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Merlin

Book 2 of the Pendragon Cycle

Written by Stephen R. Lawhead

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MERLIN

book₂ of the PENDRAGON cycle

STEPHEN R.
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LION FICTION

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PROLOGUE

They were going to kill Arthur. Can you imagine? They would have killed him, too, but I put a stop to it. The arrogance! The stupidity!

Not that Uther was ever one for a scholar's cope. I expected more from Ygernna, though; she at least had the canny sense of her people. But, she was afraid. Yes, frightened of the whispered voices, frightened of her suddenly exalted position, frightened of Uther and desperate to please him. She was so young.

So Arthur had to be saved, and at no little expense to myself. I had heard about their sordid plan in the way I have, and made it my affair to confront Uther with it early on. He denied all, of course.

'Do you think me mad?' he shouted. He was always shouting. 'The child could be male,' he said, suppressing a sly smile. 'It could well be my heir we are talking about!'

Uther is a warrior and there is an honesty about that: steel does not lie. Lucky for him he was a man born to his time. He would never have made a decent magistrate, let alone governor – he is a sorry liar. As High King he ruled with a sword in one hand and a bludgeon in the other: the sword for the Saecsen, the bludgeon for the petty kings below him.

Ygernna was just as bad in her own way. She said nothing, but stood wringing those long white hands of hers, and twisting her silken mantle into knots, staring at me with those big, dark doe eyes that had trapped Uther. Her stomach had just begun to swell; she could not have been more than four or five months pregnant.

Still, she was pregnant enough to begin having second thoughts about the nasty work ahead. I do not think any mother could coldly kill her own child, or stand by and see it done. I am not so sure about Uther... he of the strong arm and wandering eye. Pendragon of Britain. Capable of anything – which was the better half of his power

where the small kings were concerned – he was not one to shrink from any course set before him.

Outside on the black rocks the waves crashed and the white gulls cried. Ygernna touched a hand to her stomach – a brushing touch with fingertips – and I knew she would listen to reason. Ygernna would be an ally.

So it did not matter what Uther said or did not say, admitted or did not admit. I would have my way...

My way. Was it? Was it ever *my* way? There's a thought.

Ah, but I am getting ahead of myself. I always am. This is to be Arthur's story. Yes, but there is more to Arthur than his birth. To understand him, you have to understand the land. This land, this Island of the Mighty.

And you have to understand me, for I am the man who made him.

book 1

KING

ONE

Many years have come and gone since I awakened in this worlds-realm. Too many years of darkness and death, disease, war, and evil. Yes, very much evil.

But life was bright once, bright as sunrise on the sea and moonglow on water, bright as the fire on the hearth, bright as the red-gold torc around my grandfather Elphin's throat. Bright, I tell you, and full of every good thing.

I know that every man recalls something of the same golden sheen in life's beginning, but my memories are not less real or true for that.

Merlin... a curious name. Perhaps. No doubt my father would have chosen a different name for his son. But my mother can be forgiven for her lapse. Merlin – Myrddin among my father's people – suits me. Yet, every man has two names: the one he is given, and the one he wins for himself.

Emrys is the name I have won among men and it is my own.

Emrys, Immortal... Emrys, Divine... Emrys Wledig, king and prophet to his people. Ambrosius it is to the Latin speakers, and Embries to the people of southern Britain and Lloegres.

But Myrddin Emrys am I to the Cymry of the hill-bound fastness of the west. And because they were my father's people, I feel they are my own as well. Although my mother long ago taught me the folly of this belief, it comforts me – much, I suppose, as it must have comforted my father in his times of doubt.

And as there is much evil in the world, there is much doubt also. There is not the least of the Adversary's servants. And there are so many others...

Well, and well, get on with it, Mumbler. What treasures from your plundered store will you lay before us?

I take up my staff and stir the embers and I see again the images of my earliest memory: Ynys Avallach, the Isle of Avallach. It is the home of my grandfather, King Avallach, the Fisher King, and the first home I ever knew. It was here in these polished halls of his palace that I took my first faltering steps.

See, here are the white-blossomed apple groves, the salt marshes and mirror-smooth lake below the looming Tor, the white-washed shrine on the nearby hill. And there is the Fisher King himself: dark and heavy-browed like a summer thunderstorm, stretched on his pallet of red silk, Avallach was a fearful figure to a child of three, though kind as the heart within him would allow.

And here is my mother, Charis, tall and slim, of such regal bearing as to shame all pretenders, and possessing a grace that surpasses mere beauty. Golden-haired Daughter of Lleu-Sun, Lady of the Lake, Mistress of Avallon, Queen of the Faery – her names and titles, like my own, proliferate with time – all these and more men call her, and they are not wrong.

I was, I knew, the sole treasure of my mother's life; she was never at any pains to disguise the fact. Good Dafyd, the priest, gave me to know that I was a beloved child of the Living God, and his stories about God's Son, Jesu, kindled my soul with an early longing for Paradise just as Hafgan, Chief Druid, wise and true, faithful servant in his own way, taught me the taste of knowledge, awakening a hunger I have never satisfied.

If there was want in the world, I knew nothing of it. Neither did I know fear or danger. The days of my childhood were blessed with peace and plenty. On Ynys Avallach, at least, time and the events of the wider world stood off, remote; trouble was heard merely as a muted distant murmur – soft like the wailing of the *bbean sidhe*, the Little Dark People, the Hill Folk, in the stone circles on the far hilltops; distant as the roar of a winter storm cresting mighty Yr Widdfa in the rockbound north.

Trouble there was, make no mistake. But in those sun-sweet days of my earliest remembrance we lived as the gods of an older time: aloof and unconcerned with the squabbles of the lesser beings around

us. We were the Fair Folk, enchanted presences from the Westerlands living on the Glass Isle. Those who shared our waterworld of marsh and lake held us in great esteem and greater dread.

This had its uses. It served to keep strangers at a safe distance. We were not strong in the ways men respect strength, so the web of tales that grew around us served where force of arms did not.

If that sounds to you, in the age of reason and power, a weak, ineffectual thing, I tell you it was not. In that age, men's lives were hedged about with beliefs old as fear itself, and those beliefs were not easily altered, nor less easily abandoned.

Ah, but look! Here is Avallach standing before me on a dew-spangled morning, hand pressed to his side in his habitual gesture, smiling through his black beard as he would always smile when he saw me, saying, 'Come, little Hawk, the fish are calling – they are unhappy. Let us take the boat and see if we might liberate a few of them.'

And, hand-in-hand, we go down the path to the lake to fish, Avallach working the oar, little Merlin holding tight to the gunwale with both small hands. Avallach sings, he laughs, he tells me sad stories of Lost Atlantis and I listen as only a child can listen, with the whole of my heart.

The sun climbs high over the lake, and I look back towards the reedy shore and there is my mother, waiting for me. When I look she waves and calls us back, and Avallach turns the boat and rows to meet her and we return to the palace. Although she never speaks of it, I know that she grows uneasy when I am too long from her sight.

I did not know the reason for it then; I know it now.

But life to a child of three is a heady daze of pleasures spinning through a universe too impossibly rich to comprehend or experience except in frenzied snatches – not that it is *ever* comprehended or experienced in any other way – an unimaginable wealth of wonders displayed for instant plunder. Tiny vessel though I was, I dipped full and deep in the dizzy flood of sensation to collapse at the end of each day drunk with life and exhausted in each small limb.

If Ynys Avallach was all my world, I was given the freedom of it. There was no nook too small, no corner too forgotten, but that I knew

it and made it my own. Stables, kitchens, audience hall, bed chambers, gallery, portico, or gardens, I wandered where I would. And if I had been king I could not have commanded more authority, for every childish whim was honoured with unthinking deference by those around me.

Thus, I came to know early the substance and use of power. Great Light, you know I have never sought it for myself! Power was offered me and I took it. Where is the wrong in that?

In those days, however, power was seen differently. Right and wrong were what men conceived in their own minds and hearts. Sometimes in truth, more often in error. There were no judges in the land, no standard men could point to and say, 'You see, this is right!' Justice was that which issued from the steel in a king's hand.

You would do well to remember this.

But these ideas of justice and right came later, much later. There was living to be done first, a foundation to be erected on which to build the man.

The Island of the Mighty, in those days, lay in a welter of confusion which is common enough now, but was seldom seen then. Kings and princes vied for position and power. Did I say kings? There were more kings than sheep, more princes than crows on a battlefield, more ambitious little men than salmon in season; and each prince and princeling, chief and king, each jumped-up official with a Roman title seeking to snatch what he could from the slaverling jaws of onrushing Night, to squirrel it away, thinking that when the darkness finally came he could sit in his den and gloat and preen and gorge himself on his good fortune.

How many of those choked on it instead?

As I say, they were times of confusion, and the spirit may become as confused as the mind and heart. The central fact of my early life was the deep love and peace that enfolded me. I knew, even then, that this was extraordinary, but children accept the extraordinary with the same facile assent as the dreary commonplace.

Was I conscious of the things that set me apart from other men? Did I know I was different? An incident from those far-gone days

stands out in my mind. Once, when at my daily lessons with Blaise, my tutor and friend, a question occurred to me.

‘Blaise,’ I asked, ‘why is Hafgan so old?’ We were sitting in the apple grove below the Tor watching the clouds race westward. I could not have been more than five summers old myself, I think.

‘You think him old?’

‘He must be very old to know so much.’

‘Oh, yes, Hafgan has lived long and seen much. He is very wise.’

‘I want to be as wise one day.’

‘Why?’ he asked, cocking his head to one side.

‘To know things,’ I answered, ‘to know about everything.’

‘And once you knew about everything what would you do?’

‘I would be a king and tell everyone.’

King, yes; it was in my mind even then that I would be a king. I do not think anyone had ever mentioned it to me before that time, but already I sensed the shape my early life would take.

I can still hear Blaise’s reply as clearly as if he were speaking to me now: ‘It is a great thing to be a king, Hawk. A very great thing, indeed. But there is authority of a kind even kings must bend to. Discover this and, whether you wear a torc of gold or beggar’s rags, your name will burn for ever in men’s minds.’

Of course, I understood nothing of what he told me then, but I remembered.

So it was that the subject of age was still quite fresh in my mind when, the very next day, Grandfather Elphin arrived on one of his frequent visits. The travellers were still climbing down from their saddles and calling their greetings as I marched up to the Chief Druid, who, as always, had accompanied Lord Elphin. I tugged on his robe and demanded, ‘Tell me how old you are, Hafgan.’

‘How old do you think me, Myrddin Bach?’ I can see his smoke-grey eyes twinkling with joy, although he rarely smiled.

‘Old as the oak on Shrine Hill,’ I declared importantly.

He laughed then and others stopped talking to look at us. He took me by the hand and we walked a little apart. ‘No,’ he explained, ‘I am not as old as that. But in the measure of men, I am old. Still, what is

that to you? – who will live to be as old as any oak in the Island of the Mighty, if not far older.’ He gripped my hand tightly. ‘To you is given much,’ he said seriously, ‘and, as Dafyd tells me from his book, much will be required.’

‘Will I really be as old as any oak?’

Hafgan lifted his shoulders and shook his head. ‘Who can say, little one?’

It is much to Hafgan’s credit that although he knew who I was, he never burdened me with that knowledge, or the expectations that surely went with it. No doubt he had had ample experience with one like me before: I imagine my father had taught him much about nurturing a prodigy. Oh, Hafgan, if you could see me now!

After that visit, although I do not recall it as special in any way, I began to travel further from home – at least, I began to visit the Summerlands regularly and my view of the world enlarged accordingly. We called them the Summerlands because that is what my father, Taliesin, had called the lands Avallach had given his people.

Grandfather Elphin and Grandmother Rhonwyn were always happy to see me and devoted themselves to spoiling me on my visits, undoing months of my mother’s hard work. Charis never complained, never hinted at what she thought of their indulgence, but let them have their way with me. This eventually included weapons lessons undertaken by Lord Elphin’s battlechief, a crag of a man named Cuall, who strove with me and some of the younger boys, although he had a warband to look after as well.

Cuall it was who made my first sword out of ashwood; my first spear also. The sword was thin and light and no longer than my arm, but to me it was a blade invincible. With that wooden weapon he taught me thrust and counter-thrust, and the quick, back-handed chop; and with the spear, to throw accurately with either hand off either foot. He taught me how to sit a horse and guide it with my knees, and how, when need arose, to use the hapless beast as a shield.

In my sixth year, I spent all summer with Grandfather Elphin – Hafgan and Cuall all but fighting over me. Between them, I saw little of anyone else all summer. My mother came and stayed for a few days,