

EXCALIBUR RISING
AN EPIC FANTASY

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Four Volume Omnibus

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The story begins...

ATHELSTANE THE SAXON

CHAPTER ONE

October 11, 1216

The Bishop's Palace, Bishops Lynn Priory 1216

Evening

The king's stallion was as evil-tempered as King John himself. The ringing of the Vespers bell had sent him dancing and prancing and generally behaving as though he had never been broken for riding. It was all that Athelstane could do to hold him steady. Even when the echo of the bells had died away on the chill autumn air and the monks had processed into their chapel, the stallion was still rolling his eyes and blowing hot steam from his nostrils.

The sudden appearance of a mist, boiling up from the ground and shrouding Athelstane and the stallion in momentary darkness, was more than the stallion could tolerate. With a toss of his head, he jerked Athelstane from his feet and flung him onto the ground. It was from this position, on his back in the dung smeared courtyard, that Athelstane first saw the girl in the blue dress.

He scrambled to his feet. He didn't care who she was or where she had come from, all he cared about was King John's horse. Any damage to the foul beast would result in damage to Athelstane - a whipping, or another branding, or, depending on the king's mood, a painful death.

By the time Athelstane had retrieved the bridle, a faint light had broken through the sudden mist and he found that the stallion had changed from vicious uneasiness to sudden contentment. His brown eyes, no longer rolling madly, were focused adoringly on the girl in the blue dress. Athelstane brushed straw from his clothing and looked to see if anyone had observed his momentary loss of control. He wouldn't put it past any of the

stable boys to report him to the Master of Horse for the small reward of an extra helping of turnip mash.

He was startled to realize that no one was looking at him. In fact, no one could even see him. He was still enclosed in a swirling cloud of mist with only the stallion and the girl for company.

The Bishop's Palace stood at the edge of the great salt marsh where all manner of evil lay hidden in the fog that hung over the lonely tidal wastelands. He tightened his grip on the stallion's bridle, crossed himself and muttered a paternoster. Despite the fact that the candles in the chapel had been lit and the monks were at their prayers, it appeared that something wicked had wrapped itself in mist and made its way over the stone walls of the priory, and past the waiting guards.

Athelstane shuddered, crossed himself again and was in the midst of a hurried Ave Maria when he was rudely interrupted.

"Wes H'al?"

Now he was glad of the shrouding mist and he hoped that it would not only hide him from sight but also smother the Saxon greeting the girl had just spoken.

She spoke again.

"Hwaet hatest put?"

He stared at her. He didn't care who she was, or what she was, or how she had called up the mist, it was more than his life was worth to speak the Saxon language of his childhood. He shook his head at her and placed a finger on his lips. She frowned and tilted her head to one side. He controlled his fear and studied her for a moment. She was young, maybe younger than his own nineteen summers, and very pretty with eyes as blue as her dress and golden hair in long braids. She was as Saxon as he was so surely she knew the law. Saxon was a forbidden language. Under pain of death only Norman French was to be spoken in Britain.

"WHAT'S YOUR NAME?"

Now she was shouting. Did she think he was deaf? He didn't trust that the shroud of mist would keep out the sound of her shouting. Was she mad?

He shook his head vigorously and placed his finger to his lips again.

"I'm sorry," she whispered, "was I shouting? I am not accustomed to being in someone's mind."

In his mind! Was she in his mind?

She raised a questioning eyebrow. "What is your name?"

Her lips had not moved and he could not say what language she had spoken but he knew what she had said. His right hand flew up of its own accord and made the horned sign to ward off witchcraft.

She scowled at him. "I am no witch."

He kept his hand raised and risked a whispered question in his own language.

"Hwuier eart oy fram?"

"No need to speak aloud. Just think your questions."

He struggled to assemble a rational thought. She trampled across his mind again. "Don't worry, I can't read your mind. I don't know what you're thinking. You have to speak to me as you would speak to anyone, but don't speak aloud."

Well, Athelstane thought, it was just as well she could not read his mind because, as fearful as he was, he was also taking note of way that her blue dress clung to her breasts and hips, and the plump prettiness of her lips. He wondered what she thought of him. Once upon a time he had been called handsome. Once he had been a lordling among Saxons and heir to a good estate. What did she see now? Could she see beyond the stained and torn tunic of a stable boy to the nobleman beneath?

"Begin with your name," she said. "I am Sapling, and you are...?"

"Athelstane."

"See, that was easy."

"Where are you from?"

She nibbled at her lips with dainty white teeth. She still had all her teeth so surely she was a child of privilege. Perhaps she was, like him, a dispossessed Saxon noble, or perhaps she was simply a witch weaving an enchantment.

"Where are you from?" he asked again.

"From a place beyond your reach."

What did she mean? Athelstane was suddenly aware of how closely her blue dress resembled the dress worn by the Virgin Mary in the murals of the bishop's chapel. She had said her name was Sapling but perhaps he had misunderstood. Was she the Virgin Mary coming to him in a vision? She said that she was from a place beyond his reach. Did she mean heaven? Was she saying he would never reach heaven? What had he done? What mortal sin had he committed? He had tried. Surely she knew how hard he had tried to be worthy of heaven, despite being forced into the service of the most evil king that had ever ruled in England.

Her reassurance washed over him like a soothing balm. "Calm yourself Athelstane. I am from the Isle of Avalon."

"Avalon?"

"Yes. Have you heard of such a place?"

He formed the words carefully in his head. "When I was a child in my father's hall I heard tales told by a wandering storyteller. He spoke of an island of beautiful women."

He saw a flush rising on her pale cheeks. Perhaps she thought he was flattering her but he was only speaking the truth. He remembered the storyteller who sat by the fire and told the tale of Arthur, the greatest of

English kings - one of his own people, a Saxon, and of the Isle of Avalon hidden from the sight of man.

He formed another question. "The storytellers say that Avalon is the place where King Arthur sleeps, is that true?"

She gave him a curious smile. "Is that what you were told?"

"They say he was wounded in a great battle, but he is not dead. He waits to be healed and then he will come again and save us from our enemies."

Sapling nodded her head as if in satisfaction. "Good, good. It is as we hoped. The legend is already corrupted. In time it will lose all meaning. Arthur will be forgotten and we shall be safe in Avalon."

"I don't understand. Are you saying that the legend is not true?"

"It has remnants of truth and you have no need to know the whole truth. It is best that you forget the entire story. Arthur is not your king and whether or not he is healed will make no difference to your fortunes."

"He is not our king now," Athelstane protested, "but he was our king in the past. He was king before the Normans came."

"No, never. Arthur is not part of your history. He was never king of this land. He is not coming to rescue you."

"No," Athelstane shouted aloud, forgetting where he was, forgetting that his Saxon speech was forbidden. "You lie. Go back where you came from, witch."

Her voice invaded his head. Ice trickled down his spine and her words stung.

"Mark my words well and remember them. Arthur is not your king. He should never have been here. Mistakes have been made and they will be put right. We will bring an end to this legend and wrap Arthur into the mists of time. I have a task to fulfill and no more time to waste. Show me where the king keeps his treasure."

Athelstane stepped back and raised a hand to ward off her contempt. "I cannot."

"I command it."

Athelstane could not restrain his anger. Witch, faerie, whatever she was, he could not accept her destruction of his dreams. He would continue to stake his life on the hope that Arthur would return one day and rid the country of the Norman invaders. If she had come to destroy that belief, she could just roll herself up in her magic mist and depart.

"Why should I do as you command? "

Her voice retained its ice. "Because it is time for Arthur to return to Avalon and it will be ill for you if you disobey me. Do as I command. Take me to the king's treasure."

Athelstane's anger was replaced by a cold determination to rid himself of the girl and her demands. How dare she take away his people's only hope? Let her look elsewhere for the king's treasure. Let her try her tricks on the barons who had captured the king's palace in London.

"You have come to the wrong place," Athelstane said. "The king's treasure house is in London. You are free to go there and see for yourself."

Sapling frowned at him. "I see that your mind is filled with deception. You are playing with words. You say that the treasure house is in London but I know that the treasure I seek is here. Do not take me for a fool."

Athelstane shivered. He had to remove her from his head. His hand moved of its own accord, crossing himself several times and muttering the names of his Saxon saints.

"You cannot protect yourself that way," Sapling warned. "Tell me the truth and no harm will befall you."

"I did not lie. It is true that the king's treasure house is in London."

"And yet I sense a lie behind your truth."

Her eyes bored into him. Athelstane shrugged. Deception was pointless. "London is in the hands of rebellious barons," he confessed, "and all of the king's possessions travel with us. His majesty is fleeing many enemies. The French are laying waste to the south, the Scots threaten from the north and the king has no place of refuge. He must carry his house on his back like a snail."

Sapling's frown was replaced by a look of interest. "I see that you are afraid of this king. Do all people fear him?"

Athelstane considered the question, thinking of the women the King had abused, the peasants he had killed, the lands he had stolen.

"Yes, all people fear him."

"And what is his name?"

"He is John, brother to Richard the Lionheart."

"And what has he done to provoke such fear?"

Anger and resentment flooded Athelstane's thoughts as he responded.

"He has taxed the people, Saxon and Norman alike, until they have nothing more to give and still he lays waste to the land and destroys even his friends. That is why we fear him. No one is safe. Even his barons are in revolt and have driven him out of London. That is why we are here on the edge of nowhere under the protection of the church."

"Obviously you have no love for this king. Why do you remain here with him?"

Athelstane lowered his head. "My parents were murdered, and I was sold into servitude. I am not a free man."

"I don't understand. How is it possible for you to be sold?"

"I am a Saxon."

"Is that why you have been sold? Are all Saxons sold?"

"We are all subject to the Norman invaders. They take our lands and our women, and rob us of our dignity. We cannot reclaim our lands until our great king returns. We are waiting for Arthur."

Sapling's curiosity turned to anger and her voice was icy. "I have told you already that Arthur is not your king. You cannot have him. You may

wait until the end of time but he will not come to rescue you. You must save yourselves." Her voice in his head rose to a bitter commanding shout. "Do not waste your time on this legend."

The king's black stallion tugged at his bridle as though the ice of Sapling's voice had suddenly reached him and broken the enchantment that had kept him still. He jerked his head, striking Athelstane's shoulder and once again sending him sprawling on the ground. This time Athelstane landed face down. He could not see the stallion but he could hear the sound of his iron-shod hooves clattering across the courtyard and voices beyond the mist raised in fear.

Sapling's voice and Sapling's sudden fear overtook his mind. Why was she afraid? Surely she had magic at her fingertips. Surely she didn't need his help.

Her voice in his head was close to panic. "I didn't mean to hurt them. What shall I do?"

Was she asking him this question? He couldn't tell her what to do. He was little better than a slave. She was the one who could call up a mist and speak words into his mind.

He stumbled to his feet aware of the cacophony of terrified voices and the stallion's angry, threatening whinny. The mist around him was thinning and he could see through the veil to the courtyard. He turned his back on Sapling and watched in horror as the king's horse with his eyes rolling in terror lashed out all around him. His iron shod hooves struck Wilfred, the smallest stable boy, in the head and left him bleeding on the ground.

Athelstane turned back to look at Sapling and reached out to her horrified mind. Her thoughts had frightened the stallion so perhaps her thoughts could calm him.

"Use your mind. Use your power. Calm him with your thoughts."

He could feel her agitation and uncertainty and he saw tendrils of mist thickening and writhing along the ground around her feet. Her intention was suddenly clear to him. She was planning to wrap herself in the mist and slide back over the wall.

"Don't you dare leave. You started this. You fix it."

"I don't know..."

"Try."

She threw him from her mind and for a moment he was certain that she would abandon him. He saw indecision on her face and then sudden determination. Her face creased in concentration and he turned back to look at the stallion. He saw the moment when the horse steadied and came under Sapling's control, trembling but as still as a statue. The injured boy picked himself up from the ground with blood streaming from a gash at the side of his head.

Sapling took a tentative step toward him. "I didn't mean your people any harm. Let me tend to the boy."

"No."

Athelstane was angry with her for frightening him with her sudden appearance, for speaking the forbidden language, for entering his head, and for destroying the dream of Arthur. He lashed out with the most dangerous accusation of all.

"We have no need of your witchcraft."

"I am no witch."

"Then what are you?"

"I have told you what I am. I must leave now. I have drawn too much attention to myself. I will return when you are alone."

"I am never alone."

"When you are abed."

"Do you think a stable boy has a bed?" Athelstane asked, stung by the memory of his bed in his father's hall. "I sleep in the straw with the horses."

"Then I shall find you in the straw."

"No."

Sapling did not wait to hear his protest. She raised a graceful arm and the mist returned to swirl around her and blot out the sky. When the evening light broke through again, she had vanished.