

CHAPTER 1

THE PASSAGE TO ALBION



Idwyn Potter stared at the Frankish coast from the stern of the *Mandragon*, his eyes fixed on the walled settlement drifting in and out of the morning fog a league to the south. Despite the cold breeze, a river of sweat flowed down the old mariner's weathered cheeks to the point of his chin, before falling to the deck below. Like a man in a trance, Potter murmured a prayer over and over again, in cadence with each sweep of the galley's oars.

In each fervent chant, he thanked the Almighty for the fair wind and following sea and begged deliverance from the threat on the receding coast. The twenty rowers amidships, sensing their captain's disquiet, pulled together in a strong, silent rhythm, seeking, with each stroke, the safety of Albion's shores to the north. They, like Potter, lived in mortal fear of the men within those dark walls—the Norse raiders known as the seawolves.

When Potter had first gone to sea, three decades earlier, the Norse had raided the coasts of Albion and Francia from the late spring until the early fall and then returned to the northland until the next season. Alas, even this brief respite was now a thing of the past. In recent years, the seawolves had established settlements on the islands off western Hibernia and along the Frankish coast—settlements allowing them to prowl the surrounding seas from the first day of the sailing season to the last. In these fell times, a sailor from Albion was far more likely to die by a Norseman's sword, or worse, to serve as a slave under his lash, than to die in the cruel embrace of the sea.

On this voyage, Potter had left his Frankish port-of-call to the south

well before dawn, intending to sail past the seawolves' settlement in the early hours of the morning. The day before had been a Norse feast day, and he knew the raiders would be slow to rise after a night of drinking and wenching. Thankfully, in this he had been right. The settlement was as quiet as a grave, and with each stroke of the oars, the threat from the savage men within its wooden walls receded.

After taking a last look at the coast, Potter allowed himself a moment of hope. On this, his last voyage, the bones had mercifully rolled his way again, as they had so many times in the past. As he turned and started toward the bow of the ship, the Mandragon passed through a patch of fog reluctantly yielding its grey cloak to the rays of the morning sun. The moment the ship emerged from its shelter, the sailor on watch in the ship's prow screamed a warning.

"Seawolves!"

Potter scanned the sea and seized upon the long galley off the Mandragon's port side. For a moment, he stood there transfixed by the sight of the black dragonprow cutting through the waves toward the Frankish coast and the wall of armed warriors standing amidships, returning his stare. As the captain watched, the galley wheeled in a slow and sure arc toward the Mandragon, and the cadence pounded out by the raiders' oarsmaster—a red-haired giant in the stern—grew louder and more rapid.

As the ship drew closer, a desperate rage came over the old captain, and he broke free of the ice-cold tendrils of fear that were binding his feet to the deck. *They will not take my ship without a fight.* Seizing the iron-tipped cudgel lying on the deck a pace away, he ran toward the bow of the ship.

"Cadeyrn, Drust, Seisyll, Wade, and Ninian, grab your steel and make ready! The rest of you men, pull for your lives!" Potter roared.

Before Potter and his men could reach the forward rail, three Norsemen were already aboard. The leader was a fair-haired mountain of a man, easily twenty hands tall, clad in a foul-smelling bearskin. In one hand, the giant held a wooden shield nearly half as tall as Potter, and in the other, a short, wide sword designed for cutting flesh and smashing

bones in close quarters fighting. The web of cuts and gashes in the thick leather helmet atop the giant's head, along with the scars on his face and arms, marked him as a seasoned warrior.

As Potter and his sailors traded blows with the first wave of Norsemen, the old captain could see the growing stream of raiders climbing over the rail behind them, and he knew the battle for Mandragon was being lost. In a desperate effort to turn the tide, Potter dropped beneath the sweep of the blond giant's sword and swung his cudgel at the man's exposed knee.

A moment before the iron tip smashed into the bone, the giant realized the danger and raised his leg. The blow smashed into the primitive iron greave protecting the Norseman's calf, drawing a howl of pain, but otherwise leaving him unharmed. The enraged giant retaliated by smashing his upraised heel into Potter's chest, hurling him backward against the starboard rail.

As the dazed captain struggled futilely to stand and get back into the fight, a man sprang out of the starboard cargo hold. A second man followed on his heels, and the two raced across the deck to join the battle. For a moment, Potter stared at the men, bewildered, and then realized it was the two passengers who had come aboard at Lapurdum, a port in southern Francia. Potter had paid the men little heed, assuming they were wealthy merchants, based upon the quality of their traveling cloaks and their plentiful supply of silver coins. Now, he could see his judgment had been wide of the mark.

The first man out of the hold was nineteen hands tall, but he moved with the ease and speed of a man half his size. His chiseled face was framed by a mane of black hair that flowed past the ropes of muscle in his neck to the formidable shoulders below. He wore a mailed shirt over his torso, steel gauntlets on his forearms, and a gleaming steel buckler shield strapped to his left forearm. The steel sword he grasped in his right hand seemed merely a part of the far more lethal weapon that was the man, rather than a separate instrument of war.

The second man was a bald African, similarly clad. He was a head shorter than the tall man, but had the arms and chest of a blacksmith,

and his sword was curved like that of a Moorish warrior. As the African ran across the deck with his companion, he wheeled his sword in a blinding circle, as if performing a ritual, and then his powerful hand enclosed the pommel in an iron grip.

When the two men waded into the Norsemen flooding the deck behind the blond giant, it was as if something terrible and magnificent had been unleashed. The pair weaved among their opponents like wind-borne scythes, working in unison, both masters of the same lethal dance. In moments, the second wave of raiders lay either dead or dying, and the third wave attempting to board had been driven back into the sea.

As the Norse giant and a second raider pressed forward to kill the last of the five sailors who had answered Potter's call to battle, the scream of a dying companion drew his attention. The blond warrior glanced over his shoulder at the carnage on the deck behind him, and then he wheeled around, dragging his companion with him.

The tall, dark-haired man moved forward to engage the giant, leaving the African to hold the rail against further boarders. As soon as the man was within striking distance, the leader of the Norsemen shoved his smaller companion in front of him, using him as a shield. He then leaped forward, intending to strike his adversary down. His gambit failed. The dark-haired man sprang to the right with blinding speed and smashed his buckler shield against the smaller man's head, dropping the stunned raider to the deck.

The blond warrior bellowed out a roar and swung his sword in a slashing blow at the other man's neck, but his enemy dove under the strike, rolled, and came to his feet behind the giant. There, he struck the giant down with a single fluid stroke and stepped aside as the body fell heavily to the deck.

When the sailors threw the giant Norseman's body over the rail, the oarsmaster on the dragonship roared out a command and began to pound out a different beat. As Potter watched, the galley moved away and once again headed toward the settlement on the Frankish coast. The captain of the raiders had decided the blood price for taking the Mandragon was not worth the expected treasure.

An hour after the battle ended, Potter walked the length of the raised quarterdeck, surveying the worn oak planks that ran the length of the ship. After a long moment, he nodded his silver-haired head in satisfaction. The crew had swabbed away all traces of the blood and gore, and the cold sea air had swept away the odor of death. Sadly, neither toil nor wind could resurrect the four sailors who'd breathed their last only steps away from where he stood, nor render the memory of the attack that had taken their lives any less painful.

Potter's gaze scanned the rest of the ship and came to rest on the two passengers who were standing in the prow talking quietly, now innocuously clad in their traveling cloaks. He started toward them, intending to thank them once again for saving his ship, when he noticed Bede, the youngest sailor, staring at the two men as if they were monsters from the deep.

"Quit your gawking, boy, and get on with it," he ordered. "We're an hour out of port, and I want those ropes and barrels stowed."

The young sailor jumped at Potter's growl.

"Aye, Captain. I'll be hard at it."

The exchange drew a grin from Fulke, the bosun, as he lugged a barrel of wine up from the hold on his shoulder.

"You do that," Potter said as he turned to Fulke. "And you, Fulke, don't spill a drop of that wine. That barrel will go for a king's ransom in Caer Ceint."

"Not a drop, sir," Fulke said, the grin on his hard, sea-worn face widening.

Potter slowed as he approached the two men and stopped a respectful distance away. The dark-haired man turned to face him, and for a moment, the captain stood in silence, transfixed, as the memory of the battle with the Norsemen replayed in his mind yet again. Potter suppressed the recollection as he stared thoughtfully into the taller man's face.

Potter was a trader, and a successful one. He'd bargained and parleyed with the Franks, Moors, Greeks, and yes, even the cursed Norsemen, from time to time. He prided himself on being able to quickly take the measure of a man from his mien—in particular, from his eyes—and to

use those insights to gain an advantage. In this instance, the dark-haired man's face remained a mystery. The confluence of the strong jaw, aquiline nose, and prominent forehead, all of which had been bronzed by the sun in some distant land, was more noble than handsome, but the enigma lay in the contrast between the eyes and the rest of the man's face.

The striking blue eyes staring back at Potter were those of a man who had waded deep into the cauldron of life and borne the pain of its most scalding waters; the eyes of a soldier who'd oft engaged in battle and felt the near touch of death; and most surprising, the eyes of a man who had found, in spite of the ordeal, a path to the rarest of gifts—wisdom. What troubled Potter was the rest of the man's face: His mien was unscarred and bereft of the burdens of age, and yet he was skilled in battle and wise in years.

The tall man waited patiently for a moment and then stepped toward Potter and extended his hand, revealing a web of scars running over the back of his hand and continuing across much of his heavily muscled forearm. The hand that closed upon Potter's own was like a piece of worn iron, but at the same time, there was an honest warmth in the man's grip and in the words he spoke.

"Captain Potter, it seems our voyage together will yet have a peaceful end."

"That it will," he said with a nod. "And I will thank the Lord and all his angels from this day until my last for sending you and your friend on this voyage. If not for your bravery and skill, we . . . we would all have been killed or sold into slavery, for that is the way of the seawolves."

"So I have heard, Captain." The man turned to the silent African by his side, whose face was hidden within the hood of his dark grey cloak. "I would have you know my friend and brother-in-arms, Capussa."

The African drew off his hood and nodded solemnly to Potter, revealing a square jaw, a wide, prominent nose, and brown eyes that radiated power, confidence, and more than a hint of mirth. Unlike his friend's face, the African's bore the marks of battle; a scar ran from his right ear to the cleft of his jaw, and a second marred his left cheekbone.

The dark-haired man gestured to the approaching shore. "Captain,

you seem to be coming in short of the Tamesis. Is Londinium not your port?”

Potter shook his head. “It was my home port, until Hengst and his raiders came.”

“Hengst?” the tall man asked.

Potter raised both brows. “Surely you have heard of Hengst the Butcher?”

“No, Captain. I have not.”

“Sir, may I ask how long you have been away from Albion?”

The man exchanged glances with the African and then stared at the approaching coast for a moment before turning his attention back to Potter. He slowly shook his head, as if reaching for a distant and painful memory.

“I sailed from Londinium nearly ten summers ago.”

Potter let out a slow breath. “Why, the Pendragon was—”

“Still on the throne, and the Table yet unbroken,” the man finished.

The captain paused at the quiet anguish in the man’s voice and then continued.

“The war began a year after you left. That foul witch, Morgana, and her band of brigands—may she burn in the bowels of hell—were never a match for the Pendragon and the Knights of the Table. But then . . . somehow she found the gold to hire an army of sellswords from the lands of the Norse and Saxons. Those hell-spawn became the scourge of the land. The things they did were truly the devil’s own work.” Potter’s breath rasped in his throat, as if it had become as dry as a bone in the sun.

The African drew a metal flask from his cloak and handed it to the old man. “Drink,” he ordered in a voice like the growl of an old bear.

Potter took the flask and drank. For a moment, he thought he’d swallowed a hot coal, but then the burning eased and he could taste the flavor of the fiery brew, a taste he found pleasing.

“That . . . it is noble mead,” Potter said with a gasp, returning the flask to the African. “Like fire at first, and yet it has a fine taste once you take the full measure of it.”

"That's not mead, Captain," the African said with a smile, "but I'm happy you find it agreeable."

Potter took in another breath. "It is indeed. Now, where was I . . . Oh yes, the war." He frowned. "It raged for two, maybe three years. The King nearly drove the raiders into the sea during the last year, but then the witch brought in a fresh army of Norse and Saxons—Picts too—and the tide began to turn. Then came the last battle . . . Camlann."

He hesitated and drew in a heavy breath before continuing in a voice filled with heartfelt regret. "It was a terrible slaughter. The witch and her foul army were driven from the field, but the price was high . . . too high. The Pendragon was killed, and the Table died with him."

"All were lost?" the tall man asked, his voice hushed.

"Sir?"

"Do you say that all of the Knights of the Table fell that day?"

Potter lifted his shoulders in a weary shrug. "Some say one might have survived the battle, and others claim Sir Percival is still in the Holy Land." He shook his head. "I cannot say. I—"

"And Galahad?" the tall man interjected. "Are you sure that he fell at Camlann with the rest of my . . . with the rest of the Knights?"

Potter eyes widened, surprised at the intensity in the tall man's voice. "That is a true mystery," he said. "They say his body was never found, but he was in the very thick of the battle. I just can't say, sir."

Potter shook his head, and his eyes grew distant. "It . . . it seems like it happened so long ago. Sometimes, well, the younger ones, when they talk of the Pendragon, the Queen, and the Table, it's as if they were legends, people who lived in a far distant time."

"You were speaking of this Hengst," the other man prodded gently.

Potter felt a rush of fear and hate, in equal measure, at the mention of the name.

"He was the leader of the second band of sellswords, who came from the north. After the battle, he took the remnants of his men and began to raid the smaller villages. In the first year, he looted, raped, and killed. Then, as more brigands joined his band, he started to besiege the towns. Several years ago, he made a surprise raid on Londinium in the early

morn. He attacked from the landward side and his brother, Ivarr the Red, from the river. A traitor within the city opened one of the gates, and by the time the guards realized the peril, it was too late.”

The ship dipped sharply into the trough of a wave, unbalancing the old sailor for a moment. The African put a hand on his shoulder and steadied him. Potter nodded his thanks and went on with his tale.

“The devil himself would have been shocked by the slaughter that followed. My uncle was a cooper there, he . . .” The captain’s voice trailed off and he hesitated for a moment, anger welling up inside of him, but he suppressed it and continued.

“Well, here’s the way of it now—any ship that lands at Londinium is seized by Hengst’s men and forced to pay a tax, or so he calls it, and then his men take whatever they like from the ship as well. Sometimes they leave something, sometimes not. On a bad day, when they’ve drunk too much, they’ll take your ship and sometimes your head. Few ships port there now, other than slavers. Hengst is respectful of those curs—he needs them to buy the men, women, and children he seizes and sells every month.”

The tall man’s face darkened when Potter mentioned the slaves, but he didn’t question him further on the matter.

“Where will we make landfall?” he asked.

Potter pointed to a knoll in the distance, on the port side of the approaching estuary.

“Whitstable, a small village on the other side of that point. I’ll sell my goods there. Much of what comes in goes to Caer Ceint by caravan, but some of the braver traders take a load or two upriver to Londinium in smaller boats. They travel in the black of night. It’s a dangerous voyage. If you need a boat to Londinium, I know a boatman, an honest one. It’s the least I can do for you.”

“That will not be necessary, Captain. We travel to another place,” the tall man said.

Potter pointed at the approaching shore and said, “I must leave you sirs. There’s a nasty shoal on the way in, and I like to man the steering oar myself.”

The two men nodded to Potter, and he started back across the deck. As he walked by the mast, he realized that the tall man had never given his name. For a moment, he thought about going back, but a gust of wind began to push the galley off course, forcing him to make his way quickly to the stern.

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AFTER POTTER LEFT, the African pulled the hood over his head again and pointed toward the shore. "So we journey to a land of witches and butchers," he said, a hint of mirth in his voice. "A pleasant place. I'm looking forward to this new adventure."

Sir Percival stared out at the dark green forest covering the approaching hills, momentarily awash in the sea of memories evoked by his conversation with Captain Potter. He nodded and turned to his friend.

"Butchers, yes, we have those aplenty, but Morgana is no witch. Her real name is Megaera—she's an assassin from the City of Constantinople. The Roman emperor in the east sent her to kill a man called Melitas Komnenos."

"What did this man do to draw the wrath of the Roman king?"

"That, I don't know," he admitted. "Melitas is also a man of Constantinople—a man of great learning and wisdom, and some say a conjurer as well. Here, the people know him as Merlin the Wise. I believe it was he who persuaded the Pendragon to send me on my ill-fated quest ten seasons ago."

"Do you bear him ill will for this?" Capussa asked, his gaze still on the shoreline.

Percival shook his head.

"No. Yesterday is gone. I seek no retribution for its loss. I will tell the Queen of my failed quest, since she is my liege, and then, if she has no further need of my services, you and I shall return to my family estate in the north. There we shall live as men of peace, who tend the land and their flocks, and fish for the bounty of the sea."

"And so it came to pass that two former gladiators lived out the

remainder of their days as peaceable farmers, shepherds, and fisherman, no less, in a land of assassins, slavers, butchers, and conjurers. Why, our luck has surely changed for the better,” Capussa said, chuckling softly.

Percival nodded but remained silent. This was not the homecoming he had prayed for on a thousand lonely nights, in a hundred distant lands. His King and brother knights were dead, the Kingdom was broken, and the fate of his Queen was unknown. It seemed he could not end his long quest without first embarking upon another—a quest to find Guinevere.

CHAPTER 2

ABBAY CWM HIR, WALES



Guinevere, Queen of the Britons, stood before a tall, arched window gazing out at the lush green hills in the distance. Her golden tresses, blue-silken dress, and hourglass figure were silhouetted by the last rays of the August sun. In the fleeting moments before nightfall, she allowed herself the luxury of remembering life before the fall—a time that now seemed so distant as to be merely a dream.

On the good days, only the treasured memories would come to the fore, bringing her the respite of happiness and the refuge of hope; but on other days, the memories of the dark times would break free of the fetters she had carefully forged over the years and demand their painful toll. On those days, she would remember the tale of suffering and death that had been the bitter fare of the last years, a tale that always came to a close with the memory of the grief-stricken face of the young messenger, bringing the ill tidings from Camlann.

Thankfully, today's remembrance had been of the good times, although its taste had been bittersweet. It seemed like yesterday . . . a morning ride through the hills surrounding Camelot accompanied by a tall, raven-haired knight with striking blue eyes and a heart as pure as gold—a knight who'd left on a Grail quest a decade earlier and never returned.

As the sun disappeared behind the hills, leaving the alcove in darkness, Guinevere reluctantly relinquished her hold on yesteryear and turned to the modest sitting room behind her. The light from the fire crackling in the room's modest hearth illuminated all that remained of her royal court—Cadwyn Hydwell, her young handmaiden and secretary, and Sister Aranwen, her spiritual advisor.

Cadwyn sat on an old wooden bench near the fire, poring over a parchment delivered an hour earlier by one of Bishop Verdino's guards. The light from the flames danced over the petite young woman's flowing red tresses and her pretty face, with its dimples and button nose. The parchment detailed the rents and grazing fees collected from the tenants occupying Guinevere's lands and the few remaining royal preserves, and the expenses paid from these collections. In the past, the bishop's accountings had sparked more than a few fiery outbursts from her young friend, and it seemed as if another storm was on the horizon.

Eighteen-year-old Cadwyn had served Guinevere since her arrival at the abbey, six years earlier. Guinevere recalled with a smile the abbess's admonition when she'd introduced her mesmerized niece to the newly arrived queen.

"My Queen, Cadwyn is the most precocious child I have ever taught. She can speak, read, and write in the languages of the Greeks, Romans, and Britons, and more often than not, she knows what I am going to say before I say it, which I am not always happy about. On the other hand, she has . . . somewhat of a temper. However, all in all, I believe you will find her to be very helpful."

The abbess had been right. Cadwyn had been more than helpful—she had become indispensable. As for the girl's temper, Sister Aranwen had made it her mission to curb this vice, but despite her frequent scoldings, there was still plenty of fire left in her young handmaiden.

The diminutive Sister Aranwen sat in a rocking chair across from Cadwyn, contentedly knitting a woolen blanket. The pious and reserved nun had been in her fortieth year when her order had assigned her to escort Arthur Pendragon's young bride-to-be to Camelot. Guinevere remembered their first meeting, almost fifteen years ago, as if it had been yesterday. The two women had become friends during the week-long trip, and Sister Aranwen had remained after the wedding as her spiritual advisor and self-appointed guardian.

As Guinevere watched the two women, she wistfully thought, *My friends, I fear you have become prisoners of my past.*

Sister Aranwen feared yesterday's minions would imprison or kill her royal charge if Guinevere tried to restore the lost kingdom. For the quiet

nun, a life of obscurity was a small price to pay for peace and safety. Cadwyn, in contrast, would never relinquish the dream of a glorious restoration. For her, resurrecting Camelot had become her sacred duty.

As Sister Aranwen leaned forward and reached for another ball of yarn, Cadwyn exploded from her chair, holding the bishop's report aloft, her face nearly as red as her russet locks. Wide-eyed, Sister Aranwen dropped the ball of yarn and fell back into her rocking chair.

"That pompous old thief is stealing the fruit of the Queen's lands!" Cadwyn hissed in fury as she paced back and forth in front of the fireplace. "Why if ever a man deserved to be flogged—"

Sister Aranwen gasped. "Cadwyn Hydwell, you go too far! Bishop Verdino is a man of God! I . . . I grant you that he may take with a heavy hand, but—"

"Why, I wish—"

"Dearest friends, please remember, these walls have ears," Guinevere said quietly as she stepped into the room, repressing a smile. Both women turned to the Queen in unison and bowed respectfully as they responded, "Yes, Milady."

A knock on the outside door interrupted the renewal of Cadwyn's tirade, and Sister Aranwen quickly made good use of it, pointing to the door.

"That would be the cook's assistant with dinner, Cadwyn. Please be so kind as to bring in our repast, and please say a prayer of penance on the way."

Cadwyn swallowed her retort and turned to Guinevere. "Milady, where would you like your dinner tonight?"

"On the table, in my chambers, Cadwyn. I have much to do tonight."

"Yes, Milady."

Two hours later, Guinevere heard Cadwyn's familiar knock on the door to the library, which served as the anteroom to her private chambers.

"Come in, Cadwyn," Guinevere said.

The handmaiden entered the room carrying a cloth-covered basket under her arm and closed the door after her. Guinevere patted the open space on the wooden bench beside her. The bench was pulled up close

to the small table serving as her desk and, often, the place where she took her meals. The two candles on the table illuminated a small, windowless room whose walls were lined with half-empty bookshelves and locked wooden boxes in varying sizes.

As she sat down, Cadwyn said in a whisper, "I checked on the two guards the bishop left behind. They are dicing in their quarters, and both have had more than a fair share of mead, so we need not fear eavesdroppers tonight."

Guinevere nodded as she glanced toward a nearby window to make sure the shutters were closed. Bishop Cosca Verdino had arrived at the abbey six months after she had taken refuge there, dressed in full liturgical regalia, accompanied by a cadre of four guards wearing outlandish uniforms.

According to the bishop, he'd been appointed by the Holy See to serve as both the Bishop of Albion and as the papal legate to the Queen of the Britons "in her time of need." Guinevere had been skeptical of the pompous little man, whose face was rendered nearly invisible by his bushy beard and the overly large alb and miter he wore whenever they met; but the abbess had vouchsafed for the official-looking documents he bore.

At first, Guinevere had ignored the wheedling little man's oft-repeated warnings regarding the dangers of leaving the abbey's grounds, but over time, it had become more difficult. Verdino had proven to be both persistent and clever, and his authority over the Abbess and the other sisters had given him the means to enforce his will.

Unaccountably, the abbey's horses would be unavailable on the days when the Queen had scheduled a ride. When the horses were available, Verdino would order his guards, along with the unhappy abbess and a flock of sisters, to accompany her on the ride. The tactic was as galling as it was clever. The devious prelate knew she wouldn't countenance the imposition of such a burden on the abbess and the sisters solely to accommodate her own pleasure.

When Guinevere had confronted the bishop regarding his interference, he'd politely offered her a surprising compromise, one she'd felt

compelled to accept. Somehow, Verdino had discovered that the tide of chaos and violence sweeping over Albion had deprived her of the ability to collect the rents due from the tenants farming or grazing livestock on her lands and on the lands of the crown. Verdino also knew that without this source of income, Guinevere had no means of maintaining her own modest household; nor could she provide relief to the loyal subjects who continued to serve the needs of what was left of the kingdom.

Verdino had professed to have the means to collect these rents and tithes, through the “power of the church,” despite the land’s dark times. He promised to collect them if, in return, she would agree not to leave the abbey’s grounds unless accompanied by a sufficient force of guards. Although Guinevere had been incredulous of Verdino’s claim, the bishop had been true to his word, and so, in the main, she had been true to hers. At times, she found the bargain she’d struck to be oppressive, but it was a burden she had to bear, like so many others, for the good of what was left of the kingdom.

Cadwyn, on the other hand, was not one to bear the bishop’s restrictions without complaint. As far as she was concerned, the bishop was a loathsome scoundrel whose sole objective was to find and steal the hidden trove of treasure Arthur was rumored to have left to fund a restoration of Camelot. Although Guinevere suspected this treasure might well exist, its whereabouts were unknown to her. So even if Cadwyn’s suspicions were correct, the bishop’s avaricious plans would, in the end, come to nought.

“What did the messengers bring today?” Guinevere asked.

Cadwyn sat on the wooden bench, placed the basket in the middle of the table, and drew off the cloth, revealing twelve scrolls of parchment, each encircled by two restraining pieces of twine.

“Quite a lot, Milady. The sparrows have much to report.”

“Then let’s get started, my dear.”

Cadwyn untied the strings on two of the parchments, handed one to Guinevere, and opened the second herself. “Mary, in Camulodunom . . . a cobbler’s wife, yes,” Guinevere said as she rolled out the parchment.

“Milady, do you know all of the women? How many are there?” Cadwyn asked.

“No, but I do remember most. At one time or other, I have exchanged letters with all of them. As for how many, I can’t say. Before the fall, there were about five hundred.”

“Did the King know you had all these spies?”

Guinevere looked up from the parchment, a thoughtful look on her face. “No, but then I never really thought of them as spies. I wanted to have a friendly set of eyes and ears in every city and town in the kingdom . . . people who could tell me about matters of import to them.”

“How did you know whom to trust?”

“Some were people that I knew, but most came to me through others that I trusted, people like . . . say, Cadwyn Hydwel.”

Cadwyn smiled at the compliment and asked, “Why just women, Milady?”

Guinevere smiled. “If you wanted to know what was really going on in the Abbey, would you ask Ferghus, the stablemaster, or Rowena, the cook?”

“Rowena for sure. That woman knows things . . .,” Cadwyn said, her voice trailing off in embarrassment.

“Indeed, she does,” Guinevere said as she reached for another parchment. “Men and women talk when they eat and drink, and most of the people serving them are women. So they hear, as you say, many ‘things.’ I wanted the Rowenas of this land to be my little sparrows . . . to tell me about anything that was important in their city, town, or village.” Her smile faded.

“Before the fall, those tidings enabled me to save innocent men and women from unfair punishment by a dishonest lord, to reward the good, to punish the bad, to be a better Queen—at least that was my hope.”

“You are a wonderful Queen, Milady,” Cadwyn said with a smile.

“Why, thank you, my dear. Can you hand me another scroll?”

“Yes, Milady.”

As she read through the missives, each writing wove another thread into the tapestry of pain and suffering that was now Albion. Londinium was the worst. Hengst and his raiders had turned the population into virtual slaves, leading many to secretly leave the city in the dark of night. Of late, the Norse warlord had banned these departures by

branding people to mark them as his subjects. Those caught attempting to escape, or found outside of the city, would suffer torture or death in the monthly games Hengst held in Londinium's old Roman stadium.

When Guinevere put down the last letter, she closed her eyes, and the shadows from the flames flickered and danced across her beautiful face.

"Sometimes . . . oftentimes," Guinevere began, in a voice laden with regret, "I feel that I . . . Arthur, the Table . . . we failed them. We were supposed to protect them. That was our charge, our promise to the cobbler, the baker, the farmer, and their wives and children. We were supposed to keep them safe from monsters like Hengst the Butcher—and we did not honor that sacred duty."

"Milady," Cadwyn said in a heartfelt tone, "I am not a wise woman, nor, as I'm sure the abbess has told you, a very pious one, but God cannot fault you or the Pendragon and his Knights, for the fall. I have heard the tales, my Queen. Every man and woman gave their all in those last days and hours. It was . . . it was not to be, but, as you always say, Milady, tomorrow is another day, and we must work to remake what was broken."

Guinevere turned to the younger woman, took Cadwyn's face in her hands, and kissed her on the forehead.

"You are right, my precious young friend. But it is late, so that work must wait until the morrow. Tonight, let us rest."

"Of course, Milady," Cadwyn said as she rose and curtsied. "Good night, Milady."

After Cadwyn left, Guinevere knelt by the fire and burned the letters from her flock of faithful sparrows, one by one. When the last letter burst into flame, she closed her eyes and prayed, in silence, for the people of Albion.