

Debra A. Kemp



The House Of Pendragon  
Book I : The Firebrand

# THE HOUSE OF PENDRAGON, BOOK I

## THE FIREBRAND

“Oh, he is good,” I whispered. I wanted to watch the prince’s life drain from him, just as he was draining the spirit from me. My vow to stop rebelling forgotten, I envisioned Prince Modred’s blood pooling at my feet.

“What was that, Lin?”

“The bastard is good. A worthy adversary. He knew precisely where to strike. Where it would hurt most. That is why I did not see him today. Oh, for a bard’s curse.”

“Lin, leave it. You cannot win against him.”

“Ah, but I will. Just you watch me, Dafydd. So help me, I shall win.” I heaved my bowl across the room towards the palace. Its contents flew in every direction, and people in its path ducked their heads to avoid being hit by the missile. “This is between you and me, prince. Attack me all you want, but leave my brother out of it.”

## PRAISE FOR THE FIREBRAND

“The tale of King Arthur has been told by so many authors, and in so many ways, that it might seem difficult to do anything new with it. Yet Debra Kemp has succeeded. She confronts a question that isn’t often considered. Why is so little said about Arthur’s children? In *The House of Pendragon* we meet one that we haven’t met before-his daughter, Lin. We follow her strange career from slavery to possible succession as Arthur’s heir. This well-told and very original story adds a fascinating newcomer to the legend’s immortal company.”

—Geoffrey Ashe

“Throughout the year I get asked on many occasions to review either film scripts or forthcoming books that deal with the subject of King Arthur and The Holy Grail, some are good, many are dire, few are excellent. When I started reading *The House Of Pendragon* I felt that perhaps this was going to fit into the latter category, I was not disappointed. Ms. Kemp deals with the subject of Arthurian Britain in a style normally adopted for modern issues, it is refreshing to read what I can only describe as a ‘Warts and all’ account of life in the period we call The Dark Ages. This book does not give us the heavily romanced tales that many do, thank heavens, instead it gives us a gritty and definitely adult view of the struggles in Britain at the time of Arthur, ‘The Bear.’ Only too often we are served with over-sentimental offerings that scarcely hide plagiarism from Thomas Mallory or ‘New Age’ books that borrow heavily from the superb work of Marion Bradley. Here at last we have a fresh approach, a glimpse of struggles

and realism so often denied us and yet, still written with a modern audience in mind. Highly readable, highly enjoyable and highly recommended.”

—Prof. Dr. Roland Rotherham

“Debra Kemp has created a lively, compelling expansion to the tales of King Arthur and Camelot in her debut novel, *The House of Pendragon I: The Firebrand*. Here she introduces the spirited and stubborn Lin, an unknown daughter of Arthur’s. Ignorant of her birthright, Lin becomes an unwitting link in the vengeful plotting of her father’s enemies, Queen Morgause and her son Modred. Though only wishing to maintain simple dignity amidst hatred, injustice and cruelty, Lin proves that her remarkable heritage is truly a part of her. With finely crafted characters and originality, Kemp skillfully blends history, legend and fiction in a story that illuminates one of the darkest corners of the Arthurian legend.”

—Kathleen Cunningham Guler,  
Author of *In the Shadow of Dragons*

THE HOUSE OF PENDRAGON  
BOOK I

THE FIREBRAND

BY

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*To Bill, David and Missy,  
who put up with so much. And to my little "Honey,"  
our Once and Future Queen Bee.*

*Thanks to the gang, especially LP and DH.  
This humble scribe could not have  
done it without you.*

*Thanks to the Black Hills Writers group  
and my faithful critiquers.  
I love you guys.*

*Last, I need to extend a very special  
"thank you" to Bill. You have always believed in me,  
even when I doubted. And you  
never let me give up.*

# CHAPTER 1

I had no idea what hour it was. The sun had set a lifetime ago and thick clouds obscured any moonlight. Battle weary and with heavy hearts, we picked our way from the river in the dark, our joyless task completed. My four companions formed an escort around me. They knew what I thought of protocol, but I fell in step with the men simply because I was of no heart to argue. The only sounds were the lapping water behind us and our boots crunching the earth.

Odd, such stillness after the mayhem of battle.

When we reached the supply wagons and cooking fires, Dafydd hurried ahead without a word and disappeared into the crowd of soldiers and servants awaiting our return. I noticed immediately that an unnatural hush hung over the entire encampment, like a pall. I saw none of the usual camaraderie or back-slapping, heard none of the light-hearted banter normally present after victory. But my father's men were a special breed, cut from finer fabric. To a man, they snapped smartly to the instant I appeared. I acknowledged their salute with an

## THE FIREBRAND

“at ease” and hurried on my way.

Camlann a victory? Camlann was nothing short of internecine. Not Britanni against Saxon this time. We had all been part of the same army mere months ago. Yet this morning we had faced each other in the twilight mist, astride our battle steeds, in full armour, lances couched, anxious for the signals to be given, the battle cries to be sung, and have at each other. Men who had once been friends met as mortal enemies and slaughtered everything that moved in their paths. Who are the victors in civil strife?

*Wfff.* What had made us so bloodthirsty?

I saw a different question in the eyes of the men through the smoky firelight as we swept past; the man they had expected to see, the one their eyes sought, the one they had waited for, was not among us. We had lost our king as well as the Round Table. Modred, my half-brother, had driven a pike through Britain’s heart. And as my father’s heir, the duty fell on me to tell them. But not now. Instead, I announced to my companions that I would meet with everyone for reports after I had changed.

Bedwyr barked out orders and the place seemed to come back to life. Of a sort. I trusted him and the others to know what must be done, and do it, as my father had. *He* would have addressed the men first most likely, but my father was the Pendragon, and I never would come close to being his equal.

I was not the least surprised to see Dafydd lighting the last of my lanterns when I lifted my tent’s flap a moment later. He even had water ready so I could wash.

He offered to undo the laces of my armour, but I declined.

“At least let me help you with this.” Dafydd grasped the shield still hanging from my shoulder.

Why had I bothered to retrieve it?

I accepted his assistance without a word.

Dafydd regarded me. Impossible to hide my emotions from him. He

### THE FIREBRAND

knew my heart was shattered. I knew he wanted to offer comfort. But if I allowed myself his embrace now, I would crumble.

“Later, Dafydd,” I said.

“You do not bear this alone, Noble One.”

“I know. Thank you.”

After he left, I stared into the steaming basin. Tor must have had the kettles over the fire hours ago.

I felt dirty far beyond the filth covering me from crown to toe. I needed purifying to my soul and I doubted there was enough water in the Irish Sea for that. Even so, I would not have turned down the opportunity for a prolonged soak in the Great Bath of Aquae Sulis had it been offered. Anything to avoid the grim duty hovering just beyond the walls of my tent.

My muscles screamed in protest as I peeled away layers of armour and clothing. Through years of habit, I inspected woollen and leather tunics, then my *lorica*, and last the wide belt lined and padded with fleece as each came off. All stiff with dried blood and mud. Most were beyond repair.

Naked to the waist, I noticed a small wound just beneath my left collar-bone. No wonder it pained me. As I dabbed at the area, I recalled the arrow burrowing in. I must have shorn off the shaft with my shield so it would not be in my way as I slashed and hacked in the battle frenzy. When had I pushed it through?

But other than that, and an assortment of minor cuts and bruises, I was not seriously damaged. I was in much better shape, in fact, than my clothing attested.

Then I saw my feet and a wave of nausea rolled my guts. By the gods. What had I done? I had no desire to touch my boots. Had no wish to touch what remained of the men who had fallen beneath my sword. *My* sword. Drawn without thought to kill an adder slithering towards my horse. I had meant no more harm than that. I sank to my cot and waited for my stomach to settle. Waited for my hands to stop shaking

### **THE FIREBRAND**

so I could finish undressing. What I would have given for a stiff drink. Wine, ale, *uisge beatha* Anything.

Ballocks. Why can Bedwyr not address the men? He would know what to say. True. But what made me believe that his pain and grief were any less than mine? Addressing the soldiers was my duty now. I could no more walk away from it without so much as a by-your-leave than I could bring my father back. They had a right to expect my father's heir, not the weakling I had become, too much the coward to face them. Yet I had no idea what I should say. That Arthur, the Pendragon, was gone? Unthinkable. Once the Saxons caught wind of the day's disaster, they would be on us like a pack of starving wolves on an unsuspecting doe. And if not the Saxons, then all our fickle allies would descend like carrion crows, with Camelot as the feast.

If my father could not depend on the aid of his fellow countrymen as the Pendragon, what chance in *Annwn* did I have?

Between the Saxons and Britain's own people, Camelot would be torn to shreds. And it would take far more than the meagre remnants of the Round Table and my father's army to prevent such calamity. What could I possibly hope to achieve in my father's wake?

I tossed the damp cloth I had been using to bathe with into the basin and filthy water splashed over the sides onto the table.

My bath finished, I had exhausted my excuses for procrastination. I dressed in the clothes Dafydd had set out for me. The softness of the clean wool gave me pause as I slipped into trews and tunic. Such lovely comfort. Warmth had even returned to my toes and fingers.

Right then. What to say? A lie was right out, but neither could I give the entire truth. I needed to buy Britain time and I could purchase that with hope. Quite simple, really, now that I saw it.

Resolved.

I tugged at the stiff leather of my dress boots. I wanted nothing more to do with the old pair. Those I would have Dafydd burn along with the discarded tunics.

### THE FIREBRAND

With my wounded shoulder, my hair would prove a challenge. Easier to leave it in what was left of the braid I had woven this morning.

Is it still the same day? Year?

Finally, I wrapped a cloak around myself and reached down. Silly pillock. I had left my *fibula* in the grove. Laid it on the ground when I had removed my wrap for Father to use as an extra layer of warmth. Went off leaving it in the muck. Dolt. Well, there was nothing for that now. It was gone forever, like so much else in my life. As I had no spare with me, I draped the cloak over my shoulders, and went out.

Gaheris awaited to escort me. My kinsman held a small object in his hand that glittered as it caught the light of a nearby torch.

“Funny,” he said, “what people leave laying around in the mud, wouldn’t you say?”

“I was only just thinking this was lost for good, Ris. Thank you.” I clasped the gold dragon, symbol of my rank, into the deep green cloth, in its place above my right breast. “Where is Dafydd?”

“With the others. Are you ready, Highness?”

“No. But I might as well have it done.”

I found my trust well placed. Gaheris and the others had been busy and thorough. Everyone still able now stood in formation outside of my father’s tent. The Pendragon standard, blood red silk emblazoned with the brilliant gold dragon, flew high on its pole, as it should, snapping in the brisk breeze. Obviously Bedwyr’s work. I caught his gaze with a grateful smile. He gave the Latin command and all came to attention.

There were more men assembled than I imagined possible after what I had witnessed on the battlefield that afternoon. Gaheris had counted one hundred and thirty-five infantry, plus a few dozens more in the makeshift infirmary. But no further members of the Round Table had survived. Not so very long ago the *equites* of the Table had been one hundred and fifty strong. A single battle had reduced us to five.

I gazed upon that sea of faces. The last of the men loyal to my

## *THE FIREBRAND*

father and his dream to unite our people. I drew my courage from them and began.

“Modred is defeated. He is dead. Once again the day belongs to Arthur, the Pendragon.” There was no cheering; I expected none. “You have done a faithful service to your king, fighting bravely and well today, and he sends his gratitude.”

He should be here doing this. Damn you, Modred.

I thrust my emotions back down, hoping my struggle was not obvious.

“My father was wounded and has been taken to a place where he can rest and be healed.” I had heard Brother Lucan speak of Heaven as such a place. A fragile truth, at best, laced with hope. Let them make of that what they will.

“Has he named you regent until he returns, Highness?” some faceless voice asked from the dark. Did these honest men even realise that the glint of steel that had sparked the battle had come from my blade? How can I dare face them?

“No,” I said, my trembling hands hidden inside my cloak. “Lord Constantine remains at Camelot serving in that capacity.”

“Well said,” my Orkney kinsman whispered. “Bedwyr, Lancelot, and I will see to the rest. Say the same to the wounded. Take Davy and his harp with you.”

I nodded.

The infirmary was better lit and I feared my emotions would betray me. I managed by keeping my words brief. This was no time for eloquence. Fancy words are for bards, not warriors. When I finished, I visited a few moments with each man individually as my father always had done, acknowledging their bravery and skills. Sharing a jest. And answering enquiries of fallen comrades. As I moved through the tent, Dafydd strummed his harp, evoking soothing chords that travelled straight to the heart.

Only after I had seen the last man did I have a physician tend to my

### *THE FIREBRAND*

own wounds. He poked and mashed around at the one in my shoulder, sending fresh waves of pain through my arm.

“The arrow’s barb is still within you and naught of the shaft is left to push it through. Your Highness, I am afraid I shall have to cut it out.”

“Never mind the apologies, man. Do it.”

Wiping his hands on a cloth already stained crimson with blood, the leech turned to prepare his instruments and called for an assistant.

My mind reeled with the massive responsibility ahead of me. Bedwyr and Lancelot might have more experience, but I now held the highest rank. I tried to remember everything that Cai and Bedwyr and my father had taught me over the years. I’d had the best teachers. Why did I feel so ill-prepared?

I declined the elixir offered to dull the pain. I required a clear head. Besides, others had a greater need for that mercy.

“Dafydd?” I raised my voice so he could hear me from behind the screen that had been set up for my privacy.

“Highness?” Not so much as a pause in his chords. His public deference still rubbed me in spite of the years.

“Has anyone taken account of the horses?” Good, basics first.

“Sir Lancelot, Highness. He will make his report when you are ready.”

“And what of provisions?”

I grimaced as the physician probed deeper into the wound. Pride kept me from crying my agony. Pride and everything I had learned from Modred during my years in Orkney.

The physician paused. His assistant mopped my brow.

“What are you waiting for, man? Finish.”

“My apologies, your Highness.”

I regretted snapping at the poor man.

“That will be Sir Gaheris,” Dafydd said in answer to my earlier question.

### *THE FIREBRAND*

“Lugh’s cullions.” I cursed more in aggravation at my own stupidity over having allowed the wound, as the leech withdrew the arrow’s head.

The worst over, I began once again, “Dafydd, has—”

“Your Highness.” He cut me off almost curtly. It bordered on insubordination. Anyone else—”Lord Bedwyr has been arranging things.”

I should have known.

After the physician secured a bandage in place and cleansed the gash on my cheek, I thanked him as I slipped my tunic back over my head. I sat up a bit too quickly, for it brought on a wave of dizziness. When the tent stopped spinning, I stood and made my way to the tent’s entrance. Halfway there, I turned back.

Dashing sweat from my brow, I said, “Dafydd? I will meet with all of you later to get your reports. My tent.”

“I shall make sure the others are there, Highness.”

I took the remaining steps, calling over my shoulder, “And find me something to eat. I’m famished.”

“Getting more like your father by the hour,” I heard him say as the tent’s flap dropped behind me. The men laughed, and I smiled in spite of myself, unsure whether he paid me curse or compliment.

\* \* \*

Naturally Bedwyr stood sentry at his usual post outside my father’s tent. Bedwyr was always on duty. The man could be summed in a single word—stalworth. He was at my father’s side from the beginning. He and Cai both. Along with my father, they comprised what I had dubbed “the Holy Trinity of Camelot”. The three were together long before the idea of a united kingdom of Britain began to take shape.

“Everything is done then,” I asked as I approached.

“What can be until morning. There is still you to look after.”

“Me? I am right as rain.”

Bedwyr frowned.

### THE FIREBRAND

“I know you have not eaten yet. Shall I send for something?”

“I just asked Dafydd to.”

He peered at me, an eyebrow arched.

“What? I swear, you are as bad as Dafydd. I am having food sent ’round to my tent. That is where I go after I finish here. I even had the leech bind a wound.” I pointed to my shoulder.

“Had your shield down again, did you? Will you ever learn, *tiro*?” He demonstrated the proper position once more for my benefit.

Chastised yet again by my first and best teacher.

“It does not seem likely, does it? A reflection on the poor quality of the student, not you, sir.” With imaginary shield, I assumed the correct stance for a moment of inspection.

My thin smile quickly faded as I stood in the chill night air, listening to the wind snap the silk above my head. I relaxed my arm. He knew my mission and the reason I hesitated.

If I looked up at him now I would see the understanding in his warm eyes, see the caring. And the pain. No one loved my father more than the man standing beside me. No one. Not the Queen. Not Lancelot. Not even myself.

“I shall be here if you have need of me.”

Very comforting, that.

“My father was most fortunate to have had such a friend as you, Bedwyr.”

“Thank you. It has been my honour just to have known him.” He raised the tent flap for me.

The lanterns had been lit as if *his* return was expected at any moment. The tent itself was unremarkable, much like my own, though larger and with the trappings of a military leader—a table strewn with war maps and papers, a few chairs, his cot. Rather spartan for the Pendragon.

I felt quite the intruder. I did not belong in the Pendragon’s tent alone. But he was my father and he had commanded a duty of me.

### *THE FIREBRAND*

Disobeying was out of the question. I had protested the necessity of this duty. Protested the necessity of the key in my purse. He had such an uncanny way of being right nearly all the time, so that even in grief I could curse it.

With two steps, I was at his cot and lifted a small oaken chest from beneath. For several heartbeats, I stared at the box in my lap.

“Remember. You will only hold this for him until he returns,” I whispered aloud to encourage myself. I slid the key into the lock. It opened without a sound. My breath caught as the flickering lantern light brought the gleaming red-gold dragon ring to life where it lay in its soft bed of purple. The king’s ring, the seal of Camelot. Whoever possessed this, possessed the power of Britain.

I could take the ring back to Camelot and declare what was mine by birth. Could show it immediately.

How like Modred.

No. I slammed my fist against the wood frame of the cot. There was no Camelot to return to, the tides of Britain had turned. The Round Table and the Pendragon were no more; those had been destroyed on the battlefield of Camlann. The mere thought of the vile creature with whom I shared a father made me realise I must take that seal, as my father had commanded. But not to wield. The main difference between Modred and me was his insatiable craving for power. All I had ever wanted was my own identity. What a strange fate that I still emerged with everything Modred had tried so hard to keep from me. According to my father’s wishes, I was now Pendragon.

I would trade title and ring just to have my father back.

“May your next life be as a leper, Modred. Shunned by all, Maggot-feed.” I spat to wherever his spirit might be dwelling.

I snatched up the ring and used the leather cord I had brought with me to fashion a pendant. The gold was heavy; the weight of an entire nation hung at my breast. I hid it under my tunic next to my heart, where I vowed to keep it the rest of my days.

## THE FIREBRAND

*There, you have done it and the world is still here.*

I replaced the chest then crossed to the table. I gathered everything, maps and papers alike, stuffing them into a leather satchel, slung it over my shoulder and left.

“So. It is finished then? What you needed to do?”

I heard Bedwyr ask his questions through my haze of emotions.

“It is done.” Focusing on the now once more, I noticed Gaheris had joined Bedwyr.

“Ah, Ris,” I said.

“Highness. All is ready for the morrow,” he said.

“Well done, Ris,” I said.

By reason of my rank, my tent had been pitched near to those of the men I had led into battle. Clear on the opposite side of the camp. Bedwyr, Ris, and I wended through the maze of tents, cooking fires, carts, and piles of supplies and weapons. There is always a faster, shorter, route than the *via principalis* and *via praetoria* and other main thoroughfares. On the way, I declined countless bowls of stew, crusts of bread, cups of ale, despite their aromas causing my mouth to water. I greeted the men as civilly as my frayed emotions would allow as I hurried for the privacy of my tent.

A fire burned briskly in the pit a few paces from my tent. More of Dafydd’s work. But I saw no sign of my brother. Foster-brother in truth. But brother of my heart. Did we not survive the horrors of Dunn na Carraice together?

Lancelot stood on the fringe of light. I ignored his bow.

“So,” Ris said. “What are your plans for the morrow? Where will we go?”

I felt Dafydd beside me before he ever spoke.

“We could go to the Continent, disappear in Armorica until things settle here.” Dafydd placed a steaming bowl into my cold hands. The warmth felt exquisite. And the aroma...

“Dafydd, you are a darling man. See, Bedwyr? I did not lie.” I

### *THE FIREBRAND*

attacked the thick venison stew, barely tasting my meal. I soaked up the last of the gravy with a bit of bread. My hunger appeased, I handed the empty bowl back to him.

“My thanks,” I said.

He produced an ale jug that met with enthusiastic approval.

Exhausted, I sank onto the log serving as my chair. I threw the folds of my cloak off my shoulders and drew my warmth from the blaze. I gestured for the others to join me.

“Aye,” I said finally in answer to Dafydd’s suggestion. “Aye, I could go off to Armorica, like the Roman gentry who fled when things got too difficult for their cultured sensibilities. And only spend the rest of my days in a foreign land. A Pendragon in exile. It will be a long while in future, my friends, before things settle here. A very long while.”

It seemed unnatural, using the title for myself.

“My family would gladly grant you well come and aid you in any way they could, your Highness.” Lancelot spoke to me for the first time since our return to camp.

“I want nothing from you, Lancelot. Or your kin. I tolerate you now because I must.” Why he had not accompanied the Queen to the stake was beyond my ken. “Then with your permission, Highness, I shall take my leave.” He started to rise, but Bedwyr stopped him.

Both men regarded me.

Bedwyr was correct. For the benefit of the men beyond our circle, I had to maintain an air of normalcy. Any outburst now might raise suspicions that something was amiss.

“No law states I must like you, Lancelot. But I have always respected your skills as a warrior. And my father forgave you. Stay. I will hear your counsel.”

Lancelot rubbed his hands over his face, his head bowed.

“I hope someday you will forgive me as well, Highness. Gareth’s death was an accident.”

### **THE FIREBRAND**

I shot him an icy stare to signify I would not.

“Gareth stood guard at my mother’s stake, unarmed and unwilling.”

“I—” The shoulders of the mighty Lancelot drooped. “Any choice you make cannot be easy for you, Highness,” he said softly. “You cannot depend upon Constantine relinquishing the power of regency to you.”

I had expected the obvious and suffered no disappointment in Camelot’s foremost warrior. The Queen’s champion.

“Who else is most likely to oppose me?”

Bedwyr scratched at his chin. It needed a shave. He and the others ticked off the names of the chieftains and princes who had been absent from the battlefield of Camlann. They had remained in their homelands and awaited the outcome in order to pledge loyalties to the victor.

The same men who had opposed my place in the army, and my appointment to the Round Table.

“You haven’t much time to deliberate,” Bedwyr said. “You can leave at first light, saying you go to join your father. It will be only a short while before today’s terrible truth leaks out. The sooner you are away from here, the better. If that is what you truly wish.”

What I truly wished was to turn back time by a few years and have another go at it, to avoid the events we had just lived through.

“What is the use? The mighty Arthur, Subduer of the Saxon Horde, could not control his own wife or his closest friend. Could not depend on the loyalty of his *equites*” I glared at Lancelot until he averted his eyes. “Why should I even bother trying to salvage this cock-up?”

I rubbed my aching brow, remembering our last encounter with the barbarian Saxons. The now famous Battle of Baedd hen Dunn. My first command. Myself and a mere eighty men held off the onslaught for three days until my father led reinforcements from Camelot to help turn the tide. And for what?

I shook my head and thought aloud, “All that work we did, the blood spilt, the lives spent. For what? For today? What a waste. What a

### *THE FIREBRAND*

waste.” I scooped up a handful of damp earth, held it out to my companions. “For this? Did he really think this cares a fig about who lives on it? So many of our own people did not give a damn one way or the other.” I tossed the dirt down in disgust. “Well, I say, the Saxons are well come to it, if they want.”

I saw the consternation on my companions’ faces, and they had the right. We each bore the scars of the hard-won peace we had wrested from that lot.

No one spoke.

“Maybe they would take better care of this land than we did.” My last words tangled in my throat for it pained me to see my father’s dream in ruins, like a tattered tapestry.

Would this day never end? I closed my eyes and pressed the heels of my hands hard against my forehead in a vain attempt to cancel out the throbbing in my head and the pounding echo of the war drums. The screams of the dying.

*Leave me be!*

The wind gusted and I shivered with the chill. I wrapped myself into the folds of my cloak, while my companions stared. I felt their gazes burn through my skin, directly to my soul, as keenly as I had felt the glowing iron brand searing into my left wrist those many years before. I rubbed at the silver wristband covering the scar. Can they not leave me in peace? What did they expect of me? I am not the person my father was. I was a fool for believing I could even try.

“What are you staring at?” I flailed my arms at my companions.

“We only wish to help.” Dafydd’s touch on my sleeve brought part of my senses back. “We are all exhausted and in need of rest.”

“Aye. High time to end this. I cannot take the throne. You know there is no throne for me to take. I have a worthless title. Modred made bloody sure that if he could not have Camelot, then neither would I. All my work to be accepted into the Round Table and earn my place at my father’s side was wasted. It is over. Gareth and Cai and the others, they

### THE FIREBRAND

are gone. Who is left to support my claim? Let the mad dogs scramble for the non-existent prize. I shall be gone as well. We leave at dawn. Dafydd. Ris. North is as good a direction as any. Happy now?"

\* \* \*

"We could have sold that sword you know," Dafydd said, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. It was the first any of us had spoken since Bedwyr and Lancelot retired for the night quite some time ago.

The jug of ale came back to me once more. I took my turn with it before answering.

"Really? I cannot imagine anyone paying real silver for that worthless bit of... of steel."

"But why? Why did you do it? To just chuck it away?"

I could not bring myself to answer or face him. I was not ready to confront the truth behind his innocent question.

"Have you gone mad?"

There was an excellent question to ponder. I had already begun to doubt my reason. I offered the ale to Gaheris.

"I have had my share, cousin," he said.

In truth, I'd had more than my share. *Wfff*. Why was I not yet sotted? I should have been ages ago, with all the ale I had consumed. That, plus the wine from this afternoon with my father before he... I raised the jug. But Dafydd clutched my wrist and held my arm.

"Are you mad?"

I wrenched my arm free and drank.

"Perhaps," I said finally. "Perhaps I am. And who among us was not a little unsound today? Bedwyr? My father? We allowed Modred control of our destinies. Modred. Can either of you blame me for anything I did today?"

Ris shook his head. He knew better than to get into this. Dafydd should have as well. In fact, he knew me best. The ale emboldened him; he was unused to so much libation. In no mood for talk, I wanted

## THE FIREBRAND

to drop the whole thing.

But Dafydd spoke again. “No, I do not blame you at all. I am sorry you believed that.”

I accepted his apology with silence. But he deserved an explanation at least.

“I suppose throwing that sword into the river was my tribute to those who did not survive the battle. A mad act to crown the madness. And to say once and for good, my warrior days are over.”

I finished the last of the ale in a long quaff. I preferred *uisge* for my purpose. *Uisge beatha*, the Water of Life. What better for drowning your sorrows? I wanted the oblivion of potation. And ale was a poor substitute.

“But really, Dafydd. If my having a sword means so much to you, you can fetch me another before we leave. Surely there are plenty and to spare around here. It should not be difficult for you to find one, especially as you are such a master of procurement.”

“You know well it is not the sword alone I am meaning. Why are you walking away from your birthright? Do you not feel a duty to stay and try? Why did you throw away who you really are?”

His words cut directly to my heart. Why did he not simply plunge his dagger there instead?

“That, brother, I did not do,” I said, curling a fist. A hurt for a hurt. “How could you think that of me? Throw away who I am? Am I not my father’s daughter? Never think I would deny that, Dafydd. Never.”

Dafydd stared at my raised fist; his blue-grey eyes, wide with surprise.

“I am sorry, Lin. I...” He dragged slender fingers through his sandy hair. “Nothing we did today made sense.”

No, it made no whit of sense. Modred’s hatred and ambition had driven us beyond the point of reasoning. Yet it was far too simple to lay the entire blame on him, my own feelings aside. The tapestry of Camelot had begun to unravel long before Modred arrived with his

### *THE FIREBRAND*

schemes and those of his mother. It had never been tightly woven. Modred only plucked the threads out one by one. When that did not achieve his purpose fast enough, he set the tapestry ablaze. The rotted material burned quickly. Modred's sole mistake was that he did not get out of the way in time, for he was consumed as well.

*Wfft.* We had all played our parts in destroying Camelot. My father. Morgause. My mother. Lancelot. Modred. Me. Not one of us any more—or less—culpable than the others. Our destinies had been set before my father's birth.

I felt wretched. I always did after an argument with Dafydd. The thought of how close I had come to blows with him frightened me. I touched his sleeve.

“Would you rather be alone, Lin?” He accepted my unspoken apology.

I shook my head. He knew how much I hated being alone.

Dafydd took up his harp. It was never far from his reach. He cradled it in his lap as a mother does her infant. His fingers touched a string here and there to test its pitch. He adjusted a few then played in earnest. Music is the one salve for a rent soul and tattered heart. It may not cure but it certainly is a soothing balm. The effect on me was immediate. I was grateful for the darkness, to hide my tears. To hide my weakness. Damn my gender.

The bards make war seem glorious, even romantic. They lie. Trust me. They are paid to lie. Oh, there are times when war can be justified; at least we had a purpose at Baedd hen Dunn. But Camlann? I guess we needed the Saxons to keep ourselves out of trouble. There was no reason for the blood-bath we had been through today. I had been nothing more than a butcher in the midst of a gory slaughter, no better than the others. No better than Modred. We had been to Hell. How could everyone else be so calm? How could they sleep?

My eyelids closed and the scene of carnage played out before me.

By Toutatis. Thick blood surrounded me. I felt it spill hot onto my

### *THE FIREBRAND*

sword hand, saw it splatter my shield and clothes, drip from my sword. Mangled bodies, devoid of life, and pieces of humanity littered the field. I slipped and nearly fell and realized I trod upon the entrails of a dying man. Grisly? Ghastly? Most assuredly. But that is the truth of war.

I wiped my hands on my cloak, but they remained sticky. I could not recall soiling them recently. It must have been the remnants of that clot of dirt. But when I held them out to the fire for inspection, the sight horrified me. My hands dripped with fresh blood. It flowed down my fingers and wrists in thick rivulets, hissing as it hit the ground before me. Struck dumb, I stared while both my pulse and breathing quickened.

Surely this was a sign. I had never been meant for the warrior's life. Many had accused me of going against nature fighting in my father's army.

A female warrior? How daft. Even Bedwyr had questioned my father's sanity at first.

I ran trembling hands over my clothes and dragged them across the grass in a futile attempt to remove the stuff of life.

"Dafydd, I have blood on my hands and I cannot wash it off. I was nothing more than a butcher today. And here is the proof." I thrust my arms towards him.

His own fingers froze on the harp's strings, in rare discordance. A deep red drop splattered onto the frame and quickly soaked into the wood. Dafydd seemed unconcerned at the defiling of the beloved instrument, his most precious possession.

"Can you not see it?"

By the puzzled look in his eyes, I knew that he did not. Nor did Ris. I grasped my brother's ivory tunic and stained the fabric scarlet.

"Have I gone mad? Is this my penance for killing that adder this morning? Father told me to go to the parley unarmed. Am I to blame for starting the battle of Camlann?"