

ANNA ELLIOTT

On Dark Moon of Avalon:

"Elliott brings
the Arthurian world
to rich life . . ."

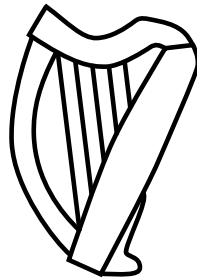
—*Publishers Weekly*

THE WITCH QUEEN'S SECRET

A Twilight of Avalon Short Story

The Witch Queen's Secret

A story of TRYSTAN AND ISOLDE from the
TWILIGHT OF AVALON universe



ANNA ELLIOTT

author of

Twilight of Avalon

Dark Moon of Avalon

Sunrise of Avalon

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This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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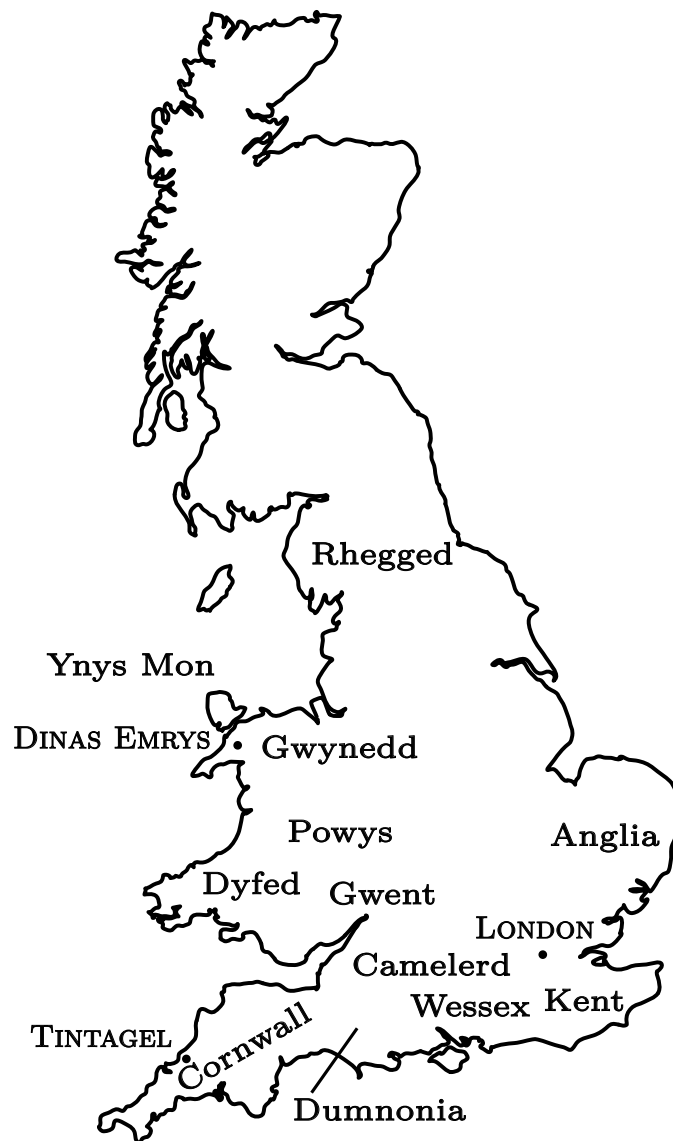
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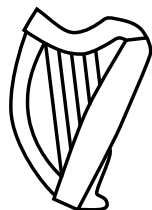
This project was made possible by the selfless contributions of many parties. Type was set using the free L^AT_EX system and the free fonts Uncial and Rustic by Peter Wilson. The free software packages Inkscape and GIMP (GNU Image Manipulation Program) were used in the graphical design process. The map of Britain is based on raw data courtesy of the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency. The cover design is based on *The Crystal Ball* by John William Waterhouse. The harp vignette is loosely based on the *Queen Mary* harp in the National Museum of Scotland, Edinburgh.

Isolde's Britain

6TH CENTURY



Author's Note



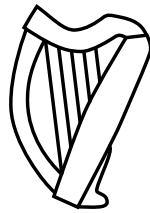
AS AN AUTHOR, I FALL in love with my secondary characters, and often feel a bit guilty their story has to take a backseat to narrating my main characters' journey. Dera, the salty-tongued army harlot, was my favorite secondary character in *Twilight of Avalon*, and she tugged on my conscience all the time I was writing the next two books of the trilogy. I couldn't find a way to fit her into the story arc of either *Dark Moon of Avalon* or *Sunrise of Avalon*—and yet I couldn't stop myself from thinking about her, wondering what happened to her and her little boy Jory after we left them at the end of Book 1. The story I imagined for her grew more and more real in my head, until I just had to write it down.

So here is Dera's story. Chronologically, it takes place between *Twilight of Avalon* and *Dark Moon of Avalon*. But it is self-contained; you don't have to have read any of the Trystan and Isolde books to understand *The Witch Queen's Secret*. Whether you know Dera already from *Twilight of Avalon* or are completely new to the trilogy, I hope you'll come to care about her as much as I do, and I hope you'll enjoy watching Dera win the ending I always knew she deserved.

To learn more, visit me on the web at www.annaelliottbooks.com. Happy reading!

Anna Elliott

1



K NOWING YOU'D GOTTEN your own self into a mess wasn't all that much consolation when you were about to die.

Stop that. Dera made herself take a breath to quiet the drumming of her own heart in her ears. It was pitch-dark here in the forest. So dark it felt like dirt pressing against her face, and it didn't matter whether her eyes were open or closed, Dera couldn't see a thing either way. The spring thaw had come—but just now, you couldn't prove it by her. Her fingers felt cold enough that she'd not have been surprised to hear them tinkle together like icicles when she moved. And the night air felt like knives stabbing her in the chest.

But she made herself draw another breath, then another after that. She wasn't going to die. Jory needed his mam. And she needed to see her boy grow up.

The pounding of her heart kept on getting mixed up with her thoughts, turning them into a tangled, soggy mess like wet knitting yarn. But all right, she wasn't going to die. It might seem about as likely as having a chat with one of the dragons that were supposed to live under the ground here—but she was going to keep Britain's army from falling to Lord Marche and his traitor warriors tonight. Then she was going to get back to Jory and find a way to have a real, proper home for him. Somewhere with real beds—or at least pallets out of the rain—where she wouldn't have to sell herself to soldiers so they could eat. Someplace where she could plant seeds for a garden, and Jory could have a dog. A boy should have a dog of his own.

Maybe she'd even learn how to cook. Miracles happened—wasn't that what the Christ-God's followers were always saying?

Somewhere in the trees above her head, an owl called.

Lady Isolde would look after Jory if Dera didn't make it back to Dinas Emrys alive. Lady Isolde would love him, keep him safe—let him play with that big dog of hers as much as he liked. Assuming Dinas Emrys wasn't burned to the ground, and Lady Isolde and Jory both lived through the—

Stop it. Dark or no, Dera squeezed her eyes tight shut and dug her nails hard into the palms for good measure. The only sounds were the rustles and creak of the winter-chilled branches in the night breeze.

Think of a joke. That was what her own mam had always said, when they'd been thrown out of another tavern or there wasn't enough food to eat. You can't laugh and worry at the same time.

The only joke she could remember now, though, was Cade grinning up at her from his pallet on Lady Isolde's infirmary floor and saying, when she asked him how his head felt, "Pretty well. There's supposed to be two of you, sort of shimmering round the edges, isn't that right?"

Which made her smile, but it also hurt her chest even more than breathing in breath after breath of freezing air.

She'd hours since this made herself stop picturing Jory—imagining him asleep now in Lady Isolde's workroom, flopped over on his belly like usual, with his eyes screwed up tight shut. Picturing how, if she were there with him—the way she'd been every night since he'd been born—she could bury her face against the soft crease at the back of his neck and feel his body rise and fall as he breathed.

But now, however hard she tried, she couldn't make herself stop seeing Cade: his dark hair and eyes, his firm chin and square brow, and the mouth that always wanted to quirk up into a smile even when he was in pain.

Not that she'd any idea whether he would—or could—bring her any closer to giving Jory a proper home. Likely not; he was a fighting man, following High King Madoc's army all the year round.

All the same, if she did somehow come through tonight alive, she had a feeling she might see something about Cade that would make this all worthwhile.

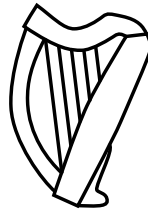
Worthwhile even apart from saving Britain's armies, that was.

Dera opened her eyes, breathing the chill air, trying not to let leaves rustle under her feet. She couldn't stop thinking, though. Not about Cade—or at least, not just about him—but about how it was she'd gotten herself here. From bedding soldiers for pay to spying on behalf of the High King, in less than a month's time.

Dera shifted position—slowly, slowly, so she wouldn't make any noise—to

lean against a prickly-barked fir tree trunk and let herself remember. Until Lord Marche and the rest of his traitor warriors arrived, it wasn't like she'd anything better to do.

11



Three weeks earlier . . .

“UP, MAMA! WANT UP UP UP NOW!” Jory’s lip was quivering in the way that meant the words would soon be turning into tears. Which would turn into screams before you could turn around three times.

Dera gritted her teeth against the aching stab that shot through her ribs and bent to pick him up. “I’m sorry, my lady. He’s just—”

But the Lady Isolde of Camelerd, widow to the High King Constantine, was there before her, scooping Jory up into her arms and tickling him.

Dera watched Jory’s sulky face break into laughter and thought there had to be something wrong with her. She’d die for her boy, no question—she didn’t even have to think about that. But why was it dying for him sounded a lot easier some days than listening to him whine for one single moment more?

Now, though, listening to the way his breath wheezed even when he laughed, and looking at the purplish gray shadows under his eyes, Dera’s heart felt squeezed tight in her chest.

She’d never been much of a one for praying, but watching Jory laugh she thought, *Just let him get better. Please, I’ll—*

What? Let Jory get better and she’d what? Drop some coins or a piece of jewelry in one of the tithe boxes at a church? Fat chance on her ever having more than she and Jory needed just to buy bread for the day. Stop bedding the soldiers in the King’s army—like the nuns at the last holy house they’d begged shelter at had told her she ought? Take that advice and she’d not even have enough for her and Jory’s bread.

It wasn't all that many men who were willing to take the chance on lying with a woman who'd a great purple birthmark all across one side of her face—the kind that marked someone out for an unlucky life. Especially not these days.

The Lady Isolde was talking to Jory. She had a pretty voice—clear and sweet sounding—and Jory was listening to her with eyes as big as soup bowls while she talked. Did he like dogs? She'd a dog who was terribly lonely for some company. She was busy with wounded soldiers all day long. Would Jory play with Cabal for a while?

They were in the infirmary, crowded rows of sick and injured men lying on beds of straw and the smell of blood and piss and smoke from the fire thick in the air. But there was a clear space in one corner of the room, and the Lady Isolde got Jory set up there with the big brown and white war dog who'd been asleep by the hearth, and a ball made of tied up rags. Jory was tossing the ball to the dog and clapping his hands before Dera had even got her wits together to say, "That's very kind of you, my lady. He's a good lad. It's just we've been on the road walking since dawn and he's tired and—"

She could feel a whine pushing its way up her throat, wanting to creep into her words, and she clamped her jaw shut. Not that she was above begging now and again if it got her and Jory a meal or a roof over their heads for a night or two. But three months ago, the Lady Isolde had risked her own life just to save Dera, a common army whore. And Dera still didn't know why.

"And hungry," Lady Isolde finished for her. "Both of you are. I'll get you food and something to drink in a moment. But first"—her eyes swept over Dera—"you're injured, aren't you?"

She didn't look much like a fine lady. Certainly not like a lady who'd been High Queen until a few short months ago. Or a lady with the power of magic about her—which she was, if all the stories about her could be believed.

Not that Dera had seen many fine ladies for herself. Or magic, for that matter. But the queens in bards' songs wore fur-trimmed clothes and fairly dripped with jewels. The Lady Isolde's dress was common blue wool, pinned at the shoulders with plain bronze pins. And she must have had a badly wounded man come in today, because the front of her skirt was all spattered with blood.

She was pretty, though. More than pretty, really, with her white skin and big gray eyes and her black hair braided and pinned like a crown around her head. She was also small and slight, and Dera knew she couldn't be more than twenty summers old. But the look in her eyes still made Dera think of Mam. Who'd been dead since Dera was sixteen. And still, thinking of her made stupid tears rise to Dera's eyes.

“No, my lady. It was Jory I came here for.” She nodded to her son. The dog had lain back down by the hearth, and Jory was curled up beside him, scratching him behind the ears. “He’s this cough, you see. Started just after Samhain, and it’s lingered. Just won’t go away, and—”

Lady Isolde nodded. “I heard it. And I’ll give you some horehound syrup for him. But if you’re in need of attention, as well—” she had small hands, slim and graceful and very quick. One of them reached out and lightly touched a place on Dera’s ribs, then moved to a spot on her cheek, just below her right eye. The bruises must not have faded yet. And she could still feel the cut on her upper lip. Though at least it wasn’t so swollen anymore.

“I’m all right. It’s nothing to speak of, my lady. Just—” Dera clenched her teeth again to stop her voice from trembling, even as she felt her mouth twist. “You know what men are.”

Dera would wager the Lady Isolde did know what men were, all too well. She’d been forced into marrying Lord Marche of Cornwall three months back. And Dera had watched her, while she and Jory had waited for her to get done with her rounds among the wounded men. Lady Isolde never stopped being gentle and kind—and she’d a way of speaking to the men that could get a smile or a laugh out of even the roughest-tempered. But when one of the sickest of them clutched at her, grabbed her arm or her hand in some fever-dream, Dera had seen her go very still, like she was holding her breath and forcing herself not to flinch or pull away.

Then Lord Marche had turned traitor, had gone against Britain and joined his armies to the Saxon devils. The fine lords and kings on the High King’s council might have been surprised by that. Not Dera. She’d scars of her own she’d gotten at Lord Marche’s hands, when she’d been fool enough to take payment from him for a night’s tumble. Turned out that tumbling hadn’t been all—or even half—of what he’d wanted. Which she should have known; you got to recognize the mean ones by the look in their eyes. The man who’d given her these bruises had had that look about him, as well. But Jory’d been hungry enough that she hadn’t been able to tell him no.

And besides, all the men were in vile tempers these days, with the fighting going so badly, and battle after battle lost to Lord Marche and his dirty Saxon allies. Half the soldiers who asked for it used her like they were punishing her for the loss of their brothers and friends. As if the bloody war had been all her idea, or it was her fault Lord Marche had to be not just a traitor but a master warrior, as well.

At least this last man had paid her; sometimes his kind just laughed and told

her she should be thanking them for a good time. But this one had paid with a battered bronze finger ring taken off a dead Saxon. And that had bought her and Jory a ride on a cart here, to Dinas Emrys, the new High King Madoc's fortress high in the rocky Gwynedd mountains. A place as safe from Saxon attacks as anywhere was, these days.

Now Lady Isolde was looking from the bruise on Dera's face to the way she was holding herself hunched over to guard against the aching stabs that kept shooting through her ribs—and Dera saw her big gray eyes filling with tears. "I'm sorry." Her voice sounded soft, shaky, sort of. "I did look for you, three months ago. You and Jory, both. But you were gone. I should have looked harder, though. I should have—"

Lady Isolde stopped at a commotion at the infirmary door: two men carrying in a third, who was screaming and bellowing like an angry bull. Not that Dera blamed him; the front of his tunic was all cut open and stained with blood, and she could see the sword cut in his belly and part of his guts poking out through the wound.

"I'm sorry." Lady Isolde was already moving towards the new man, but she stopped long enough to touch Dera's arm. "I must go. But please stay—as long as you like. And I'll get you the horehound syrup for Jory just as soon as I—"

The rest of what she said was lost; she was already gesturing for the screaming man to be put down on one of the empty pallets of straw, kilting up her skirts and kneeling down next to him, taking out a little bone-handled knife and using it to cut the bloodied fragments of his shirt away.

Dera looked over at Jory. But he was asleep, head pillowed on the big dog's middle and his thumb in his mouth. Amazing that all the man's noise hadn't woken him. Though the gods knew he'd practice enough at sleeping through anything by now.

Dera didn't know why she moved closer. She'd seen her bellyful of ugly sights these last months and days. But ugly sights were like that sometimes: you'd be sick to your stomach and still somehow couldn't drag your eyes away. Like it was so awful you had to keep looking and looking, trying to decide whether it could be true.

The next she knew she was standing right next to where Lady Isolde was kneeling—and Lady Isolde was looking up at her, with the same look in her eyes as a man might have when he inspected a weapon to be sure it was sharp. She'd wadded up a pad of clean linen and had it clamped over the sword cut in the man's belly, but Dera could already see the fabric turning wet and red.

"Can you help me?"

Dera gaped at her. “Can I—”

Lady Isolde shook her head and seemed to come back to herself a bit. She spoke quickly. “I shouldn’t ask this of you—I know this wasn’t what you came here for. But this man is going to need stitching up. I’ve been handling the usual run of injuries on my own—help is short here just now. And this is going to take another pair of hands. Can you do it?”

Dera looked from the Lady Isolde to the man’s face. He was older than the usual run of fighting men. Maybe forty or forty-five. Heavy-muscled and tall, with a long, black mustache and curly hair threaded through with gray. His eyes were dark, staring straight at her, but so bleared with pain she could likely have turned into a raven like the women in the faerie tales and he’d not have blinked an eye. He’d stopped screaming and was biting down on his lip; Dera saw a trickle of blood run down his chin.

At least he wasn’t one she could remember servicing. Not that she made it a habit to study their faces, most times.

Dera’s throat felt like her last meal had been sharp-edged rocks, and one had stuck, but she swallowed and then nodded. “All right. Reckon I can. Just tell me what to do.”

IT WAS INTERESTING, SORT OF. Once you got over wanting to heave your breakfast up onto your boots. The two men who’d brought the wounded one in held him down while Lady Isolde worked. Dera’s job was to hold her needles and thread, hand what Lady Isolde needed to her at the proper times, and keep wiping the blood away so that she could see what she was doing.

First, Lady Isolde cut the hole in the man’s belly a bit wider. Which seemed lackwitted to Dera, until she realized it was so the coil of his guts that was hanging out could be fit back in. Lady Isolde asked for water and oil, and smeared them over the pallid tubes of innards before she did that. And she had Dera hold the edges of the wound open so that she could get them slid back into place. Then she had the two fighting men shake the wounded man just gently, side to side.

Dera had been biting down on her own lips, but she must have made some squeak of a sound, because Lady Isolde looked up and said, “It’s all right. It helps the intestines settle into their proper place, that’s all.”

And then she started to stitch up the wound. Watching, Dera could almost believe there was some magic about her, just as the stories said. Lady Isolde

used two needles at once, changing them from hand to hand—and all so sure and steady she might have been darning socks, not a man’s belly and guts. At first Dera was too much taken up with watching—and trying too hard not to be sick—to pay mind to anything else. But then, after a bit, she realized Lady Isolde was speaking to herself under her breath, quick and low, all the time she worked.

“*Climb on my back*, the water horse said, *and I’ll carry you across.*” Dera knew that story, about a ceffyl-dwr, a water horse that could take the shape of a man, who tried to get a fair maid to climb on his back so that he could take her deep down to the bottom of his river and make her his wife. She hadn’t realized she was staring, though, until Lady Isolde put in the final stitches and then looked up again with a little twist of a smile. “The story gives me something else to think about besides how much pain I’m causing him.”

“I know.” Dera looked down. The wounded man had fainted halfway through; he was lying now with his eyes shut and his mouth slack. “I remember from—” She stopped and squeezed her eyes tight shut. Because if it was stupid to cry at a bit of kindness from a fine lady like Lady Isolde, it was stupider yet to cry over the dead baby girl Lady Isolde had delivered. The baby who’d been fathered by who-knew-which of the men she’d serviced, and who she’d never have managed to keep warm and fed living on the road with winter coming on.

“I’m sorry,” Lady Isolde said again. “Truly sorry, Dera.”

Dera opened her eyes and realized that Lady Isolde had put a hand over hers. Both their hands were smeared, sticky with blood. “Don’t be, my lady. Nothing you could have done.” She felt her chin jerking up and down and the tears puddling behind her eyes, so she bit her lip harder and said, “What do we do now?”

WHAT THEY DID WAS SEND the two fighting men off to the kitchens and then bandage the wounded man up. He woke about halfway through, and Lady Isolde had Dera prop his head while she got him to swallow some poppy syrup that had him unconscious again before the final bandage was tied. Lady Isolde sat back on her heels. Dera looked over at Jory, but he was still asleep, curled up with Lady Isolde’s dog.

“Will he live?” Dera nodded at the man at their feet.

Lady Isolde pushed a stray curl of black hair off her forehead with the back of her hand. She looked tired, like she hadn’t been sleeping well. Her eyes

were sad, too—sadder, somehow, than they'd been three months before. "I don't know." She looked down at the man's face, hard, as if she was trying to memorize what he looked like. "Hardly any man survives injuries like his. Maybe one in twenty. If that many."

Then she shook her head, like she was trying to get the thought out of it, and said, "I haven't thanked you properly for your help. If he does have a chance, it's because of you."

Dera felt her cheeks go red. "I didn't do much, my lady."

"Still." And then Lady Isolde stopped, searching Dera's face with her eyes. "Do you think you could—would you want to do something like that again?"

Just for something to do, Dera had started folding up the man's belongings that had tumbled out of his pack in a heap when his fellows had set him down. A spare set of breeches, shirt, traveling cloak. He must not have a wife back home. Or if he did, she wasn't any too fond of him. The wedded men usually had a bundle of rowan twigs or a love knot sewn into their clothes somewhere.

Other women were quick enough to call Lady Isolde the Witch Queen—but they weren't above trying out a bit of magic, themselves, and buying a wise-woman's herbs or a peddler's charm, hoping to keep their men safe in battle. Dera had gotten good at noticing things like that, because she always tried—unless she and Jory were too hungry to help it—not to say yes to the men with wives waiting back home.

Not that she'd have been anything but grateful if her own dead husband had ever gone and spent his nights in someone else's bed. But she wasn't going to be the one to let a man break his vows to some poor woman waiting patient for him to come back to her.

Anyway, there were no charms or anything like them among this man's things, and his clothes were mended with stitches so clumsy it looked like a blind man with two left thumbs had put them in. Dera folded the cloak, then shrugged. "Usually when I get this close to a man, I have to pretend I'm enjoying myself. So this was at least one up on that."

Lady Isolde's mouth dimpled at the corners, and then she laughed. She'd a pretty laugh, pretty as her speaking voice—though it sounded surprised, like it had been a long time since she'd thought about smiling or finding the fun in something.

Dera looked up at her, "Why do you ask me that, though, my lady?"

Lady Isolde looked down, smoothing the blanket over the wounded man's chest. And then she said, "I was wondering whether you'd like to stay here—you and Jory, too, of course. Space is tight, these days, with so many fighting

men quartered here at Dinas Emrys for the winter. But we could set up a space for the two of you to sleep in my workroom. And—if you were willing—you could help me for part of the day. When Jory doesn't need you. Help grind herbs and prepare ointments. Sometimes lend aid as you did today, when I need an extra set of hands."

Dera felt her jaw drop open. Lady Isolde must have misread the look, because she said, still speaking quick-like, "You can say no if you don't like the idea. I know it's hard, seeing what battle does to these men. Treating wounds all day."

Dera took a breath and got her voice back. "Say no? I'd have to be soft in the head to say no to an offer like that. I just—"

Lady Isolde stopped her before she could finish. "I have to be honest, Dera. Because you've Jory to think of. And because of . . . because of what happened to you three months ago because of me. You know the stories told about me—you know what I'm called. If you stay here and help me, there's always a danger you'll be accused of witchery, as well."

Her eyes met Dera's, and a shiver slid down Dera's spine, because she did remember—remembered being dragged in front of the King's Council when the Lady Isolde was put on trial for witchcraft. All because she'd escaped from Lord Marche, after a day and a night of being his wife.

And yet Lady Isolde had stood up there, right in front of all those men with their axes and fur cloaks and broad swords, and said, clear and strong, "Let Dera go, and I'll confess to the charge." And she would have done it, too. Would have gone to the stake and burned for a witch, just so Dera could go free.

Dera could feel the words wanting to spill out of her, now, to ask Lady Isolde why she'd done it. But she said, instead, "Surely things are different now, my lady. You were the one who proved Lord Marche a traitor—warned the King's Council in time of what he planned."

"Maybe." Lady Isolde's mouth twisted again, though it wasn't in a smile, this time. "But I'm not exactly holding my breath on the changed public opinion lasting. Especially not with the way the war has been going, these last months. Our armies driven back and back into the last strongholds in these hills. Cornwall and Powys lost to the Saxons and"—Dera heard her voice waver just slightly as she spoke the name—"Lord Marche."

Dera didn't know what made her do it. She was just a common camp follower. And even in her old life, it wasn't like she'd ever been anything like on a level with Lady Isolde. But something about the look in Lady Isolde's face made her touch Lady Isolde's hand and say, "Are you . . . are you all right, my lady?"

Lady Isolde's eyes went wider. Like that question had startled her even more

than her own laughing had. She was quiet a moment—and even when she spoke, she didn't answer, exactly. Just looked down at the man they'd just finished bandaging and said, "There's always a chance he'll be one of those who gets better, isn't there? Even if it's only a tiny one."

Somehow that brought the lump back to Dera's throat, and she swallowed hard.

"Are you a witch, my lady?" The instant the words were spoken, Dera could have kicked herself for letting them slip out. She hadn't even known she was going to ask the question until she heard herself say it. And now she'd just bollixed her chances of actually getting to stay here good and proper.

But Lady Isolde was still looking down at the wounded man, and if she was angry it didn't show. She shook her head. "No. That's what's so funny." Her voice didn't sound like she meant it for a joke, though. "My grandmother was Morgan, daughter of the Pendragon. You've probably heard of her. The great enchantress. That's what all the fire tales call her. She taught me about the Sight. But I...gave up any power I had. After the Battle at Camlann. When my father killed King Arthur, and died himself. Everyone said it was a judgement from the Christian God. Because my grandmother Morgan—my father's mother—was an evil witch, who'd ruined all Britain with her spite. That's what the priests and ...and everyone else claimed, at least. And my grandmother ...she died, as well. Of the plague that followed the battle. So I gave up the Sight. I'm sorry for it, now—because whatever else my grandmother was, she wasn't evil. But the Sight's never come back, except once. Other than that one time, I just ...just pretended to have it. To make the council afraid of me. Because I was completely on my own after my grandmother died. And a woman on her own in a time of war—" She stopped. "Well. You know what it's like—even better than I do, probably."

Lady Isolde stopped again, and finally looked up at Dera. She didn't speak. And as the silence stretched, Dera could have almost screamed with thinking, *Here it comes, she's not going to let us stay after all.*

But Lady Isolde said, "Does that make a difference in whether you want the job of helping me here?"

Dera's breath went out in a rush that felt like a bellows. "Saint Joseph's hairy left *toe*, I don't care if you boil newts and turn men into frogs, so long's you let me and Jory stay."

And then she stopped sharp. Because she might not know a whole lot of fine ladies, but she was pretty certain that wasn't how you were supposed to talk to one.

Lady Isolde laughed, though. Still with that little wrinkle of surprise about her eyes, like she was only just starting to remember how it was done.

“Trystan used to say that. Well, something like it, anyway. When I had to go off for lessons with my grandmother. He’d ask if I’d have learnt how to change him into a toad when I was done.”

Her eyes had gone distant, like she was seeing something a long way off. Dera tongued the cut on her upper lip, then risked saying, “Trystan?”

Lady Isolde shook her head, and her eyes came back from wherever they’d been. “A boy I knew growing up. He was a . . . a friend. The only friend I had, really. But that was a long time ago. He’s gone now.”

“MABON’S BOLLOCKS!” Cade’s eyes were watering and his mouth was screwed up like he’d been punched in the gut. “This tastes like—”

Dera managed to catch the cup he’d been holding before it could spill onto the floor rushes. “Like what? Go on—tell me what you were going to say.”

“Right, I’ll do that.” Cade gave a wheezing cough and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “You think I’ve forgotten that you’re the one who changes my bandages every day—and brings me my meals?”

Dera laughed, and Cade caught hold of her hand. “Dera, I—”

Dera had spent she-didn’t-know-how-many hours sitting next to him like this, on the floor beside his pallet in the infirmary. He’d been here at Dinas Emrys nearly three weeks, now, since his fellows had carried him in with the sword cut to his belly, and Dera had helped Lady Isolde with stitching him shut. Part of that he’d been clean off his head with pain and fever—Dera had been nursing him a week before she’d even found out from him that his name was Cade, and that he was an archer in the High King Madoc’s war band.

But if only one in twenty men survived a wound like his, he seemed bound and determined to be that twentieth one. Because he was getting better. His fever was gone, and Lady Isolde said the wound was healing well. And this morning, Dera had helped him sit himself up a bit to drink the bowl of broth she’d brought.

She felt like she knew his face almost as well as she did her own, by now. Better, really, because even if she’d had one, she’d not have wanted to spend much time looking into mirrors; the glimpses she got in whatever streams or pools she happened to wash in showed her quite enough.

Cade had a good face. Not handsome, exactly. But strong-looking, with a square brow and a good firm jaw, and lines about the corners of his eyes when he

smiled. She knew his expressions, too. And the one on his face as he looked at her now was the expression that meant she was going to have to put him off yet again.

Before Dera could pull her hand away, though, Lady Isolde's voice behind her said, "Dera, do you—" and then stopped. When Dera turned, Lady Isolde was looking from her to Cade, her gray eyes gone a little wide.

Not that she said anything. Just finished her question about one of the simples brewing in her workroom, and then stood aside to let Dera pass when Dera jumped up and said she'd come with her, straight away.

Only when they were alone in the workroom, picking over a bushel of dried St. Patrick's leaf to be used for drawing the pus out of festering wounds, did Lady Isolde say, kind of hesitant-like, and without looking up, "Cade seems like a . . . like a good man."

Dera felt her cheeks heat up. Which was funny, considering what she'd done in full view of half the men in the King's army. And Lady Isolde had only seen her holding Cade's hand. But still, she said, "I'm sorry, my lady. I'm done with . . . I mean, I wouldn't take pay for . . . I hope you're not angry?"

"Angry?" Lady Isolde looked up at that, eyes gone wide all over again. "Why would I be angry? And I didn't think you were"—Dera saw a bit of color creep into Lady Isolde's cheeks, as well— "What I mean is, that you're not a servant here, Dera. You can do what you like."

That was true enough. She'd even tried to get Dera to drop the 'Lady' and just call her 'Isolde', but Dera couldn't manage it yet.

Three weeks, now, that she'd been at Dinas Emrys. Now that the first thaw of spring had come, there'd been trouble with Irish sea raiders on the Isle of Ynys Mon—settlements pillaged, women carried off for slaves, and villages burned—and King Madoc had marched out with most of his war band to meet the raiders' attack. Dinas Emrys was quieter, now, and less crowded with so many of the fighting men gone. Dera had heard whispers among the wounded of what could happen if there was an attack now that the fort's defenses were down. But everything had been quiet, so far. The men whose wounds they treated were the ones that lived through the journey in horse carts or wagons to Dinas Emrys.

Dera still wasn't about to stitch up a sword cut or set a broken bone. But she'd gotten so that she could mix up some of the easier ointments and salves on her own. And she'd stopped having to run out and lose her breakfast when she had to help Lady Isolde lance a poisoned wound.

Now Dera took a breath. She loved the way Lady Isolde's workroom smelled: spicy and earthy all at once, warm from the brazier they used to melt the goose

grease for ointments and boil water or wine for the simples and drafts. Just breathing in the air always made her feel lighter, somehow. Easier. Like a clenched knot in her chest she hadn't even known was there was starting to come untied.

She and Jory had their own straw-stuffed pallet on the floor in the corner, with a curtain hung round to keep out the chill and a box to hold their belongings. Jory was in the kitchens, now, playing with the cook's little girl, who'd taken a fancy to him. But Dera could see the little carved wooden horse Lady Isolde had given him a few days ago for his own, lying on top of the blanket on the pallet. He slept with it at night—and woke up with the print of it in his cheek, as often as not.

"He wants me to marry him." She hadn't realized she was going to say it until she heard herself blurt the words out into the workroom's quiet.

"Oh." Lady Isolde looked startled. Not shocked or disbelieving. Just a bit taken aback, like she hadn't considered that before. She looked up from the leaves they were sorting, and said, again, "He seems like a good man."

Dera realized she'd got her hand clenched round a fistful of the dried leaves. One of the stems was digging into her palm. "What if he's not, though?"

Lady Isolde looked up quick. "You think he's not?"

"No. I mean—" Dera felt like the words were lumps of rope, choking her before she could work out how to turn them into what she wanted to say. "What I mean to say is, you're caring for wounded soldiers from sun up to sun down. You know what they've seen and done. They have to kill day in and day out. Kill or die. Can any man go through that and not be turned into a monster?"

Dera saw Lady Isolde's knuckles go white around the handle of the mortar she was holding. "I'm sorry, my lady. I didn't mean—"

Lady Isolde shook her head. "No. It's all right. But I don't know the answer." Her gray eyes went unfocused just for a moment, as she looked across at the glowing brazier where she'd set a copper pan of water to heat. "I wish I did. I thought—" she stopped and stood quiet a long moment. Then she said, "The boy I knew when I was growing up. Trystan." Dera could see her mouth turn downwards, like it hurt her to speak the name. Though it wasn't the same way her face changed when she had to say 'Lord Marche.' "Trystan was one of my father's most trusted fighting men. He was leading a war band before he was sixteen. And he never ... he never stopped being honorable or ... or good, no matter how many battles he fought in, no matter how many raids he led. Not that he'd ever have told me just what had happened during the fighting—just what he'd done. He was very ... private, always. He kept his feelings to himself. But he ... my father's spear men all jockeyed and fought to be put under his command.

Because he'd never once let one of his warriors be taken prisoner. If they were captured, he got them back, every one, no matter what risks he had to take to do it. 'No man left behind.' That's what he used to say. If a man was wounded, they took it in turns to carry him. If a man was killed, they brought his body back to be buried with warrior's honors at home."

She looked down at her own hands—though Dera didn't think it was her fingers she was seeing. Dera said, "You don't get the chance to talk about him much, do you?"

Lady Isolde looked up and gave a little twist of a smile, though her eyes were sad. "Never. I never talk about him."

Dera could tell just by looking that this story didn't have a happy ending. But she couldn't stop herself from asking, "What happened to him? If you don't mind my asking, I mean."

"Mind?" Lady Isolde shook her head. "No. I don't mind. He was captured at Camlann—at least I think he was. I thought he must have been killed, because he disappeared—no one had word of him. But then ... just a few months ago ... he appeared again. He'd been a Saxon slave. And now he's an outlaw ... a mercenary, fighting for whichever lord offers the highest pay. But"—she looked up at Dera and smiled just a bit again—"but he saved my life for me. Twice over. And the men he was with—the other outlaws—were loyal enough to him that any one of them would have laid down his life for Trystan's. So maybe that's your answer. Or as much of a one as there can be."

Lady Isolde stopped again and was quiet a moment more. Then she looked at Dera again. "I've never once seen your Cade out of temper—even when the sword cut was giving him the most pain. Fire tales are all full of heroes who are raised up to noble greatness by suffering terrible griefs or horrible wounds. I tell the stories myself—and maybe it helps the wounded men to hear them. But it's all nonsense, really. Suffering doesn't make anyone noble. If a man is mean-spirited and petty, in nine cases of ten he'll only be meaner and pettier with a sword cut or a crushed arm. But what suffering can do is show a man—or woman—for what they really are."

"If Cade's all that decent, what does he want to marry me for?" Dera heard her voice shaking and locked her hands together. "My luck's not that good." Now that she'd started talking, it felt like she'd tapped into a cask of sour ale, and the words had to pour out until the cask was dry. "My husband—Jory's da' was a mean, drunken brute. And half the men I service are the same as he was—the only difference is I've only got to put up with it for an hour—or less—most of the time. But I don't trust any man to be different—not one that wants me. Part of

me wants to marry Cade. Just like part of me knows he really is a good man. But I can't let myself believe it. I've never even let Jory meet him—because what if something goes wrong? It would be just my luck if Cade died—or changed his mind and didn't want me after all—and then Jory got his heart broke.” Dera felt her fingers clench. “I didn't used to be like this. I used to be braver. But now I ... even this—living at Dinas Emrys—I've spent all the weeks Jory and me have been here telling myself I can't get too fond of it, or anything else, because if I do it'll get taken away.”

“I—” Lady Isolde's hand moved, like she wanted to push the words away but didn't know how. Finally she said, “You love Jory, though.”

“Aye, well.” Dera felt her mouth tilt up into a half-hearted kind of a smile. “Never was much good at following my own good advice. Hearts are meant for loving, that's what my mam always said.”

Lady Isolde looked away, like she was trying to clear a memory out of her eyes. Then she said, “You've never told me about your mother.”

“Mam was”—Dera felt her eyes start to prickle, so she swept up a handful of the Saint Patrick's leaf and dumped it into the mortar's bowl— “she made her living same as I do. Always told me my da' could have been any man in Britain who'd had enough to buy her a hot meal or a jar of ale. But she was merry, like—always laughing. Could turn anything into a joke or a game. Even when we didn't have enough to eat, she'd find the fun in it somehow. We'd play we were lost in a Faerie mound, and didn't dare take a bite of food for fear we'd be trapped there for good.”

“She sounds lovely.”

“Aye.” Dera blinked hard. “She was. Died when I was sixteen. That's when I married Jory's da'. I'd no family, no friends. And my mam always told me I wasn't to go her way, earning my bread on my back. I was going to be a lady. Or at least respectable, with a proper settled home of my own.” Dera felt her mouth twist around the edges again. “You can see how well that's all turned out.”

Lady Isolde touched Dera's arm. “She'd be —” and then she stopped sharp as the door to the workroom opened so fast it banged against the wall, and a man staggered in, one hand clenched around a bloodied rag he'd got pressed against his chest.

IT WAS AN ARROW WOUND; Dera could see the broken-off wooden shaft poking through the wool of his tunic after Lady Isolde had jumped up, reached the man's

side, and lowered him onto the floor. No time to get him into the infirmary. He was half fainting, his eyes rolling back in his head. And he was big, too. Broad-built and tall, with a neck like a bull's and his belly rounding out the front of his clothes. Too heavy for them to carry.

Lady Isolde had already taken out her knife and was slicing the bloodstained shirt away from the arrow shaft. The man groaned and thrashed, nearly knocking the knife from her hand—and Dera realized she was still sitting at the worktable, gaping like a fish.

“Do you want me to—”

Dera had started to kneel down so that she could keep hold of the man's wrists, but Lady Isolde shook her head no, even as she put the knife down and started wiping blood away from the wound. “No, it's all right. I can manage. We have to get word to Gwion—the captain of King Madoc's guard. I don't know who this man is or where he's come from—but he's wearing Madoc's colors, and this arrow wound is less than an hour old. If the fortress's outer defenses are under attack, the guard has to be warned.”

LADY ISOLDE WAS STILL KNEELING beside the wounded man when Dera got back; she looked up when Dera opened the door. “Anything?”

Dera shook her head. “Everything's quiet. Gwion has his guardsmen out doing a search and fanning out from the outer walls—but there's been no sign of anything amiss, he said.” She nodded at the man on the ground. “Just him.”

The man had fainted for good and all now, it seemed. His eyes were closed, the lids puckered and sunken, and when Dera dropped to kneel by his other side and touched his hand, the skin felt clammy and slack. “Can you help him?”

She already knew the answer, though. She'd been watching Lady Isolde treat wounded soldiers for nigh on three weeks, and she knew what the look on Lady Isolde's face meant now. It was the tight, clenched look that meant the man they were working on was going to die.

Lady Isolde bit her lip. “See where the arrow's gone in?” She gestured to the blood smeared shaft just under the man's ribs. Bright scarlet blood was still pumping out around the wound. “The bleeding gets worse every time his heart beats. He'd only bleed to death faster if I tried to get the arrow out. And it's pierced his lung, as well. Do you hear that?”

Dera tilted her head and did hear it: the whistling, bubbling sound every time he tried to take a breath.

“So nothing we can do?”

Lady Isolde raised a hand and brushed the man’s greasy, grizzled hair back from his forehead. “Just help him die.”

“DO YOU RECOGNIZE HIM?” Dera asked. They’d been sitting in silence a time, the only sounds in the infirmary the harsh rattle of the man’s breathing. Outside, Dera could hear the fighting men who guarded the fortress shouting to one another, getting ready to move out and search for whoever it was had fired the arrow. She realized her belly was tight, knotted up with expecting every moment to hear those shouts turn to the battle screams and clashing swords that would mean Dinas Emrys was truly under attack.

Lady Isolde nodded. “I think so. He’s one of King Madoc’s men, of course. But stationed here. I’ve seen him on the ramparts at night. His name is”—she stopped and frowned with trying to remember— “Bevan. That’s it. Bevan.”

Almost like he was answering that, the man’s eyelids flickered. He was an older man, fifty, or thereabouts, with a nose that had been broken at least once, and purple veins like a spider’s web across his cheeks and nose.

He let out another groan, and for a moment Dera thought he was going to wake. He slumped back an instant later, though, his eyes still shut. His skin was gray, now, and the hand Dera was holding felt colder, and still slack as a dead eel.

Lady Isolde put a hand on his forehead. And then she jerked her fingers back, like the touch of his skin had burned her. “He was a traitor.” She was staring down at the man’s face, her face gone white to the lips, and Dera didn’t even think she knew she’d spoken. “He was paid to let a war band of Marche’s men into the fortress. But he went to them, demanding more money. And they shot him, instead. He”—Lady Isolde shut her eyes— “Marche said they’d already gotten as much information from him as they needed, and he was no use to them now.”

Dera realized she was sitting and gaping—like a fish—again. She swallowed and said, feeling a bit surprised that her voice sounded nearly the same as it always did, “How do you—”

“I saw it.” Lady Isolde was still chalky pale, and she was staring at the big man on the floor like she couldn’t believe he was real. “When I touched him. I saw the whole scene. Him—this man here—asking for more gold. And Ma—Marche”—she stumbled a little over the name— “ordering one of his archers to shoot. It was a cross bow bolt.” One of her fingers touched the shaft in the man’s

chest. “He was on horseback, or he’d never have gotten away. But the horse bolted. They didn’t dare follow him too close to the fortress for fear of running into one of the guard patrols and giving themselves away.”

Her voice was wavering, and she looked up. “How—how did I see that? The Sight is supposed to be gone. I gave it up. Years ago.” The words tumbled out, faster and faster. “I Saw Marche three months ago—that’s what gave me the evidence to prove him a traitor to the Council. But I thought—”

She was staring up at something above Dera’s head, and when Dera turned, she saw there was a shelf that she’d never noticed before, high up on the infirmary wall. The shelf was empty except for a bronze bowl. It looked old—old as the stories about dragons. And it had designs etched into the signs. Dera could just make them out. A man with a deer’s antlers growing from his head. Twisting leaves, and snakes making hoops of their bodies by swallowing their own tails.

Lady Isolde had locked her hands tight together, like she was trying to keep them from shaking, but Dera saw the shivers ripple through her from head to toe.

Dera hoped she never had to be as brave as Lady Isolde was. And she’d never yet managed to call her ‘Isolde.’ But now it didn’t matter—she put her arms around Lady Isolde as if she were Jory’s age and hugged her tight. “There, now, lovey. It’s all right. Nothing to hurt or to harm. All’s well.”

Which wasn’t true, any of it—but it seemed to help a bit, because after a minute, Lady Isolde stopped shaking and pulled away a bit. “I have to go—I have to tell someone about—”

“You can’t!”

“But Gwion should—”

Lady Isolde had already started to get up, but Dera stopped her, squeezing her wrist hard, because the blank look in Lady Isolde’s eyes was scaring her. “What are you going to say? Tell a passel of soldiers to please listen to you and do as you say because a magic vision told you? You want to be burned to a cinder? Because that’s what’ll happen if they put you on trial as a witch again.”

Some of the empty look went out of Lady Isolde’s eyes. Her hand was shaking, but she reached up and scrubbed a hand across her eyes. “You’re right. Goddess, I know you’re right. And yet we can’t risk it. I can’t risk *not* telling. If Dinas Emrys does come under attack—”

She straightened, like she was trying to get up again, but Dera pushed her back. “Not yet. Just”—she waved a hand at the man on the floor— “see what else you can find out. That’s only sense, isn’t it? See if there’s anything else you can learn before you go rushing off to tell.”

“I—” Lady Isolde swallowed. Then she nodded, still a bit shaky-like. “You’re

right. It's just—" she looked down at the man Bevan's face. "It feels wrong. Using him like that—to gain information—when he's dying."

"Maybe he'd be glad. Maybe he's sorry for turning traitor, and would want to help you to make up for what he's done. Anyhow," Dera added, "No one deserves to die alone. And if someone's got to hold his hand, it might as well be you."

Lady Isolde's face was still white, but her mouth turned up just a bit, like she was trying to smile at that. "Thank you, Dera. I'm glad"—she stopped and squeezed Dera's hand— "I'm so glad you're here. All right." She took a breath, and Dera saw her stiffen, like she was trying to brace herself. Then she slipped her hand into the wounded man's. She shivered again, but this time she didn't jerk back.

After a moment, though, she shook her head. "All I'm getting is what he'd planned to do with the gold he was paid. Women and—" she stopped. "And I can feel the pain he's in. It's . . . terrible. He's finding it harder and harder to get a breath, and"—she stopped again, and just lightly rested her free hand against his brow— "and he's getting colder. He can't feel his feet anymore."

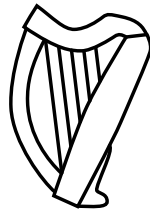
She closed her eyes, and the muscles in her throat bobbed up and down as she swallowed, like she was trying to keep herself from being sick. Then she looked up.

"King Madoc is on Ynys Mon with his war band. That's only a day's ride from here. If we could send one of the men left on guard here to get word to him—"

Then she stopped, eyes gone suddenly wide. "But that's just it. We can't. Where there's one traitor, there may be others, as well. That could be what . . . what Marche meant, when he said Bevan was no use to them. Maybe they'd found another warrior at Dinas Emrys willing to turn his coat for payment. If that is true, I won't be able to see it—because Bevan doesn't know himself, and never did. But that means—"

"Even if we can figure a way to tell someone—ask one of the men to get word to King Madoc—we could be handing ourselves over to a traitor, like turkeys waddling straight up to the chopping block," Dera finished for her. Sometime, without her noticing, the men must have ridden out, because the fortress was quiet, now. The infirmary walls seemed like they were pressing in around her, and Dera wasn't doing any too well at getting a breath herself.

"All right," she said. She made her voice sound more certain than she felt. "Here's what we've got to do."



Present day...

NOW WATER—from the morning’s sleeting rain—was dripping off the branches overhead and down the back of Dera’s neck. She pushed off from the tree trunk, and wished she dared stamp her feet to keep warm; her toes felt like they were getting jabbed all over with pins.

She’d gotten herself into this—the whole plan had been her idea. Though Lady Isolde had wanted to come in Dera’s place. She’d said there was too much danger—that she couldn’t ask Dera to take such a risk.

“That’s good, coming from you,” Dera had said. By that time, she’d been feeling like they had a loaded catapult aimed straight at them and held back by nothing more than a hair, and she’d been fairly dancing with the need to get out and on her way. “Aren’t you the one that stood up in front of Lord Marche and the whole King’s Council and said they could burn you if only they’d let me go free?”

“But that was—” Lady Isolde stopped. “You’ve got Jory, Dera. You can’t risk leaving him without his mother.”

“Maybe not. But I’m not going to let Lord Marche’s men stroll in here and kill him, either—or cart him off to be sold for some Saxon lord’s slave.” Just saying the words made Dera flash hot, then cold, and bitter bile rise in her throat. But she said, “And that’s what’ll happen if you’re the one to go out there tonight. Think. What if Lord Marche is there, one of the men attacking tonight? He’s not like to recognize me—not in the dark, and when he’s probably had a hundred

whores since last we met. But you—he'd know you, all right. And so would his men. If you were the one to go, and Marche or anyone else recognized you—"

"All right." Lady Isolde still looked pale, and a bit shaky, but she let out her breath and moved her head in a nod. "I don't like it—but you're right. Just . . . be careful, Dera. Please."

The last Dera had seen of her, Lady Isolde had still been sitting by the traitor Bevan's body, still holding his hand and touching his forehead whenever he groaned. Which Dera would probably be glad about, if she ever made it through the night alive. Just now, though, with the icy water working its way down her spine and her lips and nose long since gone numb, she was thinking Bevan was having a lot easier time of it than he deserved.

The owl called again, sending her heart slamming so hard into her ribs Dera wouldn't have been surprised to hear them creak. She locked her hands tight against her middle, and made herself go over the steps of the plan.

Lord Marche's men were camped on the shore of Llyn Dinas. Lady Isolde had seen enough of the area where their wounded man had been shot with the arrow to be—almost—sure. Which meant they'd be coming towards Dinas Emrys up the mountain track from the river Glaslyn—the same track the merchants and traders used.

So here Dera was. Hiding in the bushes, turning her fingers and toes into icicles, at the top of the mountain track that led through the trees and rocky ground to the river valley below.

And then she heard it: from far down below, a clatter of stone on stone, and then a muttered curse—like someone had tripped over a rock or pebble and lost their footing.

She'd thought her heart had been beating hard before, but now it felt like it was trying to jump out of her chest. Dera shut her eyes and tried to breathe, like she had before—but this time it didn't help. She could hear more of them, now—and closer. Heavy, booted footsteps and an occasional grunt or rustle of branches coming up the path. They'd be on her in a moment.

She took another breath, and, before she could completely lose her nerve, smashed her way through the scrub of bushes and dry brush between her and the sound of the men.

"Lud's hairy ass!"

It would have been funny, if she'd been in the mood for a laugh. The first man stopped up short, swearing as she emerged onto the path, and the next four in line plowed straight into him like a children's game of skittles. The first man in line, though, grabbed hold of her wrist and hauled her towards him, bending down so

close she could smell the stink of onions on his breath.

“Who are you? What are you doing here?”

This was the part of the plan she’d been going over and over again in her head, practicing what she was going to say until she knew it by heart. But practicing on her own was one thing. Now she was standing here in the dark and freezing cold, with the man’s fingers digging into her skin and the rest of his companions all coming up to stare at her, as well. And there must have been fifty or more of them, all armed and helmeted, stinking of sweat and ale and wet leather. She didn’t see Lord Marche anywhere among them—and surely he’d have been at the front if he was here—but that was about the only good thing she could make out about this all.

Dera swallowed, forced her mouth to open—but no sound came out. She felt like a giant hand was wrapped around her chest and starting to squeeze.

“Well?” The man’s voice was a growl in her ear. “Answer me! Unless you want me to slit your throat.”

He’d do it, too. He’d got his knife out and was holding it just under her chin. Dera could feel the point pricking her, and a hot drip of blood starting to trickle down her skin.

And all of a sudden—maybe it was the blood, or the thought of Jory asleep in the fortress above them—or just one of those miracles of the Christians—all of a sudden all the fear was burned straight out of her by a flame of pure anger that started under her breastbone and spread until even the tips of her fingers felt warm. If she could have grabbed the knife away from this man and stabbed him in the guts with it, she would have done it.

Dera took a deep breath and then said the words she’d been practicing. “Don’t hurt me—please. I’ve got news of Bevan.”

It was fury, not fear, that made her voice shake—but the man holding her didn’t know that, and it must have made for a good effect, because his hold on her relaxed a bit.

“Bevan’s dead.” He shook her a bit, but not as hard as before.

“Not yet. He will be, but he’s not dead yet. He made it up to Dinas Emrys—and then he squealed like a piglet about what you’ve got planned.”

That sent up a rumble of muttered curses from among the ring of men listening, and the man holding Dera—he must be the leader—swore under his breath then shook her again. “So where do you come in, eh?”

Dera clenched her teeth before she could say that if he wanted to get her talking, he could do better than shaking and jerking around like he’d a pair of weasels in his drawers.

Jory. Imagine she was trying to beg food for Jory, and they'd neither of them eaten in days. She'd plenty of practice with that, these last two years.

"I heard him talking—to Lady Isolde and that captain of King Madoc's guard." She hoped she'd got enough of a whine into her voice. "And I saw what happened afterward—could hardly miss it, with all the shouting and fighting and carrying on. Gwion and the rest of his men rounded up the traitors—and now they're up there, just waiting for you all to come and hand yourselves to 'em like rats walking into a trap."

Dera spoke quickly. Lies sounded better told in a rush—she'd learned that, too. If she spoke fast enough and didn't give people a chance to think, they hardly ever noticed her story had as many holes as her traveling cloak.

It was too dark now to see much of the man's face—but he didn't ask her just how Gwion had worked out which among his men were the traitors. He just scowled—she could see that well enough—and said, "So you came on here."

"Well, I thought you'd be grateful, like." Dera let up on the whine and tried a smile—the one she gave when she was trying to get a man to pay her to be kind to him for a night. "For the warning, you know?" She held out her free hand—the one the man wasn't holding—and rubbed the fingers together.

"Oh, did you, now?" The man bent his head and peered into her face, his teeth bared, and Dera tried again not to gag at the stench of his breath. "Let me tell you, me and my men have just dealt with a whole village full of women of your kind. You want me to tell you what I did to the eyes of the girl who—"

"For the Dagda's sake, Glaw," came a voice—a whispered hiss—from somewhere in the back of the group. "Just cut her throat and let's get on!"

"Not so fast." The man holding Dera—Glaw, she guessed his name must be—answered before her heart could give more than four or five panicked thumps. Which she supposed she could thank him for. "She could be a spy. Iuan—Devlin." Two of the crowd of men snapped to attention as they were addressed. "Get out and scout the fortress. See if what she says is true." He tightened his grip on Dera's arm and dragged her backwards, away from the cleared path and towards the trees. "Until they're back, we all of us stay right here."

DERA WOKE TO SOMEONE POKING her in the ribs. Sometimes when she woke, it took her a moment to remember where she was and how she'd come there. But this morning—more was the pity—she remembered right away everything that

had happened the night before. And when she opened her eyes, she found it was a man's boot that was jabbing her. And the man attached to it—a tall, wild looking man with blue eyes and a gold-brown beard—was looking down at her.

“Up,” he grunted.

Dera dragged herself upright, every muscle in her body fairly screaming after a night on the cold hard ground. “And a good morning to you, too, Sunshine,” she muttered under her breath.

The man gave her a long look, but turned away without saying anything more. He was—so far as she'd been able to tell from watching him and the other men the night before—some sort of slave or servant here. He'd been put in charge of cleaning the weapons, keeping the swords free of rust, clearing the ground for a fire and digging the privy hole. He was young—not more than twenty-five or so. And not bad looking. At least, so far as Dera could tell under the beard. He was tall, well-built, with hair between blond and brown tied back in a leather thong.

But he'd a funny, vacant sort of look about his eyes, and a stammer when he talked—and an awkward, jerky way of moving, like a puppet on short strings. And the rest of the men, the leader Glaw included, talked to him like he was some kind of half-wit.

Took a wound to the head in some battle, maybe, and it had addled his wits. It happened, sometimes.

Now he shuffled over to a traveling pack, pulled out a hunk of bread, and tossed it into Dera's lap, though he didn't look at her again.

The bread was rock hard. And so coarse ground there were bits of grit in it from the miller's grindstones. And she could scarcely get it up to her mouth, because her hands were tied together at the wrists, and her fingers were so numb with cold they felt ready to fall off. Not to mention a trip to the privy pit would have been nice.

But at least she was alive. Dera gnawed away on the cold, stale crust. The scouts weren't back yet, so Glaw hadn't—yet—slit her throat. And none of the men had even tried anything with her during the night. Glaw had given orders that they were all to be on strict guard in case of attack, and that if he caught any man with his pants down, Glaw'd have his guts for dog's meat.

“Besides.” Glaw had smacked his lips. “All this'll be over soon enough. There's surely plenty of fine women inside Dinas Emrys, ripe and ready for the picking.” He'd jerked his head in Dera's direction. “And you can have her, then, too. Win the fight, and then you can all have her at once for all I care. But not tonight.”

One or two of his spearmen had looked at her like they might be thinking about

it, all the same. But they'd lost interest after she'd started in with the cough Lady Isolde had made her practice before she left—the one that made her sound like she had the white plague.

Now Dera forced down another mouthful of the bread. She'd have been an idiot to have thought that Glaw and his men would give up on attacking Dinas Emrys on her word alone. What had she expected? That they'd say, "Oh, well, all right then, Lord Marche'll surely understand it can't be done. And thanks very much, Dera, for the tip-off"?

Apparently she was idiot enough to have expected it, though. She'd not realized it. But the solid lump of ice that had been sitting in her gut since Glaw had ordered the men to make camp for the night told her she hadn't—really—thought she was going to have to fall back on any of those worst-case plans she and Lady Isolde had made.

She touched the oilskin packet she had sewn inside her shift. That was the only good thing about all this; the men hadn't bothered searching her. And why should they? It wasn't like she was much threat to them.

Now all around her, the men were moving, scratching and stretching themselves, chewing on their own slabs of the hard bread. The blue-eyed serving man had dug out an ale skin and was carrying it round for the men to take swigs from in turn. The gray first light of early morning was filtering down through the tree branches, and she could see their faces more clearly than she had the night before. Hard faces, hard eyes, skin weathered and scarred by years of fighting and living out of doors. Most wore Marche of Cornwall's badge: the Blue Boar. But she thought some of them must be Saxons—some of Marche's foreign allies. They were dressed different from the others, in badly-cured wolfskin cloaks and fur-trimmed boots, and they kept to themselves, muttering in a harsh-sounding language Dera didn't understand.

The serving man had finished handing out the food and drink, and now he was sitting cross-legged by the fire, oiling and polishing the blade of one of the men's swords. Which Dera saw now was crusted and stained a rusty red.

She could feel the soggy pellets of bread trying to rise up out of her stomach. No. *No no no*. She couldn't think about whose blood was on that blade. Couldn't think about whatever village of women and old men and children these men had just come from, because if she did, she was going to turn into just one more woman gibbering with fear in front of Glaw and the other men's swords.

No one was paying much attention to her. Dera felt cold all through, but she looked down at her bound hands and wondered what her odds would be if she tried making a run for it.

About as good as a fish in a barrel. Flailing around through thick forest and tripping over rocks and roots and branches with her hands tied—she'd be lucky if she got fifty paces before they caught her again. Or worse; two of the band were oiling wicked-looking crossbows. Probably the same ones that had shot Bevan.

Dera clenched her teeth to keep them from chattering and thought about how lucky it would have been if last night's anger could have lasted her through the morning. Then she jerked her head up as a man stumbled through the trees. One of the scouts Glaw had sent out the night before. At least she thought it was him—his clothes were torn, and his face was so bruised and smeared with blood his own mother might have had to look twice.

"Patrol—King Madoc's men, from the fortress." His chest was heaving, and the words came out in whispery gasps. His eyes scanned the group until he found Glaw. "Caught us east of here. Near where Lord Marche and the other men were camped. Lord Marche heard the fighting. Came to our aid. Got Madoc's men pinned down so they can't get back to the fort. Looks to be the whole of the garrison Madoc had at Dinas Emrys—or nearly all. Lord Marche says get the men together and come at once and we'll end this. Kill 'em and then take the fort."

Dera heard the words—but it was like they went into her head, rattled around, and then left with her thoughts scrambled like they'd been beaten up with a whisk. She felt like she was standing and watching herself sitting there amongst a band of fifty armed men. With her hands tied, and her mouth full of half-chewed hard bread. Just waiting for one of them to—

"You want me to kill her?" One of the band already had his knife to her throat. He'd thought of it, too. That if they'd got Gwion and the rest of Madoc's men pinned down, she wasn't any use to them.

Glaw looked at her—about the same way he'd have looked at a slug, or the mess a dog had left behind. Then he said, "Where's King Madoc? Word is he and his war band are away on Ynys Mon. Is that true?"

Dera swallowed and felt the knife bob up and down on her throat. But she managed to nod. "I suppose. 'S'what I heard, anyway. But it's not like he writes me letters, you know."

Glaw stared at her again, his eyes flat as metal. And for the space of a heart-beat, she knew this was it. She was going to die here. Never see Jory or Cade or Lady Isolde again.

Then Glaw said to the man holding her, "Let her go. She may still know something useful about the fort's defenses. If she gives any trouble or slows us down too much, we can always kill her then. But for now, she comes with us."

DON'T SLOW DOWN. Don't slow down. Dera kept saying the words over and over to herself as she made herself keep moving, following the leather-covered back of the man in front of her. She'd heard what Glaw had said. Glaw was leading the band east, skirting around the rocky rise in the land that had Dinas Emrys at the top. And if she didn't keep up, she'd be dead in less time than it would take one of them to spit in her face. But she felt like her legs had been turned into over-cooked porridge. Like she was stuck in one of those nightmares where you run and run until your heart's like to burst, but never get anywhere. Her legs moved up and down and her nose ran and her head throbbed. But the scenery on either side of her never changed—and the back of the man in front of her was getting further and further ahead.

Maybe she should give up. Just sit down here and die.

Dera bit down on her lip, trying to push the thought away, but it was like a blister on her heel or a thorn under her clothes. What did she think she could do, even if she managed to keep up with the pace Glaw had set? Gwion and the rest of the men would still be killed. Jory and Cade and Lady Isolde would still die when Dinas Emrys fell.

The touch on her arm made her heart seize up, and she had to swallow a scream. But it was only the servant. The blue-eyed, half-witted one. He and she were the last in the line. And he'd just taken her arm and gave her a little push to speed her along, helping her over the dry scrub and dead, fallen logs that littered the ground.

Dera's throat felt dry as a donkey trail in summer. The serving man had never made it around to her with the skin of wine. She swallowed. The men up ahead weren't worried about making noise; the crashing they made as they stomped their way through dead brush and brittle branches was enough to cover the sound of her voice. "What's your name?"

The bearded man looked at her blankly, face vacant, eyes unfocused. She licked her lips, glanced up at the men ahead to be sure she wasn't falling too far behind, and tried again. She gave him her best effort at a friendly smile. "Is there a name I can call you by?"

Another blank look.

All right, she might as well get to the point. "Will you loan me your knife?"

If she could just get her hands free, she could take her chances on running. The half-wit wouldn't care enough to follow. And Glaw's men might not either—not

with the rush they were in. If she were free, she might be able to get up to Dinas Emrys. Warn Lady Isolde and get Jory—

The serving man blinked. “M-mmmmy knife?”

Dera squelched down an urge to take him by the shoulders and shake him till his teeth rattled. “Yes, that’s right.” She looked up at the men ahead of them and then risked a quick jab with her bound hands at his belt. “Your knife.”

The man blinked again, then looked down at the leather scabbard on his belt like he’d never seen it before. “This knife?”

Dera shut her eyes and took a breath. At any rate, that had settled one thing. She was going to live. She wasn’t going to let this conversation be the last earthly memory she had.

She opened her eyes again—and then almost stopped dead with surprise, because after what felt like a year of slogging along, watching the man in front of her getting further and further ahead, she saw he was now closer. She was catching up. And he didn’t seem to be having too easy a time of it. She couldn’t see his face, just his back and shoulders, but he was stumbling a bit, walking hunched over like he’d a pain in his gut.

And then, all of a sudden, he staggered, dropped to his knees, and then pitched forward onto the ground, retching. The man ahead of him had fallen, too. And warriors all up and down the line were swaying and tripping over their own feet, coughing and vomiting into the dead leaves. Glaw, up at the head of the line, had fallen, too. He was bellowing something about poison in between heaves.

Dera stood frozen, feeling again like her arms and legs had been disconnected from the rest of her. Then, as she stared at all the sick and writhing men, a voice in her head sounded. *This is your chance, fool. Run!*

Bound hands or no, that was true. She gulped down air, started to turn. And the serving man’s hand clamped down on her wrist.

“Who are you, really? What are you doing here?”

The blue eyes weren’t unfocused anymore. They were clear and fierce-looking as he stared into her face. He wasn’t stammering anymore, either. And his fingers felt like some wild animal’s jaws had got hold of her.

“I’m . . . I’m Dera.” Her thoughts felt like caged squirrels, furiously churning round trying to get free. But one thing was clear enough. This was the man who’d poisoned all Glaw’s band. Up ahead, Glaw was still yelling about poison, though his voice was getting raspy, and weaker, too.

Dera swallowed. “I’m from Dinas Emrys. I mean, I’ve been staying there. Me and my boy. Jory—he’s just past two. I’ve been working caring for the wounded. When I’m not with Jory, I mean. Because Lady Isolde—”

It was probably lucky the bearded man stopped her. She could have gone on forever and not managed to make any kind of sense. But all of a sudden the man's grip on her tightened. "Lady Isolde is here? At Dinas Emrys?"

Dera took a breath and nodded. "That's right. She's the one that gave me the job of being her helper—because we hadn't anywhere else to go. And she wanted to come out here herself, but I said—"

The man stopped her again. "Wait a moment." His voice was quieter, now, and he looked a bit less fierce. "Let's start over again. I'm sorry if I frightened you. Just"—he glanced at the fallen men littering the trail—"tell me from the beginning, as quick as you can, how you came to be here."

Well, he hadn't killed her—or even threatened to kill her—yet, so that was maybe a good sign. It put him one notch above Glaw, anyway. Dera took another breath and told him everything, from Bevan's staggering into the infirmary to her coming out and waiting at the head of the river path for the men she and Lady Isolde had been sure would appear.

She'd expected him to look at her like she was crazy when she told the part about Lady Isolde seeing Bevan's thoughts. But he just nodded, like it wasn't anything he hadn't heard before. Maybe he knew the stories about Lady Isolde. He seemed to know her name, anyway.

His face was hard, though, by the time she'd finished, his eyes like chips of flint above the gold brown beard.

"Traitors at Dinas Emrys? Are you sure?"

Dera's teeth were chattering, both with cold and with trying to block out the sounds of the groaning, grunting men on the ground. "I don't know. I don't know anything for sure. But where there's one, there could always be more—that's what Lady Isolde said."

The man looked at her a moment, like he was trying to make up his mind about something. Then he nodded, eyes on hers. "Look, I know you've no reason to trust me. But do you think you could just pretend to yourself that you do? Long enough, say, for me to get some answers here? I swear if you stay here and don't try to run away until I come back, I'll either get you to safety or give you the chance to make a run for it, whatever you'd like."

Dera still felt like her blood had been turned to ice water. But she studied the serving man's face and then said, "I suppose if you can pretend to *be* a fool, I can pretend to trust one."

The man's teeth flashed in a grin, white against his beard. "Fair enough."

The smile had gone, though, by the time he made it to the front of the line where Glaw was lying on the ground. And his face was grim enough to have

been carved out of stone as he hooked the toe of his boot under Glaw and rolled him onto his back.

Dera dropped down onto a fallen log, hugging her knees to her chest and blowing on her hands. She'd have expected the blue-eyed man to bully Glaw. But instead he talked to him, quiet and straight. Said he was dying, and it was likely to go on for some time and hurt something fierce. But he'd give him a quick death and a warrior's end if Glaw'd tell him what he wanted to know.

Dera couldn't hear what Glaw said. She was too far away for that. And besides, one of the men on the ground was thrashing, crying out for his mam. Dera couldn't remember deciding anything. All of a sudden, she was just there, on the ground, holding the poisoned man's hand. Which was lucky, maybe. This wasn't the kind of thing she'd have wanted to think about for long.

He seemed like he quieted a bit, though, at her touch. So she put her hand on his forehead the way she'd seen Lady Isolde do. And she started to tell the story Lady Isolde had told weeks ago, when she was stitching up Cade.

Lady Isolde was right. Dera shivered, and wiped sweat from the man's brow with a corner of her sleeve. She didn't know whether this man especially wanted to hear about a Water Horse. But it was better than sitting in silence, all alone with your own thoughts and a dying man—or trying to think up what you could say.

She'd made it halfway through the story when the serving man came back. His knife was out—and even though he must have cleaned the blade on leaves or dry grass, he'd missed a smear of blood on the hilt.

“Are you all right?” He crouched down next to her.

She rubbed her eyes and realized there were tears on her cheeks, though she didn't know quite why. The man whose hand she'd been holding was unconscious—or dead.

She looked around at the bodies on the ground. Even the cold couldn't mask the smell of vomit, or of the ones who'd lost control of their bowels. But they'd died quick, anyhow.

Dera stood up. Her head felt funny and light, like it was about to roll off her shoulders, and her hearing buzzed. She sat down again on the fallen log and looked at the man in front of her.

“They were . . . they were bad men.”

The blue-eyed man shrugged. There were tight lines around the corners of his mouth. “No worse than many others.”

“Doesn't make what they did—what they would have done to me—right.”

He rubbed a hand across the back of his neck, like the muscles ached. “And

if God knows whether that makes giving them all nightshade right, I've yet to hear an answer from Him." He turned away, picking up the traveling pack he'd dropped on the ground, re-sheathing his knife. Then he turned back to her. "I'm sorry." He reached out, like he was about to put a hand on her shoulder, then thought better of it and let his arm fall back to his side. "I said I'd get you to safety—and I will. If that's what you want. And I won't try to stop you if you want to make a run for it on your own. But I need to get word to King Madoc. It was true what you said? He's on Ynys Mon?"

Dera swallowed again, then nodded. Then managed to get her thoughts enough in order to say, "I have a message for him. From Lady Isolde—it's stamped with her own seal and everything. Because she knew he wouldn't trust a message from just anyone. Lady Isolde said if only we could hold out until he and his warriors could get here, they'd be able to drive back Marche's men." Dera touched her ribs, where the oilskin packet brushed against her skin with every movement.

The blue-eyed man stared at her. "You have this message? From ... Lady Isolde." She thought his voice changed just a bit as he said the name. But then he said, quick-like, "Let me have it. Please."

Maybe she was a fool to trust him. But you had to trust someone, sometime. Mam had always said that, too. Dera reached down into her bodice and ripped the few stitches that had held the packet in place. "Here it is. But you'd still have to get it—"

"That's all right." The man's fingers closed round the packet, and then he gave a queer sort of whistle—too short trills, and then a longer one. And before the sound of it had even died away, another man stepped out of the trees onto the path.

Dera didn't seem to be able to feel any more shock or surprise. If one of the great enchanter Merlin's dragons had stepped out onto the path, she'd probably have just nodded and asked him *How d'you do*. And now she stood, staring, while the blue-eyed man talked to the newcomer. Though 'talked' wasn't quite the word.

The second man was huge—broad-built and tall, with corn-colored hair that fell to his shoulders, and a long, fair beard. A Saxon-born, plain as the nose on his face. And he didn't talk in words. The blue-eyed man was giving him instructions, telling him he'd got to get this packet and the letter inside to King Madoc, who was with his warriors on Ynys Mon. He wasn't to stop for anything—even an hour's delay was too long. And the big Saxon man was answering in some kind of finger-talk. Moving his hands in a way that must have meant something,

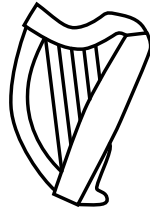
because the blue-eyed one was nodding and answering like the Saxon had actually spoken.

Then, finally, the Saxon man nodded, clasped wrists with the serving man, and turned away, vanishing into the trees.

The blue-eyed man came back to Dera. “He’ll see King Madoc gets the message. Now”—he held out a hand—“let’s get you back to Dinas Emrys.”

Dera stared at his hand. The fingers were a bit crooked, like they’d been broken once, years ago. And she could see a pattern of scars on the back, all the way up to the leather guard he wore on his wrist. She took a breath, then she put her hand into his and let him pull her to her feet.

IV



“AND HERE I AM.” Dera stopped to take a breath. She’d managed to keep her voice from shaking while she’d told the story. Though maybe that was because it still didn’t seem quite real. Back here, in Lady Isolde’s workroom, with the dried herbs rustling in the rafters, and the big dog Cabal snoring in a corner, the whole of the night she’d spent out in the woods could have been just a bad dream.

Lady Isolde hugged her again. “And thank the goddess you are here, safe and unharmed.”

They were all safe. That was another part of all this that didn’t seem quite real. Dera had been asleep on her feet by the time the blue-eyed serving man had left her at the outer ramparts of Dinas Emrys. But she’d gone straight to where Jory had been having his afternoon nap on the pallet in Lady Isolde’s workroom—and then she’d crawled right in next to him and gone to sleep herself.

She hadn’t meant to, but she must have slept right through the night. Because when she’d woken, morning light had been coming in through the window and Jory was already up and gone. And Lady Isolde had been there, with bread and cheese and mead, and wanting to hear the story Dera had been too tired to tell the day before.

So she’d started in on all that had happened—meeting Glaw and his men and all the rest. And before she’d got halfway through with the story, a rider had come running in to say that Dinas Emrys was safe. Gwion and the other men had held

against Marche's men. And King Madoc had arrived with his war band in time to drive them back—and with enough losses that Lord Marche wouldn't soon return.

Now Lady Isolde pulled back from the hug and said, "But I don't understand—this man who rescued you. You said he went to join Gwion and the others?"

Dera nodded. "The last I saw of him, that's where he said he was headed. He said until King Madoc got here, they'd have need of every fighting man in holding off Lord Marche."

"But who was he?"

"I don't know, my lady." Dera might have a guess—but she had to keep it to herself, since before he'd left her, the man had made her prick her finger and swear on her own life she'd not tell Lady Isolde anything about him—not what he looked like, nor nothing else that might give Lady Isolde a clue as to who he'd been.

A sound from the garden outside the infirmary made her look up. Not that the garden was much more than mud and plants wrapped up in cloth sacking at this time of year. But when Dera looked out the window, she saw Jory and Cade, covered in dirt, the pair of them—and digging for worms, they must be, because Jory was squealing and holding up a big, fat wriggling one.

"I'm sorry." Lady Isolde came to stand next to Dera at the window. "I know you were worried about him meeting Cade. But Jory was asking for you while you were gone—beginning to get frightened because you weren't here. And Cade came in, and—"

"That's all right."

Cade looked a bit pale under the smears of mud, and he was leaning on a wooden walking stick. But he was grinning.

Beside Dera, Lady Isolde said, "You've made up your mind about Cade, haven't you." She didn't even say it like it was a question.

Dera watched Jory jump up and land with both feet in a puddle of rainwater. "How'd you know?"

"Because you're much braver than I am—you always were." Lady Isolde's voice sounded—not quite sad, but quieter than usual. But she put an arm around Dera's shoulders and hugged her sideways. "I'll miss you—but I'm so glad."

Jory had seen her in the window. He was waving and shouting, "Mam! Mam!"

Dera waved to him. But then she turned back to Lady Isolde. "Do you ... your powers. The Sight, you called it. Do you have it back, now?"

Lady Isolde looked away, down at her own hands. "I don't know."

"You don't—"

"I don't know." Lady Isolde's mouth twisted a bit, and Dera saw her fingers tighten together in a knot. She looked up. "I told you you were braver than I am, Dera. I haven't tried—I haven't tried to See anything. Not since that man Bevan . . . since he died." She swallowed. "I keep thinking . . . why wouldn't the Sight come back before this? I used to try to summon it—but it never came. Why now?"

"Maybe you didn't really need it before."

"And I do now?" Lady Isolde's smile was a bit easier. Though the sadness hadn't left her eyes.

Dera took a breath. "Your friend—the one you were telling me about. The boy you knew growing up. Trystan." Dera thought Lady Isolde flinched just a little bit when she said the name, but she kept going. "If you had the Sight back, maybe you could See him. See what's happened to him, I mean. Where he is now."

Lady Isolde just looked at her. But then, slowly, she nodded. "I suppose. The Sight shows *may be* and *has been* and *will be*. And sometimes all mixed together. But—"

She stopped. Outside, Jory was still shouting. "Mam! Mam! Mam!"

"You should go out," Lady Isolde said.

Dera swallowed. And then she said, "I wish you . . . happiness, La— Isolde."

Dera thought for a moment Lady Isolde's eyes looked shiny with tears. But then she smiled. A real smile, this time. "And I wish the same for you."

Dera looked back just once before she got to the door of the room. Lady Isolde was still standing by the window, leaning her head against the wall. But then she turned and looked up at the high shelf with the bronze bowl—the one with the ancient markings on it Dera had seen before. Men with horns, and serpents swallowing their own tails. Dera saw Lady Isolde take a step forward, reach out and lift the bowl down.

And then she turned away and went out into the garden with Jory and Cade.

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Thank you for reading *The Witch Queen's Secret*!

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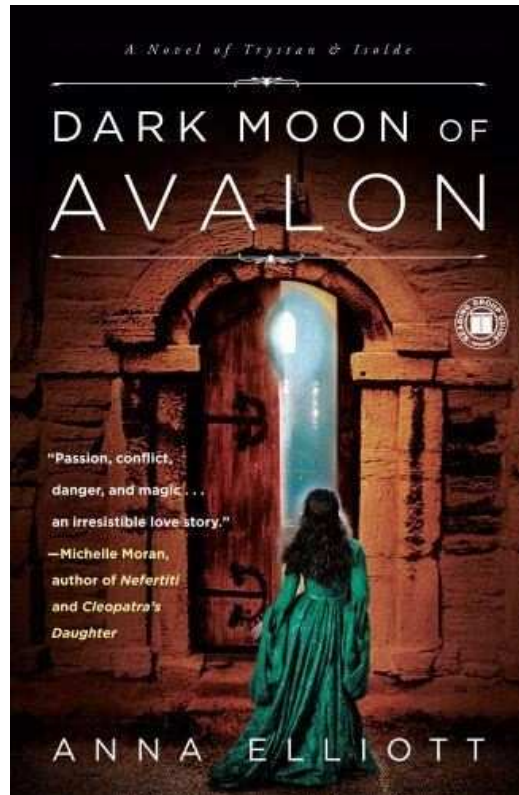
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