

## UNDER THE LAKE

MERLIN HAS COME AGAIN, down to where the light has gone and there is only darkness. Darkness and pressure, here where the water is as cold and hard as steel. He is bright himself, so bright that he hurts my eyes and I must lid them and turn away. Merlin uses that brightness, knowing that I cannot bear it, nor bear him seeing the creature I have become.

That is his strength, and it is the reason I will ultimately give him what he wants. For Merlin has power, and only he can give me what I need. He knows that, but as in any negotiation, he does not know at which point he will win. For I have two things that he seeks, and he has only the price of one.

I think he will choose Excalibur, for even he finds it difficult to think down here, under the lake. We can both see the strands of time that unravel from this choice, but I do not think Merlin sees as far as I in this darkness. He will choose the sword for his Arthur, when he could have the grail.

I admit the sword seems more readily useful. With the scabbard, of course. But Merlin's sight does not see behind, only forward, and what he has learned of the sword is only a small part of the story.

If he chose to be less blinding, I might tell him more. But the light is cruel, and I do not care to prolong our conversation. I will merely cast my own mind back, while he talks. It is as effective a means as any to avoid the spell he weaves so cleverly behind his words. Only Merlin would seek to gull me so, even though he should know better. Let him talk, and I will send his spell back. Back into time, when I walked under the sun, in the land that was called Lyonesse.

Back into time, when the barbarians first landed on Lyonesse's sweet shores, and the people came to me, begging for a weapon that would save them. They had no fear of me in those days, for I had long held a woman's shape, and I had never broken the agreement I made with their ancestors long ago. Not that they ever sought me out in times of peace and plenty, for they also remembered that I did nothing without exacting a price.

As I did when they asked me to make a sword, a sword that could make a hero out of a husbandman, a warrior of an alewiller, a savior from a swineherd. A sword that would give its wielder the strength of the snow. fed river Fleeer, the speed of the swifts that flew around my hill, and the endurance of the great stone that sat upon my hill.

They were afraid of the barbarians, so they paid the price. A hundred maidens who came to my cold stone door, thinking they would live to serve me in some palace of arching caverns underground. But it was their lives I wanted, not their service. It was their years I supped upon to feed my own, and their blood I used to quench the sword. I still thought of humans as I thought of other animals then, and felt nothing for their tears and cries. I did not realize that as I bound the power of river, swifts and stone into the metal, I also filled the sword with sorrow and the despair of death.

They called the sword Excalibur, and it seemed everything they had asked. It took many months before they discovered it was both more and less. It was used by several men against the barbarians, and delivered great victories. But in every battle, the wielder was struck with a battle madness, a melancholy that would drive him alone into the midst of the enemy. All would be strong and swift and untiring, but eventually they would always be struck down by weight of numbers, or number of wounds.

The people came to me again, and demanded that I mend the madness the sword brought, or make the wielder impossible to wound, so the sword could be used to its full effect. They argued that I had not fulfilled the bargain and would pay no more.

But I sat silent in my hill, the barbarians still came in their thousands, and there were few who dared to wield Excalibur, knowing that they would surely die.

So they brought the two hundred youths I had demanded. Some even came gladly, thinking they would meet their sweethearts who had gone before. This time, I was more careful, taking their futures from them without warning, so there was no time for pain, despair or sadness. From their hair I wove the scabbard that would give the wearer a hundred lives between dawn of one day and dawn the next.

I knew nothing of human love then, or I would have demanded still younger boys, who had no knowledge of the girls who came to my hill the year before. The scabbard did make the bearer proof against a multiplicity of wounds, but it also called to the sword and held it like a lover, refusing to let go. Only a man of great will could draw the sword, or a sorcerer, and there were few of those in Lyonesse, for I disliked their kind. Many a would-be hero died with Excalibur still sheathed upon his belt. Even a hundred lives is not enough against a hundred hundred wounds.

