'

'But Majesty, I am heir to the throne of Powys, and Rhun be one of the twelve . . .'

'Give Rhun his due, Blain. He started his training before thou wast even born.'

Rhun was Tory's only child and sole heir to the throne of Gwynedd. Her lack of offspring had been quite purposeful in that she wanted none to contest Rhun's right to the throne in his father's wake. This way, there would be no needless blood-feuds that might throw Gwynedd back into turmoil during his reign. As soon as Rhun could walk, Tory started training him in the skills of self-defense. He was three years older than Blain, and although they were fast friends they were also fiercely competitive.

'But Rhun had the good fortune to be trained by thyself, Majesty. Will thee not at least give me that same chance?'

'Bryce be one of the finest trainers I have, Blain. Thou should be proud to have him as thy sensei. However, as I said, I shall think about it.'

The High Queen looked to Owen, who'd been patiently awaiting her address.

'Of course.' Blain backed off, feeling rather put in his place. They all favoured Bryce. Why had he thought that the High Queen would be any different.

Owen bowed and wore a cheeky grin on his face as he politely took up Tory's hand and kissed it. 'It be a pleasure to see thee, Majesty. Thou art as radiant as ever.'

Tory glanced at Katren, who rolled her eyes. 'My, but thou hast a good serve of thy father in thee, too. What dost thou want of me?'

'Nothing at all, Majesty. I am perfectly content,' Owen seemed rather pleased to admit.

‘Then tell me, Owen, what be happening in thy world?’ Tory hadn’t encountered these two younger boys very often.

‘I thought thee could tell me.’ He commented in a playful manner.

‘Well Owen, I could . . . if that be thy wish,’ Tory offered, very much doubting that he would want his brothers and mother to know of the young housemaid that was driving him to distraction.

‘Nay, Majesty, ’twas a joke.’ He blushed, wondering if she knew; legend had it that she knew everything about everyone.

‘Tell us, Majesty,’ Blain teased Owen, taking hold of him in a headlock.

‘Not now, Blain,’ his mother scolded, urging her youngest son to come forward.’

‘By the Goddess!’ Tory was taken aback. ‘This could not be little Cai?’

Cai bowed astutely and Tory hoped she’d not embarrassed him.

‘Aye, Majesty.’ His eyes wavered between her face and the floor.

Cai was shyer than the others and spent most of his time with his head in a book: ‘How go thy studies, Cai?’

A smile swept over his face. *She remembers!* ‘Very well, Majesty. Very well, indeed.’

‘He hast become rather proficient on the harp, also,’ Katren added with pride, as if she and the High Queen had never discussed his talents before.

‘So art thou ready for Selwyn yet?’ Tory questioned, completely stunning the boy.

Selwyn was Chief Bard in the court of the High King, but he was also a Merlin amongst Druids. He’d studied under Taliesin a good part of his life, and was regarded as one of the wisest men in the whole of Britain.

‘Dost thou not expect me to be a warrior like my brothers and father before me?’ Cai was beaming now, scarcely able to believe that she knew of his aspirations.

‘We do need scholars, too, Cai.’

‘Hey!’

Everyone present turned to behold Rhun leaning in the doorway with a goblet of mead in his hand.

‘What shall a lad do for amusement around here?’ The young Prince of Gwynedd did not enter, but rather waited for everyone to come to him — all of the boys did, bar Bryce.

‘How did thou manage to sneak in?’ Owen was clearly overjoyed to see him.

‘An excellent surprise!’ Blain stepped up after Owen to give Rhun a high five; it would appear a little something still remained of Tory’s twentieth century childhood. ‘Who be holding the fort if thou art here?’

‘Sir Tiernan stayed behind in Rhun’s stead this year,’ Tory explained with delight.

She was proud of him; Rhun was a handsome piece of work, just like his father. He'd inherited her art of truthsaying, and as he knew everybody's thoughts, he knew exactly how to keep everyone happy. It was common knowledge that no maiden was safe from him, and Tory knew this was no exaggeration.

'Aye, I hope ye all appreciate that I had to beg to get here.' Rhun grinned, though he tried to sound put out.

'Thou begged to come see us?' Bryce had to laugh. 'I think not! I think thou hast heard that Vortipor finally got up the courage to bring his daughter, and thou hast come to see her.'

Rhun looked to Bryce and gave him a wink. 'And so I say, lead me to her.' He spurred his three young companions off on a quest.

'Duty calls.' Katre made after them. 'I am not entirely sure Bridgit can handle all four of them at once.'

'I shall be down shortly.' Tory looked to Bryce. 'Well, sir, I pray thee speak. I am listening.'

Bryce seemed hesitant to voice his mind at once. 'Come on, Bryce, out with it.' Tory closed the door.

He was still pondering how best to put forward his dilemma as he raised his big blue eyes to look at her. 'Dost thou think Blain shall get the seat in thy circle, sensei?'

'Well, there are other candidates, but Blain stands a fair chance.' Tory was straight with him. She had known there would be brotherly friction between Bryce and Blain. It had just been a matter of when. 'He be thy pupil, Bryce. Surely thou wants him to succeed?'

'Aye, sensei, I do. Then he would become a trainer, as I am, and could instruct here in Powys in my stead.'

Tory returned to the lounge and sat down. 'Why, where art thou off to?' she questioned with a laugh in her voice.

Bryce made haste to sit beside her. 'I wish to return to Gwynedd, Majesty. After all, I wast born there. Ione shall be resigning as thy champion before long . . . I wish to compete for her title and serve under thee all the time.'

'But thy father needs thee here, Bryce. Hast thou discussed this with him?'

'Nay. But if Blain becomes one of thy Masters, he shall not need me as much.' He looked a little sad to concede this.

'Blain be very young, and hardly a worthy replacement for one with thy experience,' Tory assured him honestly.

'Blain shall be king, not I. Surely . . .'

'Be that the real problem, Bryce?' It was not like him to be jealous.

'In a way.' He was disinclined to admit it. 'But, as it no longer be my fate to be king, I feel I must follow my own destiny. And I wish, more than

anything, to be a champion of Gwynedd like my father once was. It be all I have ever desired, sensei, and thou knows I would serve thee well.'

Tory could not disagree with his reasoning. It was true that he had always aspired to hold the position his father once had. Yet she could not see Brockwell wanting to release Bryce from his role as trainer to his armies here in Powys. For Brockwell, as a king, had little time to spend instructing his soldiers and he would not entrust the responsibility to one as young as Blain. 'In a few years perhaps — '

'Nay, sensei, please! Thou dost not understand the full extent of it.' Bryce stood, driven by his belief. 'Father will never entrust Blain with any responsibility whilst I am still here. Already Blain feels the king favours me, as doth our mother most of the time.'

'I see.' Tory motioned him to be seated and calm himself. She should have known Bryce could never be impelled by selfish cause. 'Thou dost feel thou art treading on his toes.'

'I know it, sensei.' Bryce sat as instructed. 'And Blain be more than capable of succeeding me . . . just wait until thou sees him in action, he shall make a fine master.'

'Well, as I said, Blain be not the only candidate I have.' Tory took up his hand and patted it. 'I shall see what I can do.' Her mind boggled at the chore. 'But only the Otherworld knows how we shall get around thy father.'

As Rhun entered the huge banquet hall with the rest of his entourage in tow, he spied Gawain and Gareth already approaching to acquaint him with the situation.

Sir Gawain was the latest initiate to the 'circle of twelve' and son of one of the High King's most trusted advisers, Sir Rhys. Although Gawain was a year older than Rhun they were of similar build, both reasonably tall, lean and broad-shouldered. They were often mistaken for brothers. They both had the same straight, dark hair, yet where Gawain's eyes were steely blue, Rhun's were dark brown. Sir Gareth, on the other hand, was a year younger than the prince. A good height and size for his age, Gareth's hair was the colour of honey, and his eyes were a pale, icy blue. His father, Sir Tiernan, had charge of the High King's armies at Aberffraw, where Gareth, Gawain and Rhun had grown up.

This was the first time in ages that all the sons of the 'circle of twelve' had been brought together in the one place. These lads were the brightest stars in Britain's future and it was clear to all in the banquet hall that they knew it, too. For theirs was a very noisy reunion — that is, until Queen Katren entered, whereupon they all simmered down to polite conversation.

'Damned shame thy father had to stay home this year.' Blain nudged Gareth with his shoulder.

'Aye, damned shame,' Gareth considered with a smile on his face.

Sir Tiernan, in addition to his responsibility for training, was still the High King's champion at the age of eight years and fifty. He was feared by these boys, and thus did a fair job of keeping them all in line. But it was Lone, Gareth's mother, that his friends feared more. She trained the female warriors of Gwynedd and was the champion of the High Queen, which was the greatest honour any fighter within the alliance could have.

'Mother stayed at Aberffraw, too,' added Gareth.

'Phew . . .' Owen voiced the general view. 'The Goddess be truly smiling on us this year.'

Rhun was still watching Queen Katre, who'd crossed the room to speak with a group of maidens. One of the girls turned to look in their direction.

'That must be her,' Rhun announced discreetly to the others. 'Queen Katre hast gone to forewarn the maiden.' He raised his eyebrows as he took a seat at the closest bench to begin feasting.

'Art thou not going to speak with her, then?' Owen wondered.

'Nay. I shall wait for the lady to seek me out.'

Gawain laughed. 'She will never come over here whilst there art so many of us.'

'Well, then?' Rhun grinned, raising his eyebrows as Gawain and the others stared back at him blankly.

'Shall we leave then?' Blain suggested, making his offer sound more like a dare.

'Would thee? How kind.' Rhun thanked them as they parted company. 'Cai can stay, though, if he chooses.'

Cai, pleased to have been chosen, sat where Rhun motioned him and joined the feast.

'So tell me, Cai, what are the maidens doing now?' Rhun continued selecting food at random from the platters before him and popping it into his mouth.

Cai observed a moment before reporting. 'I think they art being introduced to Gareth, Gawain and my brothers.'

'What?' Rhun had to look for himself. 'Oh dear.' He shrugged off his defeat with a sigh. 'We shall just have to get drunk on our own then.' The prince raised his goblet to Cai's and clinked it.

'Wait a moment.' Cai froze, his eyes still fixed on the cluster of women. 'One of the maidens be coming this way, but not the one who wast observing us before.'

'Interesting.' Rhun refilled his goblet. 'In a word, how would thou describe her?'

'Ah . . . stunning,' Cai concluded without hesitation.

Rhun became more interested. *Stunning, ay?*

‘Majesty.’ She requested his attention, having reached them.

When Rhun turned to view the maiden he was more than pleasantly surprised, for here was a face that caught the eye. It gave host to features that were almost angelic, and skin that glowed as soft and fair as a child’s. Long, thick masses of auburn-brown curls had been rolled, and pinned off to each side of her face. But the bulk of her hair sat in long clusters that fell about her shoulders and down her back. Despite the rest of the maiden’s slender, yet shapely, form Rhun’s eyes did not waver from her face. *Exquisite would have been my description.* ‘Can I help thee, Lady?’

‘Nay,’ she giggled. ‘I am the maid of Lady Bridgit, who —’

‘How unfortunate.’ He took hold of her hand and coaxed her into taking a seat beside him. ‘Do have a drink . . . what did thou say thy name was?’

‘Ah . . .’ She was hesitant to answer right away; his forward, though charming, manner had her in a bit of a fluster. ‘Lucinda, Majesty. But my La —’

‘Well, do have a drink, Lucinda.’

The prince was so amiable that she nearly succumbed to his kind offer. ‘Nay, Majesty, really. I am just here to deliver a message.’ She rose, observing the expression on his face, so soft and open for one of his ilk. The prince had suddenly become so intent upon hearing her message she almost forgot it. ‘The Lady Bridgit . . .’

‘Thy mistress,’ Rhun interjected, to confirm he was following her tale.

‘Indeed.’ The maid found herself frowning and grinning at once; how peculiar he was. ‘She be wondering if thou would grant her an audience?’

Rhun laughed, seemingly delighted by the notion. ‘After such a becoming invitation, how could I possibly refuse?’

The maid bowed graciously, sporting a half grin on her face, when Rhun stood to block her escape. ‘I am pleased to make thy acquaintance, Lady Bridgit. Please sit down and have a drink with us.’

Her eyes, the colour of amber jewels, were wide at his words. ‘Majesty, why dost thou insist I am who I have already told thee I am not?’

Rhun looked to Cai who was following the conversation with decided interest. ‘Dost thou think she could possibly see fit to test me further?’

Cai nodded with a shrug. ‘I guess she doth not know then?’

‘Know what?’ she inquired.

Rhun turned back to the maid to enlighten her. ‘How I detest being tested?’

She was taken aback by his tone, and so resolved to be open with him.

‘My game be up then?’ she asked Rhun.

Cai and Rhun nodded in sympathy with her predicament.

‘They said thou could not be fooled . . . though I have led the others a

merry dance.' She sounded pleased to have accomplished that much. 'They art still making eyes at my maid.'

The three looked to the parties to which she referred, spurring the two princes to laughter.

'It be a pity really . . . that thou found me out so soon.' She cast her sights to Rhun, who stood right beside her. 'It could have been fun.' She smiled with a pout, and wandered away.

'Whoa there.' Rhun went after her. 'Nobody said we had to tell anyone.' He turned Bridgit around and led her back. 'Cai can keep a secret . . . and, after all, if I say thou art the maid, I doubt even thine own father would disbelieve it.'

Everything she'd heard about Prince Rhun was true. Bridgit's smile broadened; she liked him already.

3

THE CAULDRON-BORN

On the map, which Ossa and his men had dug up from under the elder tree, X marked a spot right in the heart of allied Britain. It appeared that the Princess Vanora now resided on the outermost tip of the Isle of Mon, which was territory owned and frequented by the Dragon himself. The Gwynedd stronghold was situated on the mainland at Degannwy, but King Maelgwn's home and training ground were at Aberffraw, on Mon. Thus, the Saxons expected the island would be well guarded.

Along with the map, the witch had left a spell with them. She claimed the incantation would shield whomever bore her cauldron from the eyes of the Otherworld, so they could pass through the land that the Goddess safeguarded without fear of detection. However, it would only cloak the party from Otherworldly eyes — Ossa still had to deal with those of a physical nature.

Eormenric mapped a course that would take them round all of Gwynedd's major strongholds, yet they still had to devise a means to cart the weighty cauldron across the Menai. The easy way, in his mind, was to take the barge across the strait as the locals did.

'Thou dost already speak the local dialect, thanks to thy dealings with Chiglas,' Eormenric put forward. 'We could enter Gwynedd in the guise of peasants . . . shave and dress as the Britons do.'

'I would rather fight the whole of Britain than shave this beard.' Ossa motioned to the growth on his chin that fell in two long braids down the length of his body.

'Father, even I would not recognise thy clean-shaven face.' Eormenric knew his father was going to be difficult about this. 'Once we free Mahaud, I am sure she will restore thy beard.'

'Thou art assuming an awful lot,' Ossa snarled. But the aging warlord knew he would not see too many more adventures of this magnitude in his lifetime. Thus he was finally persuaded.

They cast the witch's spell over their party under the conditions that she had outlined.

Only those who would make the journey were present — Ossa, Eormenric, and their two finest warriors. The midnight hour approached as they stood in a clearing of the forest that bordered the Dragon's realm. It was a still night with no moon.

To recite the incantation, Ossa and his men stood in a circle that was marked by four lit torches to their north, south, east and west respectively. The words of the incantation meant nothing to the men, as they were in a foreign dialect that was neither Anglo-Saxon nor the native tongue. Ossa was unsure as to whether they were even pronouncing the chant correctly, until the atmosphere surrounding them became unsettled.

Tiny whirlwinds rose out of the forest floor, stirring up the dead foliage that lay about the ground. The breeze built steadily to a gale that howled up and down through the trees, routing the wildlife, who fled the area.

At the end of the third, and final incantation, the wind ripped around the clearing, extinguishing all four torches in turn.

An eerie silence hung over the place in the wake of the disturbance and the air, now stagnant, felt deathly cold. The presence of the dark force they'd invoked to protect themselves was making itself at home.

The conference was going splendidly. These leaders very much enjoyed their annual reunion, revelling in the company of those who could truly understand their aspirations, responsibilities and woes. Thankfully, their woes had been few of late; the various kingdoms within the alliance boasted of their harvests and of the progress their cities and industries had made during the relative peace of the past year. It wasn't until Tory suggested giving aid to the lands in the east that the leaders seemed to lose their high spirits. Still, old King Catulus of Dumnonia had to laugh.

‘One doth not aid thine enemy when he hast been substantially weakened, Majesty. Now would seem a better time than any to drive them out.’

‘I agree.’ The other representatives backed his view, all bar Maelgwn; he'd learnt to hear Tory out before trying to win an argument against her.

‘I beg to differ, gentlemen.’ Tory's voice rose over the din. ‘I have learnt from my own experience that war begets war, peace begets peace.’

King Brockwell, though he loved Tory dearly, felt he must strongly protest. ‘Nonsense! If the situation wast reversed, dost thou think for a moment that they would do the same for us?’

‘Nay, I do not.’ Tory was short with him. ‘That be all the more reason why we should do it for them. I am not asking this council to supply them with weapons, just food enough to see them through the snowfall. For if we do not, starvation shall surely push them to plunder to sustain themselves.’

‘If the Saxons make war on us, we shall cast them out of this land as the Goddess forewarned.’ Vortipor, the Protector of Dyfed, took a stand on the issue. ‘I shall not feed their children so they can live to take the lands of my descendants.’

‘Here, here!’ Fergus MacErc of the Scotti agreed wholeheartedly.

Tory shook her head, disappointed that the council could not see the opportunity for lasting good relations with their neighbours. ‘Thou shalt all have to lose thy fear sometime.’

‘She speaks wisely, gentlemen.’ Taliesin, who’d been keeping a low profile during the proceedings, finally came forward to voice his view. ‘Our mother-land be experiencing a major imbalance. Though one half of her lives in the sunshine and prospers, the other half lives in dark despair. Now what hast been the cause of this dis-ease I cannot say, but it will surely spread into our lands if not addressed soon.’ The Merlin looked to Brockwell. ‘So ask not if they would do the same for thee, but rather, how would thee have them treat us in the same circumstance.’

‘I already know how they would treat us.’ Brockwell was getting edgy.

‘Be that so? Think about it?’ Tory strengthened the argument. ‘Thirty years ago, who would have thought that thy good selves would prosper within this association? We have brought about peace and co-operation between half the kingdoms in this land. Why should it end there?’

‘What makes thee think they would accept our help?’ Maelgwn grinned at his lovely wife; she was doing a fine job, as always.

‘Do we have to call it charity? Call it a peace offering, a token of friendship, or goodwill.’

‘Well . . .’ King Catulus decided to give the High Queen’s notion some consideration; she’d never steered them wrong before. ‘We could send some poor, suicidal knight to Londinium with a letter of our intent . . . see what kind of response we get?’

‘All in favour?’ Maelgwn raised his hand, followed by Catulus and the others. Only Brockwell remained opposed to the notion.

‘Not the Saxons!’ Brockwell pleaded, collapsing onto the conference table as if he would cry.

‘Come on, Brockwell . . .’ Tory nudged a little harder. ‘Just let go of thy fear.’

He finally gave in, raising his arm in the air.

‘So be it.’ The council declared.

It was decided before the meeting adjourned that one of the ‘circle of twelve’ should deliver the message. Sir Tiernan, Ione, Sir Angus, Lady Alma and Sir Rhys were not present, as they’d stayed in Gwynedd to look after its affairs whilst Tory and Maelgwn attended the conference. Brockwell and

Vortipor, as heads of state, could not be sent. Thus, only Bryce, Gawain and Rhun remained as possibilities. After some discussion it was decided that Bryce, as the eldest and most experienced, should go. Only one soldier would accompany him, as they did not want to alarm their foe by sending a whole battalion to deliver a message.

Naturally, his father was not completely thrilled by the idea, but Bryce was the obvious choice.

Maelgwn and Tory returned to their chamber after the long day in court to find their son sprawled across one of their lounges, engrossed in a book.

‘How went thy meeting?’ Rhun rested his reading matter on his chest as they entered.

‘Thy mother stirred up a hornets’ nest.’ The king didn’t sound too worried about it. He took hold of his son’s feet to twist him around, and then let them drop to the floor. ‘Why art thou not out playing with that maid, whatever her name wast?’ Maelgwn took a seat beside Rhun.

‘So many people, for too long, make me dizzy . . . all those minds thinking at once.’ Rhun pulled himself back up to a seated position. ‘And her name be Lucinda.’

Tory laughed. ‘Bridgit, more like.’

Rhun’s head shot up, as did his father’s.

Tory laughed again. ‘The pair of thee have not still got everybody fooled, surely?’

Rhun grinned. Even though he’d scarce seen his mother since they arrived, he should have known she would find out. ‘A fine performance by anyone’s standards. None had guessed till now.’

‘Thou art not fooling around with Vortipor’s daughter?’ Maelgwn sounded perturbed. ‘He hast been looking for an excuse to challenge me to a sword fight for the past twenty years.’

‘Fear not,’ Rhun assured. ‘She be safer with me than anyone.’

Maelgwn split his sides laughing. ‘Her father doth not agree. He arranged a guard for her as soon as I mentioned I brought thee.’

‘I know,’ Rhun informed him. ‘They art fooled, too. They have been guarding her maid these two days past. It be a good thing Vortipor sent Bridgit away to Brittany for so long . . . no one seems to know what she looks like. Except her father, of course, and he’s been too tied up to expose us.’

Tory couldn’t help but be amused, though Maelgwn was looking a little pale. ‘So long as thou art treating her as a lady of royal blood.’ She came to sit between them, taking hold of Rhun’s hand.

‘Mother, thee would know if I did not,’ her son said emphatically. Then, perceiving his mother’s mind, his expression became more disturbed. ‘Why art thou sending Bryce to Londinium?’

‘The council hast decided to see if we can aid the Saxons in their time of need,’ Maelgwn put forward in an impartial fashion, interested to see how his son would respond.

Rhun stood, taking a few paces away then turning back. ‘I see the sense of it . . . but, let me go. Bryce doth not have the same talents for reading people that I do.’ As his parents both moved to contest him, Rhun added quickly, ‘And do not try and tell me heirs to the throne cannot risk this kind of quest — look at what Father accomplished on his own before he assumed his position.’

The young warrior, having been raised in peacetime, hadn’t seen much action, and a royal errand into the centre of enemy territory sounded terribly inviting.

‘That was part of Maelgwn’s inauguration, a challenge thee, too, will face in time. Bryce, most likely, shall never face that kind of initiation. Thus, I feel this quest be the chance for him to prove to himself his own worth.’

Rhun was aware of what Bryce had been going through these past few years, with Blain out to establish himself as a suitable heir. ‘Could I not accompany him then? Together we will be invincible.’

Tory and Maelgwn looked to each other; it was hard enough risking Bryce on the errand, but their own son?

‘I speak the language better than he does. I am much more diplomatic, not to mention charming.’

‘Enough!’ Tory knew he was right. What’s more, Rhun knew she knew it, and he smiled broadly in spite of being interrupted. Maelgwn had won wars at Rhun’s age, and with far less training than his son.

He didn’t wait to hear his mother’s verbal response; Rhun felt her let go of her dread. ‘Many thanks for the vote of confidence, Mother. I shall make ready.’ He was out the door before his father had the chance to comment.

‘Tory?’ Maelgwn looked to his wife, who was almost in tears.

‘That was the hardest thing I shall ever have to do.’ Tory’s wise and strong state of being departed as she realised what she’d done. ‘Due to a notion I had a few days ago, two of my master’s must risk their lives. I very much despise my position at times.’

Their expedition had been a misery, and it seemed like one of the longest Ossa had undertaken in his life.

One cart and two horses to carry four men and a cauldron may have been fine on the eastern plains, but through the mountains of Gwynedd it was a nightmare.

The freezing cold presence their hex had conjured hung over them like a curse. On the second night of their travels they’d been robbed of their weapons and food as they slept. They’d been bogged, lost and now they were hungry,

too. All four men were suffering from the extreme cold and running a fever, hence the entire party was short on patience; no matter how hard they tried, they could not cooperate or agree with each other.

The sight of Bangor (a small fishing community on the banks of the Menai Strait) raised their spirits considerably. The party found the local people very helpful. They believed Ossa's 'poor farmer and his three sons seeking better fortune in Aberffraw' story and provided accommodation, a hot meal, and instructions as to where and when they could catch the barge.

Gullible fools, the Britons, Ossa thought in retrospect, as he made the final leg of their trek across the more obliging terrain of the island. If not for the Goddess, I would have possessed this land long ago.

Yet Eormenric's thoughts were of a different nature. These folk were not at all like he'd expected. How generous they were to have given all four of them shelter and food, when they'd nothing to give in return. Even the ride across the Menai had been rendered free of charge. The ferrymen had laughed when his father informed him they had no money to pay.

'We art in the service of the crown, Sir,' the ferryman had explained. 'None of the High King's subjects art expected to pay to cross the strait . . . where would our industries be?'

Where indeed, Eormenric thought. We could learn a thing or two from these people. What a fine race they seemed, too — so happy, healthy, and full of praise for their king. They also acclaimed his Queen, though the locals referred to her as the Goddess.

'Why do they call Maelgwn's queen the Goddess?' Eormenric had to ask.

His father, who sat beside him driving the cart, was distracted by the question. 'I do not believe the wild tales the Britons spin.'

'What tales?' Eormenric prompted.

Though Ossa wasn't thrilled about his son's chosen subject matter, the pace of their journey was slow and some conversation seemed better than none. 'Well . . . the story goes that she wast brought from the future by the Old Ones.' He shrugged to imply that he didn't know who the 'Old Ones' were. 'They say it was she who formed and trained the circle of twelve. For she brought with her the knowledge of an advanced fighting skill, which I glimpsed only once at Arwystli. A warrior who had trained under the Goddess, the one they call Ione, disarmed me in single combat. I was so stunned by her bold fighting technique and her beauty, that I offered to swap our mutual enemy, Chiglas, in exchange for her. Maelgwn Gwynedd refused.'

'Hast thou met the Goddess?' Eormenric wondered if Maelgwn's queen was the one his father had lived in fear of all these years?

'Aye.' Ossa went silent.

The memory of her angelic presence and the divine authority of her voice

brought a tear to the warlord's eye. But Ossa repressed his guilt quickly; the Goddess had caused his people pain, and now her people would suffer.

The errand Bryce and Rhun were embarking upon was known only to the immediate members of the alliance and the messengers themselves; not even their destination had been disclosed. It was decided by the council that their intent should remain a secret until such time as they'd received an answer. They'd allowed six days for the princes to return, or send word. If any dispatch they sent was not signed by the both of them, the council would presume the worst and take action.

'Camp tonight this side of Powys' border,' Maelgwn advised his son in a whisper. 'Then ride until thou hast reached Ossa.'

'I promise,' Rhun assured, breaking into a smile. 'Father, stop worrying. I shall be fine.'

The young Prince of Gwynedd looked to his mother. He felt the conflict eating away at her, just as she felt the excitement welling within him.

'Thy decision be a sound one,' Rhun told her. 'Dost thou think for a moment I would go along with it, if it wast not?'

'Make me proud.' Tory smiled, despite the tear that escaped her eye.

'That goes without saying.'

Bridgit waited patiently for Rhun to finish speaking with his mother. The High Queen smiled as she addressed him, giving all the impression that her son was heading off on no more than a picnic. But when she held him close in parting, a brief flash of sorrow swept her face. This led Bridgit to believe that perhaps Rhun's mission was indeed as dangerous as he'd boasted the night before.

Why did I not submit when I had the chance? she scolded herself. All he'd wanted was a kiss. What if he gets killed? I may never see him again.

Rhun turned and made for his mount when a hand touched his shoulder to delay him. He knew it was Bridgit before he'd even turned. 'My Lady of Dyfed.'

'Majesty.' She curtsied quickly, all in a fluster. 'I wanted to say how sorry I am about last night. I should have believed thee.'

Rhun laughed, for he'd had quite a bit of mead at last night's feast. 'Nay, thou acted wisely. Truth be known, thou probably saved my life.'

'Well, in any case . . .' Bridgit persevered to speak her mind, pulling Rhun's knife from its sheath at his waist, 'I wanted thee to have this.' She cut off one of the many tiny braids that were bound with ribbon and laced through her curls. 'For good luck.' She explained as she placed it in his hand. Then in front of the entire gathering, she kissed him.

'Looks like he accepts favours from the hired help, too,' Gawain commented, fetching a chuckle from his peers.

'Get him away from my daughter!' Vortipor roared, striding towards the couple to reclaim his kin.

'What?' Blain, Gareth, Gawain and Owen all exclaimed at once.

Cai began to chuckle. 'It seems thou art the ones who art chasing the affections of the hired help.'

'Damn it.' Blain conceded defeat. 'He did it again!'

Rhun glanced around, and it appeared that everyone had seen them. 'Thou art a crafty woman, my lady. They shall be expecting me to marry thee now.'

The smile he wore made it difficult for Bridgit to tell exactly how he felt; he'd certainly cooled since last night. *He enjoys confusing me.* 'Surely, thou art not serious, Highness?' She smiled as Vortipor took hold of her. 'Father would never allow it.'

'Keep thy claws off my daughter, little dragon, or I shall be forced to squash thee.'

Bridgit raised her eyebrows and shrugged as Vortipor led her away, thus it was Rhun who was left wondering.

The braid in his hand would have much to tell when he had the time to sit down and concentrate on it. Right now, however, as Bryce was already mounted and obviously eager to get on the move, Rhun made haste to his horse.

By nightfall, Ossa's party had found the cottage they sought. It was a small yet cosy dwelling, and if all was as it seemed Vanora lived alone.

A tall, slender maiden opened the door. This was the daughter of Chiglas, Ossa was quite sure about it; she didn't appear to have aged a day. Her black, curly hair, longer now, was neatly tied off her face. Her facial expression had lost the sternness Ossa remembered, though her eyes, black as night, were a steadfast reminder of the wild child she'd been when last they'd met.

'Can I help ye, sirs?' she inquired, politely.

'Aye.' Ossa grinned; she did not recognise him. 'Art thou the maiden, Vanora?'

'I am.'

'I have been bade by the High King to dispatch this crate to thee.' Ossa motioned to the back of his cart.

Vanora looked puzzled, though delighted, by the announcement. 'What hast the High King sent me?'

'I do not know, Lady.' Ossa humbled himself. 'He said only that it was something that once belonged to thee.'

Vanora was intrigued. 'Then, if ye would be so kind as to bring it inside, I shall fetch some water and food for ye all. It be quite a hike to get to these parts, ye must be exhausted.'

Eormenric was completely dazed by her sweet smile; she was nothing

like what he'd expected. She looked hardly a day older than himself, yet by his father's reckoning she was aged eight years and thirty. She was a vision, as Mahaud had foretold, but he could scarce believe her to be the wretched woman his father had described.

'Heartless and cruel,' he'd said. 'She bewitches many and loves none. Men died for her and yet I never saw her shed a single tear.'

Ossa was busy supervising their soldiers to move the crate when Eormenric spied Vanora battling to raise a loaded bucket from the well.

'Ah!' She gave a laugh as he took the load from her. 'The Goddess always provides.' She wiped her hands of the chore.

Eormenric smiled; although he hadn't understood much of what she said, she seemed thankful for his aid. She wandered away from him a little and stopped on the hill's incline, looking down through the trees to the ocean beyond.

How dost thou survive in this remote place all alone? Eormenric wanted to ask, although the maiden appeared quite joyous and content. He wasn't so sure about exposing her to this witch any more, for Mahaud certainly hadn't done them any favours. Their whole party wore several layers of clothing, yet still they felt the cold of the cursed presence looming over them.

What if Mahaud lied? Eormenric considered. What if the spell was a curse to insure that we delivered the cauldron to Vanora? For until we persuade her to look into it and recall her sorcerous ways, we shall never learn how to lift the icy shield we've cast.

Nobody outside their party seemed to notice the lack of warmth, life, moisture or breeze, though the folk at Bangor had commented that none of their party appeared at all well.

I cannot let him do it. I must warn her. Eormenric decided, lifting the bucket from the well. But how? They didn't even speak the same language.

A hand clamped down hard on Eormenric's shoulder and startled him.

'Get that inside.' His father grumbled softly, before looking to Vanora and stating in a manner more becoming. 'Thy crate be in thy house, my lady.'

The three of them entered the cottage to find that the soldiers had removed the wooden packaging from their load.

'Why it be a cauldron.' Vanora seemed stunned. 'I do not recall ever owning such an item. There must be a mistake.'

Vanora moved to fetch a jug and goblets, appearing not the slightest bit interested in investigating it further. Eormenric smiled at this, though his father was appearing a mite frustrated.

'The cauldron might be just the container, Lady. Perhaps the item to which the king referred be inside,' Ossa suggested, one side of his mouth curving to a smile.

‘Perhaps thou art right.’ Vanora placed the jug of water aside and approached the huge iron pot.

‘No!’ Eormenric cried, and although it was Anglo-Saxon he spoke, his intonation was clear enough to deter her.

‘Silence.’ Ossa was outraged and lashed at his son with a backhander to the face. Eormenric hit the floor before having a chance to say more.

‘What art thou doing?’ Vanora rushed over to see if the young man was alright.

‘So sorry, Lady, but he knows better than to speak out of turn.’ Ossa looked down on his son, spread-eagled on the ground before him.

‘Well, why wast he so alarmed?’ She held his face gently to look it over.

‘Do not look into the cauldron. It be a trap,’ Eormenric mumbled, bleary-eyed.

Vanora was bemused. ‘I cannot understand him.’

Ossa went down on one knee by his son. ‘He said not to bother thyself, Lady. He doth not wish to keep thee from thy business.’

‘Oh.’ Vanora leant back on her haunches.

Eormenric was frustrated; what was his father telling her? ‘No, I think he lies!’

With an explanation already brewing in his mind, Ossa thumped Eormenric out cold. ‘Take him outside,’ he instructed the other men.

‘I do not understand.’ Vanora backed up, fearful and suspicious. ‘What did he do to warrant such cruelty? What did he say?’

‘Do not concern thyself, Lady. He be nothing but a Saxon and a traitor. We art in the process of reforming him, but I dare say he needs a few more years in prison before he can truly be of any use to our community. I would rather not repeat what he said to thee . . . it would be better if thou did not know.’

‘Oh.’ Vanora felt rather rattled after the scene. His explanation seemed as though it could be truthful. ‘I do apologise to thee. I misunderstood.’

‘It be I who should apologise to thee for any unpleasantness taking place in thy home.’ Ossa smiled sweetly.

Vanora turned her attention to the large obstruction in the middle of her room and circled it once before reaching for the handle. ‘What dost thou think might be inside?’ she questioned playfully, raising the lid to peek underneath.

‘Some old memories perhaps?’ Ossa grinned with satisfaction as a tremendous rumble resounded deep in the belly of the pot.

The lid suddenly shot from Vanora’s hand and was cast across the room. From within the seething misty haze of the cauldron sprang long, spindly arms that were transparent and red in colour.

‘Release me,’ demanded a voice of beastly strain.

The maid was stunned speechless, until the gangly hands reached out and took hold of her head. As they pulled her toward the pot's churning red centre, Vanora screamed in terror and resisted with all her might.

'Remember me!' the feral voice from within the cauldron taunted.

'Help me, please!' Vanora looked to Ossa in a final plea. 'Just replace the lid.'

But the warlord looked away, blocking out her screams for assistance. He allowed the beast to draw her in.

4

RUINATION

Bryce and Rhun reached the border earlier than expected, so they hunted up a couple of pheasant for dinner and made camp before sunset.

They discussed their plans for the next day whilst they ate, and placed bets as to how long it would take to reach the said destination — Rhun's estimation being the more optimistic of the two.

Afterwards, with their bellies and minds filled to overflowing, they lay next to the small campfire in relative silence. It was nice laying out under the stars for a change; they hadn't done so in years. Still, tonight it was altogether more exhilarating, as this time they really were on a mission.

Bryce emerged from his contemplation and glanced across to Rhun, whose sight was entranced by the firelight as he held the braid of the Lady Bridgit in his hand. His friend's expression wasn't that of a man reflecting on a fair maiden; he was, for some unknown reason, deeply grieved and concerned. 'Bad news?'

'Sorry?' Rhun snapped out of his daze.

'The maiden.' Bryce motioned to the lock of hair in Rhun's hand. 'Be something amiss with her?'

'Nay,' Rhun smiled, his thoughts wandering again. 'I cannot seem to concentrate . . . my mind keeps being distracted by something else.'

'What?'

'I do not know, I cannot see it . . . it be a little hard to explain.' Rhun brought his attention to the fore to try and clarify. 'These abilities I have extend from the Otherworld, but they also extend into it . . . that be how I am granted the information I seek.'

Bryce gave a nod to acknowledge he was following.

'Yet sometimes I perceive information I have not asked for and, as I do not know anything about it, I must ask the right questions before I can draw any meaning from it.' Rhun looked perplexed.

‘So what hast thou seen that disturbs thee so?’

‘In this case it was felt, and again, it be rather difficult to verbalise.’ He didn’t want to unduly alarm his companion, but Bryce motioned him on. ‘I feel a great unease within the Otherworld, and when I asked what wast causing this . . .’ Rhun shrugged, ‘all I felt was an icy chill. All I saw was a great darkness.’

‘That doth not sound very promising,’ Bryce conceded. ‘And nothing on the girl?’

‘Nay.’ Rhun tucked the braid gently back into his shirt. ‘It be difficult to access answers when the spirits art so disgruntled.’

Bryce exhausted his powers of reason trying to figure out what it could mean, but as he was not very knowledgeable about such matters he lay back against the base of the tree behind him to rest. ‘Well, let me know if anything comes to thee.’

‘I shall,’ Rhun assured him with a smile, before his eyes were drawn back to the lapping flames.

Eormenric was seeing stars when he woke, thousands and thousands of stars. One side of his face ached with a vengeance, and, as he managed to raise himself to his elbows, he realised he was in the back of a cart.

It took a moment to recall exactly where he was as he didn’t recognise anything at first glance, but as he spied the cottage upon its peaceful aspect overlooking the ocean he remembered the maiden and the sum of her woes.

What hast happened! He leapt from the cart, his ailing head catching up with the rest of his body when his feet hit the ground. Even though all appeared calm and well, Eormenric ran to the doorway and burst into the room.

‘Do not argue with me. I must go alone,’ Vanora told his father in Eormenric’s own tongue as he stumbled through the door. She glanced to the intruder, not really paying him much mind. ‘Half of Gwynedd knowing of thy involvement be the last thing we need.’

The maiden’s demeanour seemed to have changed somewhat. Suddenly it was not so hard to believe the stories Ossa had told about her. *What have we done?*

‘But I want to be there to see it,’ Ossa grumbled, obviously disappointed.

‘Believe me . . .’ she smiled in a cold, calculating fashion, ‘thou shalt be able to see it from quite a distance.’

‘See what?’ Eormenric demanded.

Ossa turned in his seat to acknowledge his son’s presence. ‘So. Thou hast finally come to thy senses. I still pack a fair punch, ay?’

Surprisingly, his father seemed rather cheery. Eormenric had felt sure Ossa would have him hung as a traitor for what he’d done.

Ossa grunted. 'Well, I hope I knocked some sense into thee.'

Vanora rose and slowly approached Eormenric, seeming so amiable that she near took his breath away. 'So this be the one who tried to save me.' She giggled, amused by the notion. 'What be wrong, Eormenric?' She circled him, running a hand across his broad shoulders. 'Dost thou not like me this way?'

The chilly atmosphere of the curse that was upon him suddenly became cooler and he shuddered. Vanora's fingers felt like ice against his skin and as beautiful as she was, her face had lost all its lustre. She smiled, yet her huge, dark eyes were devoid of all emotion, as if she'd died inside. 'Dost thou like thyself this way?' he said, finally.

'Of course I do. Dost thou think I enjoyed living in the isolation of this place? I have been a prisoner here for twenty years!' she informed him, as if he were some kind of idiot. 'I wast brainwashed and robbed of my kingdom.'

'Forgive me, I had not considered . . .'

'Indeed.' She brushed off his apology. 'So, from now on, do not try and do me any favours.'

She looked away before Eormenric could respond. *The poor woman dost not even control her own will anymore.* Much to his horror, Vanora cast a cool glare back in his direction.

'Oh aye, I do. And tomorrow eve, thou shalt see for thyself just how much control and willpower I have.'

Come dawn, Bryce and Rhun ate the leftovers from the night before and then rode as hard as they could through the land of their foe — stopping only twice to answer nature's call.

The errand had taken on a whole new meaning for the young Britons, for they could hardly believe the devastation that surrounded them; the farmland looked more like marshland. The Goddess had been right in saying these people needed help.

Rhun set a deadly pace over the precarious terrain, but they didn't enter the outskirts of Londinium till just after dark. Bryce considered that they must have set some sort of record. Needless to say, Rhun won their bet, as they reached their destination before midnight.

At the gate to Ossa's fortress, the pair were removed from their horses and searched. As they bore a dispatch and were unarmed, bar a bow and knife for hunting, they were permitted entry. A guard of ten soldiers led them to Ossa's council chambers, where they were left with four guards both in and outside the door.

'Well, we art still alive.' Rhun gave Bryce a slap on the shoulder to lighten the sombre atmosphere that hung in the room.

Bryce looked to his companion, rather dumbfounded by his jovial mood. 'Only because they have yet to think of a good reason to kill us.'

Rhun laughed out loud. 'Then we shall not give them one.'

They turned as the door opened. Much to their surprise and delight it was not Ossa who entered, nor one of his sons, but a beautiful young maiden who was still half asleep.

She looked at the guards. 'Where be Ongen?' she questioned one of them.

'We art still searching for him, lady. Hopefully, he will not be long.'

The maid seemed a mite perturbed by the absence of her associate, but maintained a good mood as she addressed the messengers. 'I am Aella, daughter of Ossa. My brother, Ongen, shall join us presently.' She motioned politely for them to be seated. 'What can we do for ye, gentlemen?'

Rhun bowed as a messenger would to a lady of Aella's stature. 'We bear thee a cable from the council of united kingdoms of Britain.' Rhun looked to Bryce to produce the dispatch, but his friend's attention seemed somewhat preoccupied with their hostess.

After a nudge, Bryce realised that he'd missed his cue. He stepped forward, to present the scroll bearing the Dragon's seal to her, bowing as he did so.

She couldn't help but smile at their antics, as she graciously accepted the dispatch. Were these men a typical example of her supposed foe?

Though Bryce didn't want to appear rude, he couldn't take his eyes off the girl. How could such a fragile little angel be Ossa's daughter?

'Be this some kind of joke?' Aella didn't sound angry, but rather, stunned, and a smile swept her face.

'Nay, lady.' Rhun smiled warmly. 'I swear to thee. The united kingdoms want nothing more than to see the whole of this land prosper in peace. Thus, we cannot sit by and watch half of it forced into penury by the cursed weather.'

She very much liked how relaxed and confident these men were and tended to believe their intent was of a completely innocent nature. Nevertheless, she was fairly sure her brother would not take the same view. 'Thou art very fluent in our language, sir.'

Rhun bowed his head to accept her compliment. 'It be my job to possess such skills.'

'I wish I could return the consideration and thank ye in thine own tongue, but I have scarce seen any of the native people, let alone spoken with them.' She smiled at Bryce, who still appeared rather overawed by her presence.

'Then I hope thy first impression of the Britons be a pleasant surprise, lady.'

'Aye,' she confirmed, before her attention skipped back to Rhun and the cable in her hand. 'But thou must realise this; thy kind offer be so timely and well needed, it seems almost too good to be true. I dare say my brother shall not be so willing to believe the sincerity of it.' As she heard a group of men

approaching, she added quickly, 'Please have patience, he shall see reason in the end.'

Bryce, Rhun, and Aella looked to the door as Ongen entered. He was the oldest son of Ossa, and thus it was he who had charge of the affairs of state in his father's absence.

Ongen, tall and top-heavy, as his father had been in his younger days, stopped just inside the door and looked to the messengers of the council. 'Arrest them,' he ordered without blinking an eye.

Bryce looked to Rhun, hoping he hadn't understood Ongen correctly.

'Now we art in trouble.' Rhun confirmed his friend's fears.

'Nay! Warn him of Britain's intent if the council do not hear from us,' Bryce implored Rhun as the soldiers took hold of them.

Aella spoke up. 'Ongen, they have brought a peace offering. The Britons wish to supply us with food enough for the winter.'

'Aella, thou art so gullible!' Ongen scolded. 'Can thou not see it be naught but a trick?'

'Look, I hate to interrupt . . .' Rhun sounded awfully calm as he was escorted past Ongen, 'but the council will retaliate if we do not return.'

Ongen smacked Rhun fair in the jaw. 'Let them.'

Bryce broke free of his captors to catch his friend before he hit the floor.

'Ouch!' Rhun mumbled, as Bryce set him back on his feet and threw an arm around his back to walk Rhun out of the room. 'Perhaps we should not have mentioned it.'

'Just let them return home,' Aella pleaded. 'We cannot afford to go to war!'

'Quiet!' Ongen thrust her to the floor, just a little too roughly for Bryce's liking. Bryce left Rhun to his own devices and barged through the guard toward the lady's assailant.

When Ongen turned back to view the disturbance, all he saw was the bottom of Bryce's boot as it encountered his face.

As the Saxon leader hit the floor, blood streaming from his nose, Bryce held a hand down to help Aella to her feet.

Her large blue eyes gazed up at him in awe; such gallantry expended on a female was unknown to her. 'I am indebted to thee, sir.' She smiled and held out her hand to place it in his, but her brother's soldiers dragged him away.

The tower of Ossa's fortification in Londinium, if nothing else, did afford a splendid view of the city below. Even at this time of night, fires and torches were blazing for as far as the eye could see.

'Londinium be bigger than I imagined.' Bryce peered through one of the many long, slender slits in the wall.

These windows were designed to be wide enough to shoot an arrow from, yet too narrow for even a young child to squeeze through.

'I wonder if all their women art as fair as Aella?'

Rhun's thoughts were back in Ossa's room of court also, only with Ongen. 'Let them.' Rhun mused over the warrior's final words to him. 'He sounded pretty confident, considering their state of affairs. I dare say, I would not be inviting a war in the same circumstance.' Rhun looked to Bryce, who was not listening to him.

'Did thou see her hair? Straight and fair, just like thy mother's. It near touched the floor.'

Rhun couldn't believe it. Bryce was seldom preoccupied with those of the fairer sex — bar the High Queen, of course. What a time for Bryce to go soft on him. 'Forget the girl. Show me thy boot.'

'What?'

'The one thee struck Ongen with.' Rhun beckoned with his fingers for Bryce to comply.

Bryce rested his foot on the bench by Rhun, appearing puzzled.

'Ah-huh!'

'What?'

Rhun wiped his fingers across the leather and held them up triumphant. 'Blood. Ongen's blood.' He smiled.

'Aye.' Bryce grinned. 'I got him good.'

This was not what Rhun had meant, however. He considered that even though Ongen had asked for the belting, it was not the most diplomatic course of action to have taken — but, hopefully, it would serve them now. 'Go back to thy vision, friend. I have need to concentrate.'

'Dost thou think thou may be able to learn something of Ongen?'

Rhun rubbed the tips of his fingers against each other, getting a feel of the individual from whose body the blood had flowed. 'Perhaps.' He closed his eyes to focus. 'Let me be awhile.'

Bryce moved away to the windows, though his eyes remained glued on his friend. Rhun was peaceful a few moments, then he began to quiver violently. 'Goddess preserve us!' His eyes shot open. 'They art going to release Mahaud.' He rushed to a puddle of water on the stone floor by the windows to scrub the blood from his hands.

'Holy mother! We must stop them.' Bryce raced for the stairs.

'Hold on.' Rhun recommended a little restraint. 'I have an idea, but I need total silence. So please, just sit.'

Rhun walked into the centre of the round room and took a seat, assuming the lotus position. It was a long time since he'd tried to bethink his mother thus, and never had he attempted it from such a distance. But still, as Taliesin said, it be only a matter of will; time and space art an illusion.

Vanora entered the inner bailey courtyard at Aberffraw sometime around

noon. So many maids wandered in and out in the course of a day, going about the duties of the house, that the guards let them pass without questioning every one as to her errand. As Vanora appeared well kept and was alone, she passed right through the guards without either one batting an eyelid.

She awaited the midnight hour by the sundial, which was located amongst the extensive gardens in the huge courtyard of the High King's manor. When the waxing moon was high in the sky, marking a time of new beginnings, Vanora emerged from her hiding place. The silvery light from above shed scatterings of light upon the area she approached. This sundial marked the sacred site through which Mahaud had been banished, hence it was from here that she must be released.

Vanora set down the utensils for summoning the evil spirit of her mentor in their respective places around the sundial. Mahaud's crooked old wand was laid in a southerly position to summon the element of fire. A smaller cauldron, used by the old witch for such purposes as this, was placed to the west to invoke the element of water. A large hunk of crystal, black as night in colour, sat to the north to summon the element of earth. Vanora placed the sword of Vortigern, arch-traitor of Britain, in the easterly position. The sword of Vortigern was a memento of one of Mahaud's past encounters: she had been known to advise the warlord on occasion, and, ever since his death, the witch had found his weapon most effective for conjuring up the more mischievous elementals in the air.

When all was placed as it should be, Vanora stood just outside the circle and directed her energies into the centre. She focused herself a moment, the better to concentrate on her summons.

Vanora chanted her verse three times over, in accordance with the law of three requests:

*'O fire of demons, water of drought,
I call on thee to draw her out.
The one who hast served thee
and granted thee power,
release from her prison
in this midnight hour.
Air of suffocation, darkest side of mother earth,
Thy combined force can give her birth.
The one who wast banished here
and cast from this plane,
grant her the means
to be born again.'*

Upon her first utterance, the ground within the centre of the circle began to glow red with a throbbing motion.

Upon her second recitation, the ground beneath the sundial began to rumble and break up.

As Vanora neared the end of her third and final rendition, guards began to flood the grounds, but they were too late.

The sundial crumbled into the earth as the ground beneath it split apart. A thick stream of glowing red and black gas shot into the air, forming one glowing mass of energy that covered the sky as it extended itself over the manor.

The witch's advocate screeched with exultant laughter as an electrical storm erupted, the like of which none had ever witnessed before. It appeared as if the sky was on fire and red bolts of lightning tore through the rumbling clouds. All of Mahaud's sacred implements were sucked into the raging torrent of energy, whereby Vanora calmly turned and walked toward the closed inner bailey portcullis.

Guards pursued her, only to be struck down in flames by the lightning from above. The large, iron portcullis, deeply inset into the stone walls of the house, was blasted from its foundations. The guards could do naught but watch as the culprit walked out through the gaping hole left in the wake of the explosion.

The High Queen had barely slept since her son's departure. Not that she really needed much rest. Immortality did have its advantages — or drawbacks, as these past two nights had seemed endless to her.

Tory remained motionless and silent in the darkened room, her thoughts roaming the Otherworld in search of some news of her Masters. The strange thing was, the spirits seemed deathly silent. All she was able to perceive was a great expanse of blackness that accompanied an eerie chill.

Please Goddess, help me, she pleaded, feeling a sudden sense of urgency. A glimpse of them is all I ask.

From within the blackness behind her eyes, the image of her boy took form.

Mother. Hear me, please.

I hear thee, Rhun, she assured, relieved beyond all belief. Where art thou? How fares thy mission? She was proud that he'd attempted to make contact with her thus. She would have had great difficulty finding him otherwise.

Never mind about that, we have far greater problems.

Rhun was fairly confident he could get Bryce and himself safely out of their predicament on his own, so he mustered the most positive sense-of-being that he could, to prevent his mother being distracted from the more important task.

Ossa intends to release Mahaud, and she hast given him the means to do it. He left near a week ago with the witch's cauldron, of the mind to seek out Vanora.

That explains the great blackness. Tory considered the possibilities. He must

have cast a shielding spell over their party, or we surely would have known of this sooner.

Indeed, Rhun confirmed.

But what of thee? A huge disturbance, formed of a red flare of light, engulfed her vision of Rhun. When it passed, he was gone. Rhun. Rhun! But there was no response. Her etheric sight perceived naught but the dark, cold silence.

Damn it. Tory sat back in her chair, pausing to think a moment. I need to speak with Taliesin at once.

No sooner had she decided this than Taliesin passed right through the wall of her room to speak with her.

‘Majesty. I fear something loathsome hast happened. Did thou feel it?’

‘Aye I did,’ she was sorry to admit. ‘And, unfortunately, Rhun had just got through informing me that Ossa planned to release Mahaud. Hence, I suspect he hast succeeded.’

Taliesin’s solemn expression became even more so. ‘Then it be worse than we thought.’

‘How so?’ Maelgwn inquired, as he approached them. He was belting on his trousers, having just woken from a deep sleep.

‘Ossa can only release the witch from the place she was banished.’

Tory and Maelgwn looked to each other, horrified. ‘Aberffraw!’

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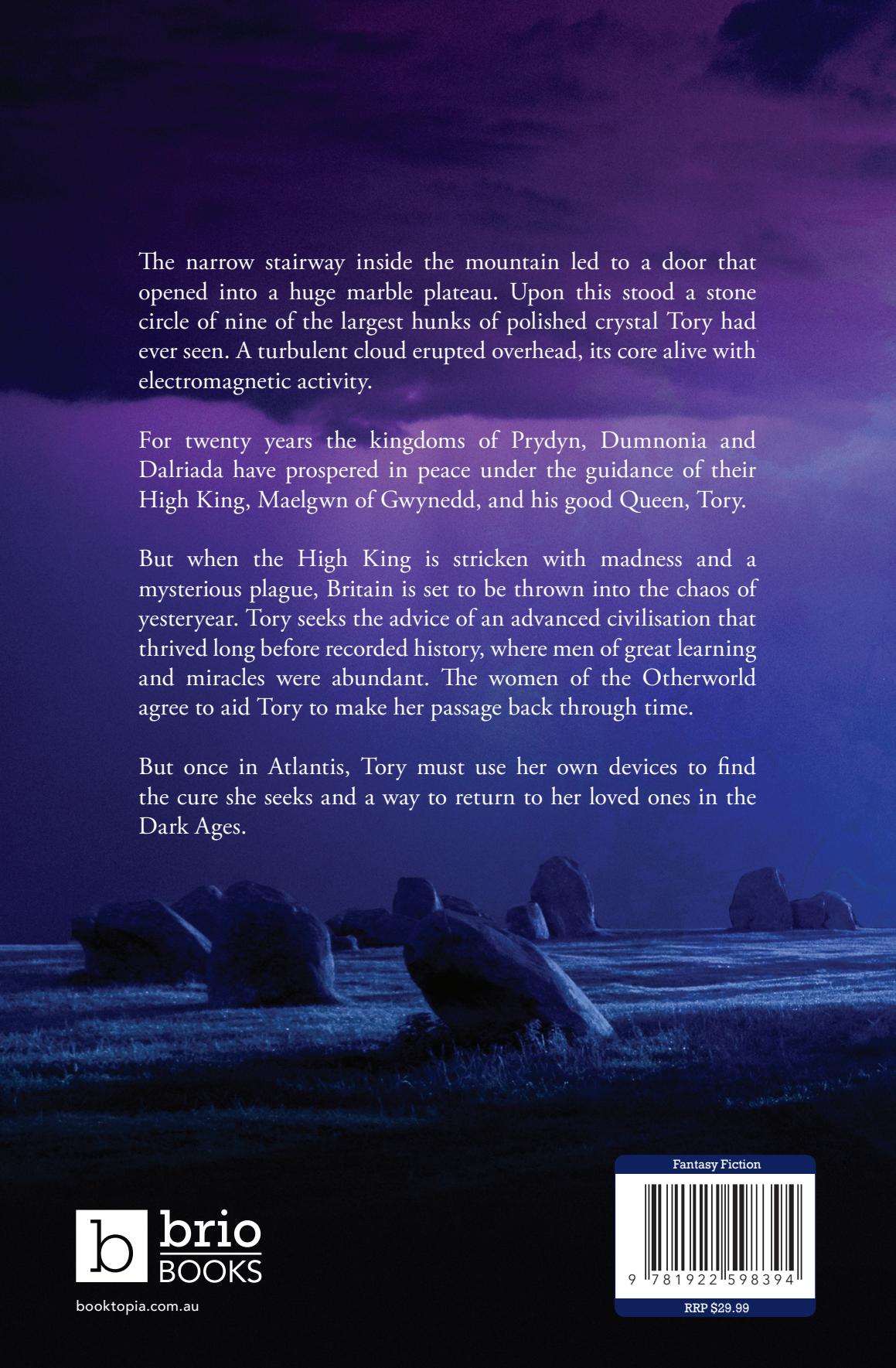
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The narrow stairway inside the mountain led to a door that opened into a huge marble plateau. Upon this stood a stone circle of nine of the largest hunks of polished crystal Tory had ever seen. A turbulent cloud erupted overhead, its core alive with electromagnetic activity.

For twenty years the kingdoms of Prydyn, Dumnonia and Dalriada have prospered in peace under the guidance of their High King, Maelgwn of Gwynedd, and his good Queen, Tory.

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