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Here Lies Arthur

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Extract

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Even the woods are burning. I plunge past the torched byre and hard into the shoulder-deep growth of brambles between the trees, but there's fire ahead of me as well as behind. The hall on the hill's top where I thought I'd find shelter is already blazing. I can hear men's voices baying like hounds on a scent, the hooves of horses on the winter earth like drums. I see their shadows long before the riders themselves come in sight. Fingers of darkness stretch from their raggedy banners, reaching through the smoke which hangs beneath the trees. I duck sideways into a brambled hollow and wriggle deep. Thorns tug at my dress and snag my hair. The ground's frosty. Hard and cold under my knees and fingers. Fear drags little noises out of me. I squeak and whimper like a hunted cub.

But it's not me these horsemen are hunting. I'm nothing to them. Just a lost girl-child scurrying across the corners of their war. They thunder past without seeing me, the firelight bright on spears and swords, on

mail and burnished helmets, on shield bosses and harness buckles and fierce faces lit up like lanterns. Their leader's out in front on a white horse. Big, he is. Shiny as a fish in his coat of silver scales. The cheek-guards of his helmet ripple with fire-gleam and his teeth between them are gleaming too, bared in a hard shout.

You've heard of him. Everyone's heard of Arthur. Artorius Magnus; the Bear; the *Dux Bellorum*; the King that Was and Will Be. But you haven't heard the truth. Not till now. I knew him, see. Saw him, smelled him, heard him talk. When I was a boy I rode with Arthur's band all up and down the world, and I was there at the roots and beginnings of all the stories.

That was later, of course. For now I'm still a snot-nosed girl, crouched in the brambles, giddy with the thump and stink of horses and so still that you'd think I'd been turned to a stone by my first glimpse of the Bear.

I didn't know then who he was, nor why he'd led his fierce, shiny riders to burn my home. All I knew was it was unnatural. Wrong as snow in summer or the sun at midnight. War's a thing for autumn, when the harvest's in and the rains not yet come to turn the roads to mud. When men can be spared to go harrying into other lands and carrying off other men's grain and cattle. So what do these horsemen mean by coming here in winter's dark, with the trees bare and the hay-stores half empty and cat ice starring and smashing on the puddles they ride their horses over? Are they even men at all? They look to me like Dewer's Hunt. They look like the Four Riders of the world's end I've heard the monks talk about up at

Lord Ban's hall. Though there's more than four of them. Five, seven, ten, more than I can count, heaving uphill on a steep sea of horse-muscle.

Uphill, and past me, and gone. Their wild voices blur into the crackle of burning brush and the steady bellowing of scared cattle from the byres. I sneeze on the smoke as I make myself move, slithering across the flank of the hill, over the knuckles of tree-roots, over the granite boulders furry with moss, through sinks of dead leaves in the hollows. Don't ask me where I'm going. Away from the burning. Away from those angry riders. Just away is good enough for now.

But then I reach the road, down at the bridge where it crosses the river, and there's another of the raiders there. His horse has come down in trampled mud at the bridge's end and the battle has left him behind. He's on foot, furious, flailing at the horse with the flat of his sword. A young man, his white face framed by wings of red-gold hair, a thin beard clinging to his jaw like fluff the wind has blown there. His eyes are full of angry tears and a desperate hunger for blood. Even the blood of a girl-child, I realize, as I somersault out of the scratchy undergrowth and land thump on the path before him. He forgets the horse and comes at me. With his blade in front of me, the steeps and fire behind, I turn, looking for a way out.

Ways out are all I have been looking for this evening, ever since I woke in my master's house to find the thatch ablaze, the women screeching, the men scrambling sleepily for staves and spears and sickles. I remember how the shadows of horsemen flicked past

the open doorway. How my master had run out shouting and how a sword came down on his head and made the women screech louder. How I scrambled between the horses' legs and over a fence the pigs had trampled down in panic. Gwyna the Mouse they call me, and like a mouse I always have the sense to scurry out of trouble.

Except that now all my quickness and cunning have brought me to this: a dead end, cut off short by a shouting boy.

And for once I'm more angry than afraid. Angry at myself for running into his way, and angry at him and his friends for their stupid, unseasonal war. Why couldn't they stay at home, wherever their home is? I dart at the boy, and he flinches back, as if he thinks I mean to fight him. But mice don't fight. I duck by him quick, feeling the wind of his sword past my face, hearing the hiss of sliced air. I run towards the bridge, where his terrified horse is heaving up, mud and white eyes and a smoke of dragon-breath. I go sideways to avoid it, and lose my footing on the ice, and fall, and keep on falling.

And I leave the fire and the noise behind me, leave everything, and dive down alone through darkness into the dark river.



The first shock of that cold water jarred my teeth and made my lungs go tight. I surfaced in the shadows under the bridge, and heard the boy above me, screaming curses at his horse. I turned circles, paddling with my hands. This mouse could swim. Raised near the river, I'd been in and out of it as long as I could remember. In summer me and the other children of the place came down at evening when the day's work ended to splash and shout until the light died. In autumn, master had me dive in to set his fish-traps. Open-eyed in the hubble and swirl below the rapids, I'd wedge the long wicker creels in place, then lift them out later full of plump, speckled fish.

So I took a deep breath and dived, kicking out hard, letting the river drag me away from sword-boy. Gritty water pressed against my eyes. I could see only darkness, with here and there an orange fire-gleam slanting down. It was easier to find my way by touch. I pawed over slimy boulders to the first bend below the

bridge and came up for air, yelping and gasping in the clatter of the rapids. The current tugged at me, reminding me of all the things that haunt rivers, ready to drag unwary children under with their long, green hands. I was scared of them, but the raiders scared me more.

I slid down into a calmer pool and trod water there, listening for the sounds of battle. There was nothing, only the voices of the river and the woods. Far off, the farm where I'd grown up was burning like a dropped torch. I wondered if all master's household were dead. There had been no love between me and them – I was just a hanger-on, the whelp of some dead slave-woman. But still that farmstead was the only home I'd known. Out of pity for myself I cried and cried, adding my tears to the river till the cold clutched and shook me and set all my teeth a-rattle.

At last, just to keep warm, I started swimming again. Downstream, letting the river do the work. I kept my head above the surface this time. If you'd been watching from the bank you'd think you'd seen an otter, scared from its hole by the fighting upriver and heading for quieter fishing grounds. I swam until the trees parted above me to let the sky show and the river widened into a deep pool. Another river joined it there, coming down off the moors and tipping into the pool in a long fall, pale in the moonshine like an old man's beard.

There, cold as a ghost, wet as a drowned dog, I came ashore, heaving myself out by the tangle of tree-roots that reached out of the bank. I flopped into the litter of beechmast and dead leaves between the trees and made

a little ball of myself, trying to hug some warmth back into my juddering, shuddering limbs. The noise of the water filled my head. Where would I go now? What would I eat? Who would I serve? I didn't know. Didn't care either. There was no more feeling left in me than in a hearthful of cold ashes. When feet came scuffing through the fallen leaves and stopped beside me I didn't even look up, just knelt there, shivering.



It was dark under those trees. I couldn't see the man who lifted me and carried me away from the pool. I couldn't see his waiting horse, though I felt it snort and stamp when he hung me over its saddle like a blanket-roll. I didn't see him till we reached shelter. It was an old building from the Roman times, big and pale in the owl-light, half sunk in furze and trees. He led the horse right inside, and small, loose tiles slid and scraped beneath its hooves as if the place was floored with teeth, or knucklebones. He lifted me down from the horse's back and laid me in a corner. I was too scared to look at him. He moved about quietly, kindling a fire. Big shadows shifted across the walls. Traces of paint clung to the plaster. Ivy hung down thick through the rotted cage of rafters overhead, rustly and whispering. I squinched my eyes shut. I thought if I was small enough, and still enough, and quiet enough, he might forget me.

"Hungry?" he asked.

I opened one eye. He was crouching by me. He wore

a shabby black travelling cloak fastened with a flashy, complicated brooch. A jangle of charms and amulets hung round his neck. Horse charms, moon charms, paw of a hare. Magic things. In the shadow of his hood his face gave away no secrets. Sallow, sharp-nosed, beardless. Was he a priest? He wasn't dressed like one, but I'd never seen a man clean-shaved who wasn't a priest or a high-born warrior, and this was no warrior. Fine-boned like a hawk, he looked. Quick and birdy in his movements too. And his eyes were hawk's eyes, patient and clever.

What did he want with me?

"Hungry?" he asked again. He stretched out the palm of his hand towards me and suddenly a hunk of bread was between his fingers. I shuffled backwards, pressing my spine against the wall. I was afraid of him and his magic bread.

He laughed. "It's only a trick, girl. Look close." He folded his hand over the bread and when he opened it again the bread was gone. He waggled his fingers and the bread was back. It perched on his palm like a baby bird. He held it towards me again but I closed my mouth tight and turned my face away. I didn't know much but I knew to fear magic.

Another laugh. A ripply sound, like water running in the first thaw of spring. "Scared it'll make you sleep a thousand years? Or witch you away to my kingdom under the hill?" He pushed the bread back inside his clothes and went about his business. He took a saddlebag from his horse and opened it, pulling out a cooking pot, a sack of food, a stained old blanket that he

wrapped around me. All the time he talked to me softly, the way a farrier whispers to a scared horse.

"I'm as mortal as you, girl. I am Myrddin. The bard Myrddin. You know what a bard is, don't you, girl? A traveller and spinner of tales. There's my harp, bundled in oilcloth, see? It was *I* who thought *you* came from the otherworld. Creeping out of the lake like that. You must swim like a fish. I thought you were the lake-woman herself, come up from her home under the waters to steal my heart away. But you're a little young yet, aren't you, to be stealing anything but apples and barley cakes? How many summers have you seen? Nine? Ten?"

I managed a shivery shrug. Nobody had ever told me how old I was. Nobody had ever asked before.

"And have you a name?" He crouched down again on the far side of the fire and watched me. He threw back his hood, baring cropped, greying hair. The flame light stroked his face and gleamed in his eyes. He wore a look you could have taken for kindness.

"Gwyna," I said.

"So you can speak! And where have you come from, Gwyna?"

"From my master's farm. Up that way." I pointed with my head. My voice sounded very small and dull compared with his, as though the river-water had washed all the colour out of it. But it made the lights in his eyes flare up like embers when a breeze catches them.

"You've come from Ban's place?"

I nodded numbly. Ban was my master's master: lord of the fort on the hill above my burned home, and all the lands you could see from that hill.

"But it must be miles from here. . ."

"Not so far by river," I said. "I swam all the way."

"Like a fish." He was looking at me different now. I started to feel pleased. Nobody had ever cared much what I was or did before.

"I swum under water half of it," I said. (I didn't know it then, but I was sealing my fate with that silly boast.) "It's my job to set the fish-traps at fall-of-leaf. The cold don't worry me. I can open my eyes down under water and I can hold my breath. . ."

"How long? Show me?"

I gulped in a great breath and sealed my lips tight behind it. I watched him, and he watched me. Blood thumped in my neck, and the back of my head. I felt proud of myself. It was easy. I couldn't see why people bothered breathing, it was so easy to get by without. And still this Myrddin watched me. After a while the breath I'd taken started to grow stale inside. A bit of it seeped out my nose. The dam of my lips cracked, letting out more. I gasped, and the game was over, and still he was watching me.

"Better and better," he said. "Perhaps the spirits of the lake did send you to me, after all."

"Oh no, sir! It was the burning, and the riders. . ."

I stopped. Here by the warmth of his fire the battle seemed far off and strange, like a dream I'd had. But I hadn't dreamed it. Outside, the sky was turning pale above the bare branches. Birds were stirring. Day was brewing. "Oh sir!" I said, "They came with fire and swords and horses! They came killing and burning and hollering!"

Myrddin wasn't worried. "That is the way of the world, Gwyna. It has been so ever since the legions sailed away."

"But they'll come here! We must hide! We must run!"

"Peace, child!" he said, and he laughed. He caught me by both shoulders as I tried to scramble to the door. His horse sensed my fear and whinnied softly, stirring its tail, wafting a smell of dung towards us. Myrddin said, "You've nothing to fear. Not now. Not if you're with me." He sat me down again, shushing and crooning to calm me. "You know who those riders are, Gwyna? They are the war-band of Arthur. You've heard of Arthur, haven't you?"

Well of course I had. I never thought to meet him in my own woods, though. Arthur was someone out of stories. He fought giants and rescued maidens and outfoxed the Devil. He didn't ride about burning people's shippens down.

I said, "It can't be. What would he want here?"

Myrddin laughed and scratched his chin, as if he was trying to work out the easiest answer to that one. At last he said, "Arthur offered your Lord Ban his protection, in exchange for gold and other tributes. But Ban thought the price too high, and refused. That was foolish of him. Now Arthur has come to take Ban's holdings for himself. And he looks to me to help him do it. I ride with Arthur's band, see. I spin tales for him, and about him. I parted from him a few days since and came here by a different way, scouting out the land. If you know how the land lies a battle can be half won before it's started. Sometimes there's no need for a battle at all."

I took a moment to understand what he'd said. When I did, I was scared of him all over anew. What had I done, to make God deliver me up to a friend of the raiders?

"You've turned paler than porridge," he said. "But you've nothing to fear from me, and nothing from the Bear either. It'll make no odds to you who your lord is. Except that if I can make Arthur strong enough there might be peace again, like our grandfathers' fathers knew back in the days when Rome held this island. Strength like Arthur's could be used for good, see, just as the strength of old Rome was. That's why I help him, Gwyna. And I have a sense that you can help him too."



He talked and talked while I sat drying out beside his fire, and the grey day brightened grudgingly above the woods. He was in love with words. He found his own conversation so interesting he didn't notice that he was the only one talking. I just sat watching, listening, while he spoke of places I'd never heard of: Elmet and Rheged, Ireland across the sea, Din Tagyll where the ships from Syria put in. Oh, I snatched a few familiar names out of the word-storm. I'd heard of bad King Gworthigern, who let the heathen Saxons settle in the east, and how they rose up and tried to steal the rest of Britain too. And I knew a song about Ambrosius Aurelianus, who led the armies of the Britons through battle after battle until he smashed those Saxons flat at Badon Hill. But mostly Myrddin's words flowed past my ears like water.

"When Ambrosius died," he said, "there was no man strong enough to take his place. The army he built to fight the Saxons came apart into a hundred different war-bands. Now they fight each other, and leave the