

Guinevere

Guinevere pulled the edges of the coarse woolen blanket around her neck, tightening the makeshift hood over her head. Heedless of the brown tendrils that escaped from the braids framing her face, she shivered in the predawn. Once the sun rose, the air would grow heavy with the rain waiting to fall as the day moved forward. For now, the night chill still clung to the scrubs and trees.

I should have waited and taken Seren Brenin, she thought for the umpteenth time. She had been gone from Cadbury for only an hour, but on foot she moved slower than the worms huddled in the long grasses, protected from the cold.

Blazes. At this pace, I won't reach the sea for days. She continued to put one foot after the other hoping the Goddess was watching and would help her.

Another hour passed. The sun burned slowly through the low-lying clouds. Steam from the vegetation rose on both sides of the road creating the illusion of warmth. Around her the cry of thrush and finches greeted the day. Hungry goshawks patrolled the sky circling and watching for the slightest movement below.

Behind her the clip-clop of hooves on the packed ground broke the morning chorus. Guinevere darted to the roadside and crouched below a stand of elms. As the wagon came around the bend, relief flooded through her. It wasn't from the castle.

Standing up, she flagged down the driver. Keeping a hand tight on the blanket, she approached the stopped wagon. The man stared at her, his free hand wiping the moisture from his forehead. The woman next to him glanced briefly at Guinevere and then whispered to the man.

"You're quite a ways from home, ain't ya, young lady?" Guinevere's throat closed. *Does he recognize me?*

"Now, Thomas, don't scare the lassie that way." The woman smiled at Guinevere and motioned her forward.

"Where you going so early?"

"I missed my father early yesterday. I..I was up la.. late," she stumbled on the words. "He left without me. I'm tryin' to catch up." Guinevere watched their faces hoping they believed her lie.

“Well, young lady,” the man said, “wherever you’re headed it’ll take longer on foot. Don’t believe you’ll catch up to ‘im any time soon.”

“What my Thomas is tryin’ to say, dear, is that you may ride with us for as far as you like. We’re fixing to see our daughter and her husband near Abbotsbury. They just welcomed a son into the family.” She beamed as if the baby boy was her own.

Guinevere hesitated just a minute. “I would be grateful for the ride. I won’t be any bother.”

“No worry on that. Maybe it will give my Alice somethin’ else to talk about.”

Alice punched him gently on the arm. “Climb on up, ah, what are you called?”

“Jenny. I’m named after my mother, may she rest in the goddess’s shelter”

“Don’t know nothin’ about no goddess, but climb aboard, Jenny. It’s a long ride to Abbotsbury. Should get there close to night.” He watched as Guinevere, Jenny, used the wheel to climb into the bed of the wagon. “Just where’re you supposed to find your father?”

“He’ll be at Weymouth Bay. Waitin’ on supplies from over the water.”

“Won’t be too far then from where we stop.”

Guinevere settled on the wagon bed, drawing the blanket closer. Out of the corner of her eye, she fancied she saw movement in the trees. Squinting, she peered into the shadows. The jolting of the wagon moving out disrupted her concentration for a moment. When she looked back, there was nothing.

With Guinevere in the back, the conversation was limited, but Alice turned sideways on the seat and told her about their daughter. It had been several months since they had seen her. Both were anxious to see that mother and son were well, even if Thomas acted a bit gruff. Without stopping, they shared their mid-day meal of bread, cheese, and water with her. Guinevere’s full stomach and the lack of rest over the last few days left her struggling to keep her eyes open. And when she could resist no longer, her eyes closed, and the vision came again.

Cedwyn thrown into the boat, his hands tied in front of him. Guinevere jamming a fist into her mouth to keep

from crying out, and falling to her knees, tears streaming down her face.

I'll come for you, Cedwyn, I promise. I promise.

I promise.

Cedwyn

As he had done every minute since the boat left Britannia, Cedwyn searched along the water's horizon hoping to spot land, even Gaul. Anywhere to get off this accursed vessel. Each hour that passed he thought would be his last. Cedwyn hadn't been sick before, but he had seen those with the sickness who couldn't keep anything down, food or water.

The young'uns had the sickness the worst. Just hours after they left shore, they were herded up from the belly of the vessel. For Cedwyn, the fresh air helped to quell the sickness, but the others had succumbed to it ever since. That first night with the little'uns on deck, Cedwyn hauled up buckets from the sea and carried them down the steep steps. Below, he washed out the sickness and the gagging smell through small drain holes just above the water line on the sides of ship. Once he finished there, he'd climbed out and hauled up more buckets of water. He dumped a bucket on each little'un cleaning the vomit off them and their clothes. At first, they screamed, but after the third time, they'd stood there, stoic, unmoving, and silent, especially John, the youngest at four. While he managed to get small amounts of water and broth into the children during the day, nothing stayed down for long. Cedwyn knew they couldn't last much longer. He couldn't even remember the last real meal they'd had.

With his own clothes still dripping from his morning cleansing, he stared, squinting in an attempt to see farther. Land had to be close.

"Land!"

Cedwyn turned and looked up at the smaller man—the bully—the one called Ulf. He shivered as the man's name conjured up visions of a hungry wolf, dangerous to all. Ulf clung high on the tall pole in the center of the boat. His out-stretched arm pointed to an invisible spot ahead of them. Cedwyn tried hard to see what the man saw.

The other three renegades ran to the railing, craning

their necks toward the direction of the spotter's arm. The burly renegade leader, called Baard by the others, raised the cry. "There! Land!" He and Ulf had not fared well on the crossing. Cedwyn had seen them both hanging over the rail with the sickness.

Cedwyn returned to scanning the horizon. A low shadow came into sight, grew, and at last became a separate image from the water. Silently Cedwyn thanked the Goddess, her words the only comfort he had since they'd left Britannia.

...your journey the hardest of all...far from those you serve and love...See this most difficult journey to its end... Embrace your Knight's vow.

Cedwyn had embraced his vow, realizing there was no other choice he could have made. And, during each moment of his journey his thoughts didn't stray far from his friend, his Queen, Guinevere.

I know you'll come, Guin'ver. I know it.

Ulf, down from the mast, cuffed him on the shoulder. "Get those smelly kids up here and washed down again. Don't want to be carrying that smell with us in the wagon. Go on now." He shoved Cedwyn but then almost lost his balance as the ship dipped suddenly.

Cedwyn's stomach lurched, but his hidden grin of satisfaction, as the man ran to the rail and hung over, choking and gagging, calmed his insides. *Serves him right, the bully.*