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Dawn Wind

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I
The Breaking of Britain

The moon drifted clear of a long bank of cloud, and the cool slippery light hung for a moment on the crest of the high ground, and then spilled down the gentle bush-grown slope to the river. Between the darkness under the banks the water which had been leaden grey woke into moving ripple-patterns, and a crinkled skin of silver light marked where the paved ford carried across the road from Corinium to Aquae Sulis. Somewhere among the matted islands of rushes and water-crowfoot, a moorhen cucked and was still. On the high ground in the loop of the river nothing moved at all, save the little wind that ran shivering through the hawthorn bushes.

For a long while that was all, and then in the dark heart of the hawthorn tangle something rustled that was not the

wind. It stirred, and was still, and then stirred again with a kind of whimpering gasp, dragging itself forward little by little out of the black shadows among the thorn roots, like a wounded animal. But it was no animal that crawled painfully into the moonlight at last, it was a boy. A boy of fourteen or so, with a smear of blood showing dark on his forehead, and the same darkness clotted round the edges of the jagged rent in his leather sleeve.

He propped himself on his left arm, his head hanging low between his shoulders; and then, as though with an intolerable effort, forced it upward and looked about him. Westward along the high ground the ring of ancient earthworks where the British had made their last night's camp stood mute and deserted now, empty of meaning as an unstrung harp, against the ragged sky. Far down the shallow valley, the camp-fires of the Saxons flowered red in the darkness, and between the dead camp and the living one, all along the river bank and over the high ground and along the line of the road to Aquae Sulis, stretched an appalling stillness scattered with the grotesque, twisted bodies of men and horses.

Only a few hours ago, all that stretch of stillness had been a thundering battle-ground, and on that battle-ground, the boy's world had died.

One of the tumbled bodies lay quite close to him, with arms flung wide and bearded face turned up to the moon. The boy knew who it had belonged to—rather a comic old man he had been when he was alive, always indignant about something, and his grey beard had wagged up and down when

he talked. But now his beard did not wag any more, only it stirred a little in the night wind. Beyond him another man lay on his face with his head on his arm as though he slept; and beyond him again lay a tangle of three or four. Last night they had told stories of Artos and his heroes round the camp-fires. But Artos was dead, almost a hundred years ago, and now they were dead too. They had died at sunset, under a flaming sky, with all that was left of free Britain behind them, and their faces to the Saxon hordes. It was all over; nothing left now but the dark.

The boy's head sank lower, and he saw a hand spread-fingered on the ground before him. The fingers contracted as he watched, and he saw them dig deeper into the moss and last year's leaves, as though they had nothing to do with him at all. But the chill of the moss was driven under his own nails, and he realized that the hand was his, and understood in the same moment that he was not dead.

For a little, that puzzled him. Then he began to remember, and having begun to remember he could not stop. He remembered the brave gleam of Kyndylan's great standard in the sunset light, and the last stand of the fighting men close-rallied beneath it. His father and Ossian and the rest, the desperate, dwindling band still holding out, long after those that gathered to Conmail of Glevum and Farinmail of Aquae Sulis had gone down to the last man. He remembered the inward thrust of the Saxons yelling all about them, and the sing-song snarling of Kyndylan's war-hounds as they sprang for Saxon throats. He remembered struggling to keep near his

father in the reeling press, and the hollow ringing peal of the war-horns over all. He remembered the glaring face and boar-crested helmet of a Barbarian warrior blotting out the sky, and the spear-blade that whistled in over his shield rim even as he sprang sideways with his own dirk flashing up, and the shock of the blow landing just below his sword-arm's shoulder. Everything had gone unreal and strange, as though the whole world was draining away from him, and suddenly he had been down among the trampling feet of the war-hosts. A heel, Saxon or British, it made no odds, had struck him on the head, and everything had begun to darken. He remembered dimly a gap opening as the battle reeled and roared above him, and crawling forward with a blind instinct to get clear of the trampling feet, and then nothing more. How he came to be where he was, he did not know. Maybe the slope of the hillside had taken him. And in the turmoil and the fading light among the hawthorn scrub, the battle must have passed him by.

But what of his father and Ossian?

All at once he was struggling to his knees, then to his feet, clinging to a branch while the moon-washed hillside dipped and swam around him. He did not feel how the spines tore at his clenched hand, nor the stab of the wound in his sword-arm which had ceased to bleed and clotted hard on to the leather of his tunic; all he knew was that he must find his father and Ossian. He was staggering uphill towards the place where Kyndylan had made his last stand, lurching, falling, and gathering himself up again, his breath coming in hoarse,

whistling gasps. Once a body groaned as he stumbled over it, but when he checked and crouched down to look, the man was not his father, so he left him and staggered on, weaving his drunken way through the piled and scattered bodies.

Just below the crest of the ridge, where he had made his last stand, Kyndylan the Fair lay dead with his household warriors about him, and a goodly toll of Saxons to keep them company. His long pale hair flowing into the trampled bracken was stained and dabbled with blood, and the moon struck little jinks of light from the bronze hoops of the battered Roman breastplate he wore. But the boy paid no heed to him; he was looking for his father and his brother, not for any prince. And in a little he found them, lying close together among the thickest of the dead. His father was covered in wounds, like a boar that turns at bay and is savaged by a score of hounds before they pull him down; but Ossian was almost unmarked save for a little hole in his neck, and looked surprised, as though he was not sure how he came to be there at all. Ossian was not the warrior kind; the only thing he had ever really wanted to do was to make a garden of herbs and learn how to use them for healing people who were sick or hurt. But there was no time for growing herbs when Ceawlin, Lord of the West Saxons, was on the march, driving his grey-iron wedge towards the Sabrina Estuary, to split the last British position in two, and so make an end of the ancient struggle.

It had been almost two moons ago, early spring, when Kyndylan had sent out the call through all his territory; and

the wind had been stripping the blossom from the pear tree against the south wall, when the messenger rode into the farm a day's march from Viroconium that was home to Ossian and Owain. And Ossian and their father had gone to the chest in the smoke-darkened atrium and brought out their swords. There was no sword for Owain—good blades were hard to come by in these days, and reserved for the grown men who could make best use of them—but he had had his long dirk, when they had set out to join the rest of the war-host that was gathering to Viroconium of the White Walls.

The Saxons had taken their swords now. They had taken the great war-standard of Kyndylan the Fair; maybe Ceawlin their King slept warm in its gold-worked folds tonight, while Kyndylan and his warriors slept cold among the hawthorn bushes. But it seemed that their looting had been hasty—maybe they did not care much for a battlefield after dark and would come again to finish the work by daylight—for as the boy Owain moved, something on his father's hand gave off a spark of greenish light under the moon. He bent forward with a gasp. The great ring with its dolphin device cut in the flawed emerald of the bezel was one of the first things that he could remember. It had been his father's, and *his* father's before him, away back to the days when the Legions first marched through Britain. It should have been Ossian's after him, because he was the elder son, but now Ossian was dead, too.

'I take the ring, my father,' Owain whispered. 'It is for me to take it. I am your second son and it is mine, now.' It was not the coldness of his father's hand he noticed, when he lifted it,

so much as the emptiness, like a lamp that has gone out. He fumbled the heavy ring off, one-handed, and managed to get it on to his own signet finger. It hung there loose and heavy, and he bent his finger to keep it from slipping off again. There was nothing to hold him here, nothing that he could do. He touched his father's hand once more, and then Ossian's shoulder in farewell, not feeling anything very clearly as yet, save a great coldness. Then he stumbled to his feet and turned away, with no idea of where he was going, knowing only that it was no good staying where he was.

As he did so, something else moved in the hawthorn scrub.

He checked, his breath caught in his throat. What was it? One of his own folk left by the fighting as he had been left? Saxon marauder? Angry ghost? He was just starting forward when a long slinking shape oozed out of the shadows. He saw the pricked ears and open panting jaws, the eyes like twin opals in the moonlight, and all the blood in his body seemed to fly back to his heart. Wolf! His left hand went fumbling to the place where the hilt of his dirk should have been. But it was not there; he had lost it when he was struck down.

And then the creature whimpered, and in the same instant he saw the broad bronze-studded collar about its neck. It was no wolf, but a dog. One of Kyndylan's great war-hounds. Perhaps it had escaped death by some such chance as Owain himself, perhaps it had merely been frightened and run away; Owain did not care, it was something alive and maybe even friendly in the cold echoing emptiness of a dead world. It

stood with one paw raised, ears pricked, looking at him; and Owain called, hoarsely, with stiff lips and aching throat: 'Dog! Hai! Dog!' The great brute lowered its head and whimpered again, then came, slowly and uncertainly, crouching like a hound that has been whipped. 'Dog!' Owain called again. Once it stopped altogether; then it finished at the run, and next instant was trembling against his legs.

He was a young dog; the beautiful creamy hair of his breast-patch was stained and draggled, and his muzzle bloody in the moonlight, and Owain could feel him shivering. 'Dog, aiee, dog, we are alone then. There's no one else. We will go together, you and I.'

Dog—the great hound was never to have any other name—looked up, whining and bewildered, and licked his thumb.

'Come then,' Owain croaked. 'There is nothing to stay here for—nothing here at all.'

He never remembered afterwards where they went or how far, he and the hound together, only that it was away from the road and the river and the red flowers of the Saxon camp; and that they came at last to a little busy stream brawling down from the hills, and collapsed side by side on the bank and lapped the cold quick-flowing water that was webbed with living silver in the moonlight. When they had drunk their fill they crawled together into the midst of the streamside tangle of alder and osier and last year's willow-herb. And the last thing Owain knew before the blackness flowed over him, was the delicate tracery of alder leaves and the dark alert shape of

the hound's ears pricked against the stars and a vague feeling of surprise that the stars still looked as they had done last night.

Most likely the boy would have died before morning, partly from shock and loss of blood, but mostly for the very simple reason that his world had died and there was too little life left in him to go on living on his own. But the hound lay half on top of him and kept him warm with his own warmth, and licked and licked at the wound as far as he could come at it through the rent in Owain's leather sleeve. And because the hound was alive, the little flickering life in the boy did not go out.

It was full daylight when he drifted up through the blackness that had been half sleep and half something deeper. And the first thing he saw, as it had been the last, was Dog's rough grinning head just above him. But now the pricked ears were outlined against a sky of drifting grey, and the alders swayed in the wind and a little spitting rain blew in his face. Maybe it was the day after the battle, or maybe it was the day after that, he did not know. The fighting seemed a long time ago, even longer than the time when the war-host had gathered to Viroconium; but he knew, confusedly, that that could not be so, because his father and Ossian and the rest had been alive when they hosted, and when the fighting was over they were dead—all dead—all dead.

And then in swift denial, the thought came to him, stopping the breath in his throat, that he did not know they were all dead. There might be some left, as he and the hound had

been left, the few tattered remains of a broken army. And if that were so, surely they would make for the place where they had hosted in the spring. Maybe if he could get back—if he could only get back to Viroconium, he would find them again.

He propped himself up painfully on his sound arm, his wound stabbing wildly as he moved, and remained a while with hanging head, while the hound sat back on his brindled haunches, his pink frilled tongue drooling from his open jaws, and watched him.

Presently, when the world had steadied a little, he dragged himself to his knees and then to his feet, and staggered down to the edge of the stream. And there, lying full length among the alder roots, he drank again, lapping like the hound, for his right arm was numb from the shoulder down and so he could not make a drinking cup from his joined hands. He splashed the water into his face, and the cold of it cleared his head a little; and afterwards, sitting back on his heels, he pulled some woollen threads from the skirt of his under-tunic, and contrived with hand and teeth to thread his father's ring on to them and knot them round his neck. It would be safer so, thrust inside the breast of his tunic, than on his finger where it was so much too loose.

Then getting unsteadily to his feet once more, he stood looking about him and sniffing, to get some idea of his direction. Viroconium lay to the north, several days' march beyond Glevum; and the old road from Aquae Sulis to Glevum must run somewhere beyond those low wooded hills. But it would be best to keep clear of all roads this side of the Sabrina.

He tried to whistle to Dog, who was snuffing among the alder roots, and could not make the sound break through his lips; but the hound looked up as he moved, and came bounding to join him, and they scrambled up the bank and struck out northward together.

Afterwards, Owain was never very clear as to the details of that long northward trail. Sometimes his thinking was quite clear, and he knew what had happened and where he was going and why; but at others, more and more often as the days went by, his head seemed full of a fiery fog that came in some way from the throbbing of his wounded arm; and nothing seemed real, and he stumbled along in a dream without any clear idea in his head save that he was going north. He could smell the north as a hound scents game. They were making their way through a world that seemed empty of all human life, but that might be only because he was instinctively keeping clear of all the places where men might be. Once, Dog caught a badger cub, and he managed to get some of it away from him before it was all eaten. Once, in some open moorland, they came on a dead lamb part eaten by ravens, and the hound gorged his fill, but the raw stinking flesh made Owain's stomach rise, and he could eat little of it. They crossed the Glevum road in the dark of the fourth night, and struck down into the fringe of the western marshes, and after that it was a little easier to get food, for the later wild fowl were still nesting, and there were eggs to be found without much trouble. Dog foraged for himself.

After the emptiness of the woods and marshes it was strange to come at last to Glevum and find it alive and thrumming like an overturned bee-skep. It was one of those times when his head was full of the fiery fog, and everything was shifting and unreal; but something in him remembered where to find the Sabrina crossing, and he turned aside from the Southern Gate and drifted down on to the strand between the city walls and the river. The Water Gate was open, and people were heading in a steady trickle along the causeway over the mudflats, and away by the bridge of boats that spanned the river. Owain wandered into their midst because he, too, wanted the bridge, holding with his sound hand to Dog's collar, because he knew that if he and the great hound were separated, there would be no more hope in this world or the next for either of them.

He found himself one of the pathetic trickle of fugitives that he dimly realized was the life-blood of Glevum draining away. Tradesmen with their tools on their backs, whole families pushing their most treasured possessions on hand-carts, or pressing forward simply with what they stood up in; a girl carrying two pigeons in a green willow basket; an old woman on a mule—maybe some rich merchant's wife—with a face that showed staring grey under the stale rouge and eye-paint that had streaked with tears; a beggar with white blind eyes and bare feet. He saw them like the people of a dream, all with the same stunned masks for faces; and all around him, he heard one word repeated again and again: 'It is the Saxons—the Saxons—God help us! The Saxons are coming . . .'

Somehow he had not thought of that, of the Saxons on his heels.

People were looking at him now, staring, their mouths foolishly open, asking questions. He heard his own voice answering, but was not sure what he answered. Something about the fighting on the Aquae Sulis road, something about Kyndylan's death, and Conmail's. They fell back from him a little, as though he were a ghost; as though he were the Breaking of Britain made visible to their eyes.

The bridge timbers sounded hollow under his feet, and there was a little gap between him and the people ahead and the people who came after. Then he was on the further shore, and the paved road ran out before him, thrusting westward into the hills.