

24th day of December- Listen to me O' vengeful spirits and demons. Bow and submit even as I run through the carnage that you have maliciously pulled into this world from the pits of your fallen master. Wretched monsters cease your chase! How do you dishonor your god? Who has dared raise a weapon against the foundation of the earth and pillar of the heavens? The earth hugs me as all that I have created is returned to the waiting arms of Terra herself. What is this cape of Vulcan that dares to smother my divinely empowered breath? My flesh spills immortal ichor into the flames that reach out to me with their dancing limbs all the while weaving music. I hear this most accursed and yet ancient song. They mock me and smash my spirit with their scorn. A cloak of ebony flies on raven wings away from my grasp. Cold washes over me sending a bitter shiver to my core. Judgment will come to this land. No other oath have I ever taken with such holy conviction. What I record now is the tale of how mortals brought about my fall and how I shall rise again.

Mere hours ago damnation was set free. The servants whom I held closest and most dear were assembled to celebrate their places at my side. Revelry filled these the greatest of my endless ocean subjects. They sang of my glory in the manner of the muses and angels on high. These walls of my upraised hall resounded with and were coated by honeyed praises. Spices and herbs from foreign lands spoke to me of their journeys. All the while tables bedecked with so many riches sit before my most pious followers. They celebrated with the most blessed appetites of saints. What fills the air is no less than blessings bestowed upon us for my benefit. Weapons once drawn in anger sit solemnly and starkly on the ground as harbingers of peace. Costumes befitting my attendants are worn with a pride that might almost be considered sinful. Pure silks and furs delivered from my forests as manna from the skies above chased away the chill of the night and complemented the crackling fire of the central hearth.

To my right my nephew took in the vision of his peers. He joined me in my silent and sagacious contemplation of the challenges that consumed our realm. Aged wine opened my mind further with each sip that I took from my goblet. Wisdom saturated my being. I did not allow my cup to empty for I shuddered to consider how far I might stray if this liquid fermented by the hand of Pallas was allowed to leave me. Strength surrounded me as a friend whose counsel I value above almost all else. Its presence kept me far from the distractions that haunt those who lack proper faith.

My most precious jewel and those that accompany her hovered as protective spirits at my left shoulder. Bedecked in the armor of my champion she is all the proof that all of the goodness of heaven and earth are mine. Grace, might, beauty, and knowledge reside with her. Not even a legion of green knights could ever compare to the force that she represented. With my greatest treasure by my side I was free to consider the hidden truths that are now revealed to my once-blinded eyes. The most holy patrons lacked the tears to bemoan that she was so far beyond their reach. Her silence joined with the setting sun outside and became part of the call of Diana to the world.

Only one thing shoved serenity into a pit to rot. Myrddin, my most trusted counselor and friend, was nowhere to be seen. I begged that keeper of my secrets to come to this most sacred

event. My champion protected my flesh, but it was Myrddin who guarded my soul. Some think that I am mad for allowing him to guide me. However, it was his spiritual guidance that kept me safe. Those eyes saw what I can never gaze upon. Indeed I was a sinner most foul to ignore so righteous a man and allow my slaves to feast in my presence. If I am the shepherd of my subjects, he is the candle, staff, and sling that keep the wild beasts at bay. On the day and hour that he abandoned me I was without hope. What chance did I stand when the light that gave me sight went out?

A tournament prior to this celebration of my greatness which was worthy of my exalted status is how all of this began. Outside of my castle a myriad of banners of gold, silver, ruby, sapphire, mustard, and many other hues merrily cheered beneath Aeolus' breath. Nature was spurring forward the contest that was to take place. Boreas and Sol were at war as my vassals stood armor clad and ready to show their loyalty. The workmanship of so many artisans gleamed almost blindingly. Helms that told tales of ancient heralds were steel crowns atop their ennobled brows. Bejeweled plates of metal lovingly formed into coats clung to the flesh of those possessing both human and equestrian blood. Breath steamed in the air and the glorious tension woke up a part of me that had slept for quite a time. Its thirst for blood set my mind aflame in a way that was more intoxicating than the finest of wines. I sat atop my throne at the height of Olympus and surveyed those whom I could command to the depths of Tarturus.

It was as if time had flowed back to its source and days of old had returned to me. Knights so noble attended to themselves with discipline and without unholy intervention. They jested without surrendering the grandeur of their stations and my honor. This was one of the truest days I had ever witnessed. Lies seemed to be hiding in the depths with their lord. Had the archangels descended to bestow us all of the bounty of the eternal kingdom we could hardly have gained anything that we did not already have. There could be no paradise greater than this. Divine light illuminated these loyal servants from both deep within and without.

After watching them prepare for a time I stood from where I sat alone and cast my shadow over them. My toga as clouds on a calm vernal day revealed that I was as regal as even the most exalted Caesar. Almost as though prophecy was gifted to me I spoke words whose purity could only have originated in an immortal place. Ecstasy infused my soul with a greater hunger than I ever thought was possible.

"Hear me my most loyal and beloved ones. Today you will show me the true measure of your greatness. Mortals dream of ever being able to show their devotion to their masters. Now is the time when you will live that devotion. This is not a tournament to vanquish your foes and take all that is theirs. We stand here to test your mettle. You fight for the glory of your lord. Battle well."

I sank into my throne, as their show of true love unfolded. Even the fear of Satan himself could never have inspired the glorious combat that I watched that day. Whether even Myrddin with all of his wisdom could find the source of the martial greatness that even the Avenger would not understand I can never know.

Those lances that they bore were almost religious relics worthy of enshrinement. Stallions possessed by their riders' zeal rushed to their positions at the perimeter. A divine puppeteer must surely have arranged this day. Nothing else could account for its perfection. In moments the divine festival was underway.

My brother and former seneschal opened the circus in a bout with my most exalted knight. They clashed and then danced with skill unlike anything that I had expected. Crashing drumbeats carried them toward each other. Sharpened lances struck each other with terrific force and then exploded as though smitten by the hand of an angry god. Both of them flew from their mounts as though they had grown wings. In a whirlwind they rose and advanced. Tempered steel clashed as the rage of a wounded beast met the unyielding speed of a river set free. Subtlety met power as sparks filled the air. Dust fled from the place that it was born for higher climes. Speed cut shallow scores across the creature's plate. Violent blows tore angrily at the swift-flowing waters. Metal buckled and a small libation of blood was spilled. Eventually my brother yielded when he struggled to draw breath. Immediately, the next contest began. All of them were conducted in a similar fashion.

Gaea did not go thirsty that day. Great honors were heaped upon both the victors and the defeated. Chests of recently acquired tribute were given to those who had suffered at the hands of the more skilled combatants. Titles, servants, promises of land, and wealth were freely given to those whom Fortuna had allowed to drink from her chalice.

Myraddin was never far from my side. His discerning gaze cowed my enemies and his presence granted me the gift of peace. However, he seemed distant during the tournament and its aftermath. The speech of fools never graced his almost bloodless lips. On this day he spoke fewer words still. There was something unsettling about the way that he seemed to wish to be anywhere, but in my service. Where he went later in the day I do not know. When I myself went to call him to the feast his door was sealed before me.

"Myrddin, join us in celebrating my eternal kingdom. I need you by my side. What will my vassals say if you, my most loyal supporter, fail to affirm my power?"

I cannot believe that I pleaded with him. A king does not plead. At that moment I was a petulant child.

"Listen to me. No good can come of even making them worthy of pulling the plows in your field. If you wish to lower yourself back into the muck where I found you, be gone!"

He spoke with me no more. His words tore my heart from me and cleaved it into many shreds of dying flesh. I listened to my own foolishness. Now, I have been punished.

My anger sets my words in stone. Soon, I shall return to that which is mine.

26th day of December- I am hunted like a soon to be butchered boar. On the nape of my neck I can feel the monstrous breath of the hounds that they set loose upon me. Yesterday, when I should have been at midnight mass I was fleeing through the dark and the icy winds. A most sacred and holy day has been desecrated by demons that corrupted servants of god. Worship

became the sacrilege of barbarians. Voices by day and night pushed me into the wooded wilderness.

Rage drives away the sleep that pierces my eyes with blazing hooks.. Shivering grants me strength greater than even my youth had ever offered me. Were Hera's bane before me I would rend his limbs from his body and cast him into the depths. My sword rests beside me as I sit in a secluded hollow born upon the third day and since then forgotten by mortal flesh. Words become a prayer to those that bring retribution upon those that defile divinity with their unworthy gaze. Rise up tale of woe. Ascend before your god and smite mine enemies without mercy.

I was so lost without Myrddin's wisdom to show me the way through the night that is this plane of life and death. The feast took on a new shape for me in his absence. It was the dagger at my throat. This assembly was an enemy whose very existence could strip everything from me and leave behind only polished ivory. Something sharp stabbed me over and over again ceaselessly. My blood seemed to grant life to the world around me. No trepidation surrounded me when I took to the dais and was seated at the place of glory.

By my word every musician to be found in my court that had assembled began to play lyre, flute, lute, and drum. They filled the room with glorious tunes that were waves of a kind that drove me to the wisdom granting drink of mighty Minerva. Each drop infused the hall with ever greater levels of ecstasy. Stone began to hum along with songs of its own. Gold goblets became suns and the plates of silver were the huntress herself. Treasures made this place a temple of primordial forces older than time. Everything was so glorious that I don't know that even the worthiest of tongues would be gifted by Phoebus to be able to speak of this place that I had built. A longing for this glory to hold us onto eternity descended upon us and held us as though we were its truest desire. It was wonderful in a way that even now I can scarcely mention without believing it to have been the most passing of dreams.

I can recall knowing that Myrddin's words had company in the omens that my court allowed me to ignore. The servants and squires who were to have lain at our feet waiting to obey were now hiding. Why did I not have them brought to me in chains of barbed iron? They ought to have been whipped with their fetters until they cried out to me to end their suffering. My failure to put them in their place perhaps earned me the vengeance of the celestial realm. There was also something about the tunes that were so pleasing to me. Mockery of the sort that sought to remove my greatness seemed to underlie their every note. Even the walls seemed to laugh at me after a while. None of this awakened me to the truth that Myrddin so desired for me to learn. Blasphemies were brought into my court and now armies from the lord of the nine rings came to take me for himself.

What sounded at first to be the cry of some creature speared through the side and left to die silenced the festivities. In the span of a breath the chamber was rocked by a terrible din. It was like a slap which left me rooted to the earth as any cedar of Lebanon. Words escaped my grasp, slipping through my fingers as burning desert sands. All of my vassals were stricken. Where is their courage? Lambs would be better guardians than these fools whose honor is now

worth less than the dust beneath my horse's hooves. She who would call herself my champion did not even draw steel in my defense.

I was the first to arise with my weapon ready to seek vengeance for what I have lost. My eyes sought out the cause of this attack upon all that matters in this world. Flashes of slain enemies gripped my throat. A kindness from Mars himself is all that held me on my feet.

In the entrance way of the great hall a gaping maw of flame appeared in the air and swallowed whole those magnificent doors carved centuries ago. Precious oak groaned as age took hold of it in an instant. Agony pulled from it the most tortured screams that mortals can ever hear. Gasps like a choking person filtered into the room. There was a chanting coming from the midst of the inferno. Wood splinters and falls away fanning the destruction ever closer to those who still had yet to move.

Infernal hands entered my vision as the very gates of hell were cast open and its denizens invaded my fortress. Heat as the devil's own smithy sets my blood aboil. Shock sublimates as spawn born to Grendel's dam pour through the portal to the abyss. Their shadowy legions inspire words of anger to emerge.

"Children of the morning star here you die."

They met my words with words of exploding glass and the sound of death's own voice.

"Find him."

"Feed on his flesh."

"Eve is ours to know. Take her."

So many voices of the fallen strike at me with animalistic violence. Each and every unholy word is a puppeteer's hand forcing me to lash out blindly. Smoke holds a veil over my eyes as I seek to cut down humanity's foes. The mockery returns filling my ears with so many whispers that leeches my soul of its humanity. Cackling was a cage around my body that constricted everything until all that I knew is an ocean of sweat racing down my brow and ragged breaths straining to escape from my lips. I need to make it stop! Panic took hold of me as I struck useless at the air around me. Finally, something fell to the edge of my blade. Meat tore as wet parchment and viscera spilled onto the table before me. That stench was my companion through the holy battles of my youth returned to me. Without conscious thought I climbed atop the table. No obstacle to my movement was allowed to remain. Goblets overturned and plates were church bells when they struck the earth as I began to slash at all of the shadows that I saw like a man possessed by madness.

Scarlet kisses sprayed about in the dark. Stones whistled and scarred every patch of flesh that was bared to them. Spears elicited terrified screams that rang in the ears. The wounded and dying formed grotesque mounds that hid throughout the midnight maze. Bodies appear to fly when wraiths leapt forward to congregate among the living. A glut of death thickened the air. Gasping cries mixed with murderous howls. Flames seem to form figures that dance their way through the chamber all the while ignoring the living and feasting on the dead. Rot seemed to peel back the guise of these hell spawn and revealed horrific dripping fangs and soulless eyes. Frost pure and untainted fell outside the high windows of the hall.

Those netherworldly scum jumped at me in an attempt to drag me to their lord. My blade severed heads and scattered limbs to the winds. I sent sacrifices back to the one who offered me such fine gifts. Unsteadily I wove a web born of Ares and Thanatos. Were they watching over me as my patron saints? What plans did they have for me? Neither of these questions were within my power to answer. Wretches in spasms of anguish formed a ring as I grew ever more desperate to drive them back to the place from whence they came. Insane spirits fell over this place and only I had the power to exorcise them.

Few warriors stood shoulder to shoulder as they attempted to stay alive. Crashing like the fist of a giant pounding at the building occasionally drowned out the carnage that is raging. Time lost any sense of meaning. Moments were eternities that came and went in a single heartbeat. Darkness that was almost tangible gripped the living and the dead in a vise. Warmth and memory became tattered and worn. Quickly they faded away.

Visions of madness play out before me. So many vassals in rivers of scarlet tears and fallen gore. Ghosts wander among the fallen crying out for mercy. Myrddin's reproachful eyes are everywhere that I gaze. I hacked away through a forest of flesh unable to do anything else. Divinity is my calling.

"Kneel and die."

The voice that came from my throat is alien to me. This was no man, but a god reverted to human form. My might smote these attackers who clawed their way to heaven to make me fall. I shall not fail where the Nephilim did. Hosts of the damned lust for paradise. From me they shall rest with their desiccated and tortured ancestors. A lion's roar erupted from my breast. Faster and faster I sent the risen to their graves. Within me a religious frenzy took control. On this earth none would stop me from ridding mankind of these twisted forms of flesh and blood. When my nephew drew near to me I turned my blade toward him. That coward would join my enemies? Death was to be his reward. He fled from me as I danced among the enemy's weapons. After a time I grew weary and they pressed me from the table toward the hungry flames. Mercury guided me to tomes and pens not yet destroyed. Out into the night I ran and demanded that all of the world hear my voice.

There are voices echoing near this pit that hides me in its bosom of barren stone. Am I going to enter sainthood as Stephen did? Will my blood fall upon this place and this hollow become my shrine? Curses like those of Cain grab onto those who would disturb my plots. Damnation reclaim them for what they did to me. I shall help it as I can.

*29th day of December- When the voices faded back into the infernal places of the world I rose from my tomb and became the new Lazarus. My mind bleeds memory as I wade through shallow rivers. The past is an undammed storm carrying me to places that had become suns dimmed to the point of being voids. Once those luminaries regain their might I am helpless before them. I lay now in my rags and body wracking with aches unbecoming a monarch and think of those days long ago. Those thoughts conjure old horrors that made me remember how I came to be a god or at least the child of one.

If you know my past you know from whence I came. Uthyr my lord, was a powerful being not of this feeble realm of men. Magic both subtle and at the same time fearsome flowed through his veins and by extension mine. He was the head dragon and to me he bequeathed the enchantment that he cast upon Britain. Fate has no hold over us, but I am ahead of where I wish to be. Let me return to the beginning.

Gorlois of Tintagel ruled as a wholly sinful and blasphemous monarch. His pustulous heart of slag laced iron brought him to battle against the princes of the nearby lands. Tributes filled both the halls of his keep and the entirety of his vision. Warriors bent at the knee and made to parade as their days of birth for his pleasure were taken by the edge of the sword. Circuses for his court's amusement brought dirges to the lips of mothers, sisters, and daughters veiled in the night. Tears fell into his chalice as libation and the flesh of the slain was the foodstuff of his table.

This man was as fearsome to behold as any that ever stalked the earth. Fire burns behind his eyes of forest green reducing all to smoldering ash. Arms and thighs corded with sinew and meat of steel connect to a body rotund as a boulder and just as solid. Blood dripped from his hair prematurely, silver painting a ruby path throughout his kingdom. A forked tongue weaved the serpent's tale. His name shook the mountains and sent the fae into the mists where man cannot see or be seen. Accursed molten iron poured by his hand created tortured songs that saturated him in dreams that led him to the haunts of pagan gods.

An empress whose beauty was stolen from the innermost treasure room of Venus ruled by Gorlois' side. Eyes of violet and hair of scarlet. Skin tanned from days spent at war. Face sculpted by the hands that drew Aphrodite from the waves. Lips as wild raspberries. She was as cruel as she was beautiful. Her ladies richest garments before their eyes would be reduced to rags that she demanded that they wear to court. Bare feet on jagged stone was the service that she required. If her disfavor was incurred, public floggings and tortures delivered by her own hand would inspire the most sincere of praises. Above her there were none, but the crows three.

Sisters three she birthed and these three faces of morning, noon, and eve never saw her at these phases of the day. They were cast into the arms of slaves from their first gasps of breath. Elaine, the eldest, a fair saint. Morgause, the second, traitorous ones emerged from her. Youngest Morgana, most powerful of the three, from whence you came and whence you have gone? Raised apart from most wicked Igraine your name is hers onto the end of days. Thy sins stem not from her nor hers from you. Dearest ones the fates heaped upon you sorrow many fold. Your sadness was mine as well.

Tintagel's madman, fearsome as he was alone, was spurred by Lilith and became ever more bold with every passing year. His legend grew into a nightmare from which there was no awakening. Winter's holy days became debauched and baptised in the fonts produced by rotting corpses. The rebirth of Demeter's realm brought with it armies that lusted to slake a hunger that could not be slaked. They marched out with their king at their head and would not stop, but by his word. Sorcery he cast upon them to bind them to his will. At night his dreams were theirs and

by day every breath was by his command alone. Each was an empty vessel that was incapable of listening to the cries for mercy that came from those who stood in rebellion before their master.

Villages and cities would take up what few arms they had hidden away. To the fields they would rush with the wind at their backs. First, the arrows would come in a hail of wood and iron. Their charge would smash into a wall unseen. Those who were fortunate would be felled by an arrow to the throat or eye. The survivors would meet equestrians clad in glimmering unornamented mail. From atop stallions blades straight and true carved through those that remained.

Unwalled hamlets, easily set ablaze, were beacons of warning to those who would disobey this master neither they nor their ancestors had known. Women, children, and those men who remained were a portion of the spoils divided among Gorlois' monsters. Cities, whose gates could be barred, were punished more harshly than their sister hamlets. Drums and instruments of the loudest sort were brought out by the enemy. Around the city they would go as the Israelites did to the walls of Jericho.

"Slaves for games is what we seek. Father against son shall engage in war. Mothers and daughters shall wrestle in the muck until one rises no more. Children we shall raise to do our work long after we have parted from this earth."

Over and over again would this chant be sung. Its poison would seep into the inhabitants' minds. It drove them against one another. The gates would be flung open by those seeking a mercy that would never come. Salt would be driven deep into the wounds of the earth. Walls would crumble as nothing would be left to recall what once stood upon this now barren ground.

He was the storm upon the ocean. None could tame nature and in the end none, but nature itself could put an end to him. No coalition of kings could challenge his might. The Fae most ancient and proud bided their time and plotted to destroy Lucifer's heir apparent. That murderer is flesh, they said. Perhaps we simply wait and allow the way of all flesh to remove him from this plane. After a time, one arose from amongst them. His was the mightiest blade. Retribution was what he sought and he trembled in rage as he spoke.

"Are we cowards who refuse to see justice done? How many were led about in manacles of iron? Are there any of us who do not remember how he burned alive our men, women, and children? Who feels no shame at how we did nothing while the most noble and innocent among us were led away to be broken and then killed? We are the Fae! While mankind was young we were entering a golden age. Now we hide from those who should hide from us. Gone are the days of our cowering. I will lead our armies to war. If I alone must go forth to stop that mortal and she who has aided him then I will do so. In millennia from now when mankind has faded from history what will be said of us?"

Shadows faded away and resplendent Fae marched to battle. Helios in his chariot wept as their march illuminated the dark places of the realm in ways that he could not. Word spread fast of these legions of old. Birds darkened the sky to bear witness to what was to take place. In the forests nymphs woke from slumbers that had lasted for eons. They listened as tremors began to rattle humanity.

From his fortress most secure rode Gorlois and his horde. Pestilence followed them across the land as a cloud bearing death himself. In full regalia splattered with the gore of all he had killed, the madman approached his immortal foes. He made no grand speech or overtures. His jagged iron long sword held high he spurred his charger into the teeth of those whom he knew would give no quarter on this day.

As the battle began, a war of quite another kind was being fomented. Uthyr had led the army to the field, but went on his own way before the enemy had arrived. Across the land oozing corruption from every pore he flew with righteous intent. Healing could not grasp the sickened stone, but for a long moment it fought back. His was not a prophetic bloodline. If he was wrong then he was lost. Conflict threatened to tear him asunder. However, the lost who demanded that their blood debt be paid silenced his doubting heart. Mercy had not been shown to his people. For this act the only justice would be to take from Gorlois what he had himself stolen. Today his wife and children had to die.

The accursed stone parapets drew near. Illusions wove around him as his form began to shift. Eyes brimming with burning rage became portals raging with unholy lust. Lean and hard muscle was transformed. In the span of time that it takes for lightning to flash Uthyr became that which he hated with all of his soul. These emotions were real. A part of him shattered as he took this filthy form. Once the change was complete he completed his journey.

To any who watched he rode alone across the wilderness to his keep. He would have been hard to see as dusk was approaching. His form gathered Nyx as the train to a cape that trailed to the ends of the world. Aeolis whispered as he drew close to walls stained with a vile rot that bleached every stone in a layer of dying pitch. Nothing grew from these rocks that the winds would not touch and the sun never warmed. Atop these gates into Hel a handful of sentries who had been left behind peered into the rising night and challenged all who would dare approach. When they gaze upon him wicked gleams appear. Arrows were on strings instantly.

“Who comes?”

Two simple words echoed though there is no cavern. They were more potent than any arrows for they froze the imposter and his horse in their tracks. Demand tainted by something like inquiry infused the question. Whatever it was that rested at the heart of this challenge it summoned a new spirit into Uthyr. Gone was the dragon! The serpent was awake.

“You stop me with foolishness?”

He spurred his illusory horse to the place where a spike moat ringed the walls and paused his pilgrimage. Flesh baked in the sun for many weeks aged on stakes far below. Shattered skulls are planted within the ground as though an army is expected to sprout. Poison drips from empty sockets that are now the resting places for vipers.

“I swear that the first to unbar the gates will die quickly. The last will join them.”

He hopped off his destrier and led the beast across a hewn bridge just large enough for three men walking side by side. Its head moved about in a maddened way. Froth bubbled at its mouth. Fifteen hands high this devourer consumed the feasts of Ammit. Eyes that lacked focus completed the portrait of this chestnut colored terror.

Before him a bolt slid back and vast doors turned inward to let him pass. No one greeted him as he entered. Something born in the fall of Cain flared within the depths of his shriveled soul. An axe wicked in its double curves was in his hand.

“Is there none who honors their lord?”

Uthyr left the phantom whom he had granted the appearance of true life alone. There was no answer in the walls of his domain. Silence was a sharp taste upon the tongue. In the dim torch light he was a predator who stalked those who had wronged them. Gorlois and Uthyr were one and the same. From on high a dead laughter slapped the axe into a tighter grip. Cured leather creaked in the silent air.

“My lord husband, whose will is mightier than Jove's, why have you returned from your slaughter? Have we won the day? Are those who can challenge us burnt offerings for The Morrigan?”

From the darkness atop the walls she congealed into being as though the night was her dam and the shadows her sire. In the torch light a divine inferno filled those violet eyes. A sapphire gown of purest silk clung to her. The torches were ineffectual compared to her hair and the crown of rubies that rested atop her brow.

There was a struggling form kneeling beside her. Terror was carved deeply into the face of one of those who had defied him. His helm and chainmail lay still by her feet.

She gripped his hair with hands that were bloody in the firelight.

“He promised you a quick end. Your master is one who keeps his word.”

This fury leaned in and spoke as though her voice was the slightest breeze that rustles through the forest prior to the unleashing of supernatural retribution.

“I am not bound by his mercy.”

Before the horrified soul could beg she pulled him to his feet with shocking strength. Armored hands grabbed him and forced him to be still. From the ground she hefted the wicked warhammer that never left her side. A little longer than a mace the wicked hammer had a heavy head of iron with a scarlet stained spike at the end of its handle. She stepped back and as suddenly as the beginning of a storm she swung her weapon.

A pathetic cry tore from his throat as the hammer struck his chest. Sickening cracks sounded every time that she reared back and smote him. Bones strained and shattered. Fragments tore his organs. He whimpered and spit blood. Every breath drove the shards deeper. It did not take long for him to slump into the border between the realms where Hypnos and Thanatos ruled supreme.

Uthyr watched his enemy show her true form. The outer beauty hid Charybdis just beneath the surface and lured him into her grasp. Intoxicating pleasure filled him as he beheld that which should have sickened him. Disgust shriveled away before it could take root. He was in a trance. Her every action was a heady perfume that drove away every thought, but one. This force of nature was his and his alone. There was an accord between his body and mind. She cannot escape his grasp. Somewhere far away there was a whisper which raged against her. It was quickly smothered into silent submission.

After a while the blows stopped. Her eyes narrowed and a frown graced her lips. She lowered the hammer and leaned upon the handle. Sweat trickled down her face and glistened in the torchlight. A slight puffing could be heard from her as she fought to retake control of her breathing. There was an uneven rhythm to the rising and falling of her chest which matched the racing of her heartbeat. The formerly perfectly placed crown was askew atop her wild hair. Dangerous and volatile energy poured off of her as a cascade.

“Wake him. He does not get the mercy of slipping away. Take him back to his family after he has returned to his creator.”

They refuse to meet her eyes as they drag their former brother away. The whole of the world held them back from gazing at her disheveled state. Tremors shook these hardened men down to their foundations. Never would they turn on her lest she turn on them. Eternity aged them with every step until she turned on her heels and let them see the moon rise.

The empress of flame descended rough stairs from the heights. In her wake crows seem to survey their mistress’ domain. Three bitter phantoms circle overhead melting in and out of living and writhing shadows. Her stride lengthened the closer that she got to the man that she called binder of her soul. She stopped before him and set her hammer aside.

“My lord, is victory ours? Have we sent them to oblivion?”

Uncertainty clouded her vision as she looked into his eyes with something that might almost have been akin to love. There is something in the way that she drew close to him that was primal in nature. It was an insistent demand which fused them on the most elemental plane. The death of one would surely leave the other cast down into a place from which there could be no return. Igraine sought something from him for whom she had slain so many that had meant so little to her. When for a moment no answer came she was incensed. In single fluid motion she stepped away from him and hefted her tool of death.

“Have you been stricken to acknowledge your queen no more? Perhaps then after all this time they have spoken the truth. You tire of divinity and wish to put an end to your conquests. If that is so I shall return you to your ancestors this very hour.”

A change overtook him as she threatened him. Uthyr who was fading into the the place where Fae end grinned at she who should already have died by his hand. His sharpened canines pearl daggers as a true laugh bellowed from his chest. Breathing became difficult for him the harder he laughed. Several moments passed before he was recovered enough to respond.

“Wife, empress, mistress of war, I left the battle to younger fools who will die because I have wished it to be so.”

He advanced on her and pulled the hammer from her hands. They stood almost eye to eye as he tossed her weapon aside.

“None of them shall be king. Until Armageddon you are mine and I yours. We shall ride across Meggido’s plain on that day as the conquerors of all humanity.”

Wordlessly she turned and stalked over to a plain wooden door set into one of the towers that drowned the fortress in shadow. The ocean winds ruffled her hair as she opened the door and disappeared inside.

The one who is the dragon no more practically ran to her. He was a boy consumed by a passion that robbed his every movement of certainty. Into the dim tower he walked the smell of ancient stone assaulting him as he climbed up narrow steps that led to her. No matter how fast he climbed his spirit yearned for him to be as Hermes. What curse she placed on him erased memories of a time before he had seen her. Cool night breath pouring through arrow slits in the wall did nothing to quiet his afflicted heart. That seat of judgement rested in her hands. Taunting voices grew louder the higher he rose. Each one accused him of abandoning his righteous duty after a moment.

“Pathetic one, how easily you seek a new master.”

“Soul as Adam when he fell, may death embrace you as it did us.”

A cacophony almost too deafening to ignore pierced his heels with molten hooks. Muscle is shredded as he claws his way through the mountains and valleys blessed by Nemesis in all of her glory. Ropes woven of the hair of so many fallen encircle him from within. Each strand is a needle that draws life from him and revives each being that he failed to protect from the unnatural evils of this world. They fall away as she is all that exists in his world. There she is before him. With an audible roar he pulled free of all that restrained him. He took hold of her shoulder and spun her to face him.

“Where is it that we go? Would you have us hide in this tower?”

She returned his hungry stare with one more fiery than anything that he had yet seen.

“Hiding husband? No. I sent out far and wide to find a way for you to celebrate your victory. Nemain came to me in a vision. We are going to see what I beheld.”

She pulled away gently as she dared. At the top of the stairway that was, but a stone’s throw away from where they stood was a simple door of pine. A single sudden step forward and knock on the middle of the wooden obstacle was all that was needed to increase his attraction to her. Determination and power cupped his head in its loving grasp.

After the gateway was unblocked Uthyr stared into the room beyond in shock. Two censurs filled with incense that held real power burned on either side of a bed covered in linens from the weavers of Egypt and silks from the east stood out of his reach. A cage of gold holding three crows hung above the canopy from the lands where even the son of Philip never ventured. The incense was known to him. He had seen its kind ward off spirits and command the will of any mortal who gave themselves to it.

The sorceress slunk into the room and silently ordered out the guard who had unlocked the gate to this treasure. All of that magic augmented her in ways that mortals can scarcely describe. Candles and torches molded her into a goddess who could not be reasoned with. If Pallas and the Huntress stood shoulder to shoulder with Isis and Bellona then they would prostrate themselves at her feet. Time extended into eternity around her. There was a futility to trying to measure a moment in her presence. Something so very odd plagued the universe when she was not out in the world. This was the vision that she presented as she stood among the wafting clouds of smoke. Up above the crows never took their eyes off of her from the moment that she entered. It was almost as if they were staring into the essence of her very being.

Uthyr could not tear himself away from what he was seeing. It was something that truly frightened him. For the first time since he had stepped in this vile place he remembered who he was. How could he allow this to stand? The threat that she posed made the axe that he held sing to him.

“Cut her down and bathe me in her blood. Cleanse the kingdom of her. All that you have to do is swing me and cleave her flesh.”

That sound was so clear that he very nearly dropped the battleaxe. Confusion paralyzed him.

“What is this sorcery? What have you done?”

The enchantress did not answer him. Silence deeper than the consuming emptiness of the crypt was the response that he received. There was a heaviness in the air which made it difficult for Uthyr to think. Without warning voices three trilled out to where he stood.

“We knew you would come. Enter Fae, who is known as Pendragon that we may speak with you.”

Something primal flowed through every word that flew from the chamber. These statements emerged in unison from the mouths of the crows. Their voices were one and at the same time each of them were incomparable to one another. From one came the turmoil of battle in its purest form. Armies falling over their own swords to escape the enemy that confronts them are born of this one. Another called with the voice of conquest. Music as ancient and unshakable as the foundations of the sprung forth when this being spoke. The last was the most terrible of the three. The unbridled frenzy of mutual destruction screeches from the maw of this crow. Screams produced by whole regions as fathers turned against sons and brothers against brothers were woven into the speech of this ultimate bird.

No sooner had he heard this command than his feet moved as though some puppet master were directing him. Nothing was able to prevent his weapon from ringing throughout the tower as it tumbled from his formerly clenched fist. Uthyr was confronted with a frozen empress and an empty cage when he crossed the threshold. Her back was to him and she was as still as those kissed by Medusa's eyes.

Three women clothed in scarlet, russet, and crow stood before the bed and beckoned him forward. These lacked the ability to be described in mortal terms. Their bodies shifted appearance faster than the eye could possibly capture. Once they towered over the room and were skeletal with wispy silver hair that hung limply from their heads. The next moment they possessed hair of ebony which flowed from the youthful forms that would make even the most chaste of men weep with lustful desire. Two things about them never changed. An aura of carnage that threatened to uproot the whole of existence surrounded them. It was their eyes which defined them in ways that nothing else would ever be able to. Age drowned eyes of the deepest night. Every look was haunted by endless memories. Any who gazed within for even an instant was swept away into a place where the ground was paved with rotting corpses; the scent of death was the air.

He slipped away into this realm and immediately shrieks flew from his lungs. His limbs were afire as they were being torn from his body. Bone creaked under immense strain. All that he was was this pain that could only be a punishment devised by a vengeful deity or in this case deities thrice born. There they were standing the distance of his outstretched arm away. What almost looked to be pleasure was inscribed upon their ever shifting faces when they met his gaze.

“Son of the Fae, we knew that you were coming to this place. Why have you let the queen live? Were you unable to take this axe and remove her head as you sought to do? Did you perhaps fall into her eyes as you have fallen into ours? Do you love her?”

As before all three of them spoke with a single purpose and voice. Each question was spoken as fact more than with wonder. There was no anger, hate, or any other emotion in their tone. They were beyond that. These beings simply were as death or the passage of time. In the middle one’s right hand was the axe which had fallen.

He tried to answer, but those screams would not stop. Fever gripped his mind in an unrelenting grip. Everything in his vision was a haze that extended into eternity. A miracle was what allowed him to even comprehend their words.

“Answer us Pendragon. We the Morrigna give you leave to answer us in this plane. By the will of Babd you shall speak. Macha’s pity demands that thought return in full to your ephemeral mind. Nemain heals you of the price that your corporeal form must pay.”

Uthyr drew in breath and fell to his knees. Tears flowed down his cheeks as numbness filled his body and his thoughts were once again coherent. He made no attempt to rise, but rage caused his relief to shrink away. Drawing his head back he spat in their direction.

“You expect an answer from me, mistresses of war? Well known to me are the tales told of the wrath of Anu. You whose servant would destroy my kind will get nothing from me this day or any other. Send me to my ancestors if that is what you desire. May those who serve you have their eyes taken by your crows and bodies left so mutilated that nothing will be left of them to be buried. I curse you that maggots shall infest your bones and fire turn you to ash while you yet live. By the ancient powers I strike you down.”

Howling winds from the heart of the primordial storm begin to blow. It smashes into all, sending everything flying through the air. A rain of Jove’s burning spears fly forth smiting the realm and setting it ablaze. A furnace takes this nightmare into its depths. Thunder is a deafening drum that brings a deluge in its wake. The ground rattles as tremors threaten to rip it apart. Jagged hail smashes into the burning ground filling the sky with waves of steam.

These words and the destruction that follows in their wake do nothing at all to phase the Morrigna. They float upon the angry winds that attempt to reclaim their domain. Lightning strikes them and simply fades away. When the fire rushes up to meet them they bathe harmlessly in it. The heat turns away from them and flees when it draws near. Thunder’s cacophony becomes their herald. Waters and rains swirl playfully around them like a hound with its mistresses. Hail melts in their fiery bath. Steam obscures them from sight. Empty laughter temporarily overpowers the chaos that Uthyr had created.

“We demanded no entertainment from you. Yet, you use so great a portion of your power uselessly. Once more we speak. Answer us or die.”

From the steam they emerge ever as unchanging as they had ever been. As one they flick their wrists in much the same way that the queen had when she dismissed the guard that unleashed this nightmare. All returned to the way as it had been shortly before. Uthyr was as a pearl and shaking visibly when he knelt in submission before them. All was quiet as they waited for him to obey their command.

“I would have liked for her to die. If you are as powerful as the stories have said then you know that I would kill her myself now...”

He fell silent as he was returned to the room with the axe that he had intended to use in hand. The witch is still frozen in place and he stood close enough to do what he wished. There are no restraints to stop him from swinging the weapon and taking her head from her shoulders. It is just the two of them alone in the chamber. Even the three goddesses were nowhere to be seen. Each moment stretches on into the never ending abyss of time as he fails to raise his hand against her as he had said that he would. Every time that he gets close his heart fails him. Pangs of yearning stay his hand. Once again he drops the axe.

“Why do you seek her death at my hand, O' craven ones? Are you lacking in the power to destroy a single mortal? I shall not be the tool of so foolish gods that they must use beings of flesh to destroy other beings of flesh. If you do not have the skill I shall not be your weapon. I am not your puppet.”

“You are a speaker of lies and a fool Pendragon. Speech is so cheap a mortal device. We gave you what you said that you wished. However, your lust for her blood it seems is overtaken by lust of a different sort. Admit the truth. What you want is not her death at all. It is her that you seek to take for yourself.”

He was silent. A slight heat rose to his face. Protests of a thousand kinds rose to his lips, but died before they were ever spoken. His head lowered in shame. The right words refused to come as though they cannot live with the thought of being near him. Though he wished to remain silent forever he knew that the deities grew impatient. However, he realized that their desire for an answer made him more powerful than they were. With a new fire in his eyes he began to walk toward the door.

“Run Pendragon. Her power shall never be yours. By remaining silent you have bared your soul to us. Return to your people. They shall die this day. You have seen to that.”

He stopped in mid-step. Clenching his fists he turned to face the bed where the three immortals had reappeared. A glint of barely restrained passion ignited with him. Control slipped away.

“What is your desire that you play these games? Are you children who toy in the affairs of this world for the sake of leisure. Let us be.”

“Her death was no more our desire than your people's. Had you slain her it would have meant nothing to us. Knowledge is a dangerous thing. Before you inquire to seek it out, be sure that you truly want it. Once taken there is no path back to where you once stood.”

Uthyr's face was drained of all blood as the wool of a lamb so young that it knows not the destruction wrought upon its kind. There was no more passion left within him. His last spark vanished. Exhaustion so pure smothered him in its grasp. The illusion that he had woven fell away leaving him exposed to the world. From the sea the tang of salt and memories lost to the waves force his eyes shut. Neither tears nor any emotion came. All that he was was a numb empty shell that needed rest. Agony, long buried, sunk into the void and was lost to him. For a time he stood absolutely still and did nothing else. Finally, his eyes opened with deliberate slowness. They were there as they had been before. Waiting for him and watching his every move with a patience that simply was not of this realm. Endlessly calculating were these predators that refused to leave him alone.

"Tell me then O' mighty mistresses what it is that you wish of your most humble servant."

The slightest hint of mockery shone through his apathy. His posture was tense in contradiction to the way that he was feeling. That weapon was so close. If he could reach it then perhaps he could make them pay for their words. Where these thoughts came from he did not know. Somehow a lust to take them with him became his goal. This flightiness was so foreign that he forgot for a moment that at any moment he would likely be joining his parents and siblings back before time began to have any meaning. He walked over to the axe and picked it up. They had not responded to his question. With those impossible stares they asked questions of their own.

"What is it that you want? I desire to know."

He approached ever closer so that there was very little space separating them. With no thought at all he stepped back a step or two, raised the axe and smote them through the necks from the left to the right. In a frenzy he hacked away at them trying to cut them down to offal for the birds of the field.

No blood spilled forth. The spectral bodies split open and were nought but empty shells. Their heads rolled onto the ground and let out cackling laughs as before while the flesh and bone crumbled and vanished from sight. Each crown was a crow once more no more than a moment after being severed. They rose into the air before him.

"Let us tell you about the thing which you seek the most. It is not our death or hers that you wish. Nor do you want her lord's head upon the battlements. If you so sought his blood why did you not simply not take it from him as he slept in his bed? Your little tricks might have gotten you this had you wanted it. If you had set your eyes upon the queen's corpse why did you not kill her? She was an easy target. No, what you were intent to have was far more than simple vengeance. Death would not satisfy you. Would it?"

Uthyr nodded his head. What they knew he could not speak. Locks held his tongue fast. No words would escape his lips.

"Speak what you want. Only when you admit that which you seek will we grant you wisdom."

Those locks melted in a burst of flame that left not even the slag behind. Each word forced their way from his throat and out into the world. They were not measured. Wild and unrefined they rushed forth to take their places among the living.

“Power at first was what I wanted. His power to be a ruler for my people and all others throughout this land. She was the key. Then I came and I wanted her. The enchantress is mighty. Her beauty has no equal in even the most ancient of pantheons. I desire an heir whose might shall never know an equal. In all of your tricks sisters who are three I think you have not the skill to give me anything other than provocations.”

“Child. You speak as do babes without substance. We knew what you desired when in your own land you dreamt of your plan. How is it that you thought to come here now? Did you imagine that the battle that rages was either your idea or that fool Gorlois’. By our will you came and by our will he has gone from this place.”

“You lie. I am my own master. Yours are not the hands which brought me here. None control the destiny of the Fae.”

If it were possible amusement appeared on the faces of the crows. They circled the roof of the chamber and all light of the world vanished. They and he stood atop a pillar in the midst of a maelstrom. Enraged winds whistled a dirge which the crows continued in their own way. Waves of ice washed over Uthyr and bowed before the godly birds. Faces of so many who had tried to stop Uthyr appeared upon each wave that dropped before them.

“Hear us Uthyr Pendragon.”

All of nature roared his name, Lightning carved his name into the heavens. Each booming drum of thunder spoke these words. In the winds were these very sounds. Crashing waves demand that he pay heed or drown in this damned place.

“Nature is ours to command. It is we who gave Cannae to the thunderous one of the punic lands. The son of Philip ruled because we so allowed it. Did you think that the lord of Tintagel was a conqueror of any great skill? Igraine invoked us to grant to her husband dominion, power, wealth, and legacy. In visions we came and delivered onto her all that she asked. Worship from her and her lord was the price that we placed upon these blessings. Never did he believe, but in falsehood he swore to sacrifice in our names. Her worship was true. Blessings came upon them on her account alone.”

This quartet stood upon a field of battle as man rushed through legions bearing the eagle and struck down those who opposed him. Masses of armored men were smashed against blades and spears. Their cries filled the air and the scent of spilled blood became overpowering. The gore spilled upon them and seeped into their very beings. Advancing walls of bronze crash through wicker armor. Gorlois stood atop a mound of dead taking the heads of his enemies as his own.

“One by one those to whom we gave bounty failed to give the Morrigan what was asked as the price of our blessings. As we give so too do we exact a terrible price if we are denied that which is ours.”

A man past his prime huddled in a secret room, a chalice had fallen from his hand and his eyes stared into eternity. Four armies in bronze crashed into each other leaving behind only bits of shattered bone. Then the storm returned in all of its glory.

“Our gift to the king whose power you desire is ended. She who loved him still bears our gifts. Worship us as she does and we shall give you all that you desire. True dominion shall be yours. Wealth without end is within your grasp. A legacy greater than any that has existed in this land is sworn to you. Might as this sea is yours to wield if you pledge your devotion in truth. If your sacrifices are as the waters of the ocean then we shall honor you in kind.”

Uthyr’s teeth threatened to explode from his mouth in fright. Every bone became as the most brittle glass cast upon the ground. It took him several moments for great shame at having voided himself in the presence of these deities to rear its head and wake him in full. All that he can do is whisper. He cannot fight the forces that have shown him these wonders any longer. For the first time he falls of his own accord. Prostrate upon the pillar with his arms and legs hanging in the air he cast the axe that he still held into the waters below.

“Your service be mine and mine kin until time does cease. The flesh of those who oppose me are yours. My kingdom and all that I shall possess are yours. Nothing shall be withheld if you truly can grant me that which you have spoken of.”

“Words mean nothing. You must prove that you will do as you have spoken.”

He is lifted up from the pillar and dangles over the waters. A vision of a brother whom he had left upon the fields of war appears close enough for him to reach out and touch. Panic fills his kin’s eyes.

“Uthyr what is this? Have we both been killed and sent to some purgatory?”

“You know what you must do. If you fail then all that you have spoken is null.”

Uthyr looks down at his hands and is disturbed to see that they are still. They do not tremble at all. A horrible creature takes hold of his hands. Instead of responding with words he clasps both of his hands around his brother's throat and squeezes it in a vise. Weak gasps escape his sacrifice as he attempts to escape this death grip. He presses harder and ignores the thrashing that is taking place. Kicks strike him, but he presses on almost grinning as he watches his victim’s eyes bulge and its face change colors. After what could have been a few moments or the entirety of human history he removes his vise from the man that he had just murdered. Impassively he watched as the body fell into the thrashing waters and was dragged under.

“You have proven that you are to be trusted this day. We accept this offering of flesh.”

The ocean waves swallowed him in their icy maw. Needles of ice cut him and then the chamber formed around him. His garments and flesh were dry except for the crimson liquid which covered his hands. It mostly faded away after a few long moments, but it left stains upon his palms. They were burning into his very being. Somehow the weapon that he had thrown away was impossibly resting at his feet. As the rest of him, it showed no signs of the waters into which it had been cast. There was something richer about his clothes and garments. Regality flowed through him. Though he could see no change, something within his mind opened. From within out spilled an invincibility which tempted him to face down all of the armies of mankind.

He held his head higher in a way that some might even call arrogant. A seal of sovereignty encircled his ring finger. Rose gold in the shape of a breather of hellfire such as the one that took the king of the Geats glowed upon his hand.

“What you seek is yours king of all of the mighty Isle. Wealth beyond counting shall flow in tribute from those who will rest at your feet. Lands and kings shall you submit to your will. Many knights shall flock to wage war beneath your standard. An heir will you bear. By that which he shall do will your legacy be secured. Be wary. Remember well what you have seen and what we have spoken. We have given you much. With a thought we can strip all of it away. Do not forget from whence your blessings have come. Our eyes behold the days that have not yet come upon this earth. Your blood will soon enough deny your name. He will be a mighty warrior, but he will believe his power to be his own. Death will follow him. When he shall deny us ours we shall exact upon him as we did upon all of the others. Instill fear of us well lest what you built return to the void upon which it was built.”

The birds fall silent and they appear in their cage as though nothing had happened at all. All of the spells that laced the room broke. Life filled the enchanter once more. Cool air entered the chamber chasing away the clouds of incense. Uthyr himself blinked several times before lifting the axe.

“Husband, I desire for ever more power to be ours, come now and sire the future king of all lands.”

The weight of prophecy descended upon the chamber as for the final time he allowed the axe to tumble from his hands. There was an intensity to him that was never there before. Gorlois resurfaced and joined Uthyr in being. They approached...

Overhead a sound and footsteps...

29th day of December- Madness has burned me from the inside out. How could a god fall so far? Crows flew overhead and before my eyes took on the shape of the immortal women that I had described before. What nightmare is this that has beckoned me from the shadows and burrowed its way into my very soul. They approached with murderous intent that poured off them in waves. I rose and dropped the one quill which I had saved from the inferno that had taken everything from me. With what swiftness I could muster the fist sized stone at my feet was made into a weapon.

“Begone demons. Your kind cannot harm a blessed one. By the name of the king. almighty god, I banish you back to hell’s own depths. Creatures of the pit I, the chosen of the lord, command you to leave.”

I drew back my hand and with all of my strength threw the stone as soon as I had spoken those holy words. That stone tossed at the devil’s servants fell to the ground as dust. They lifted their head and let out a cackle as one that stripped the forest around me of all life.

Birds covered the sky overhead blotting out the light. Does scrambled away in panic with hares and boars chasing after them. Squirrels rose from their dens and ran alongside serpents that seemed so desperate to escape from their mistresses. Silence enveloped reality as life sought to leave this place so unholy that even the word of the faithful could not cleanse it of impurity.

“Blessed one are you? We name you liar Artorius son of Uthyr also called Pendragon. You are a shatterer of oaths, little king. Retribution comes upon those who break their word.”

They approached as one. Each step seemed to draw forth from the earth all vitality. What little moss and grass remained shriveled. Trees filled with rot instantly. Wood cracked and one by one trees began to fall. All the while they did not waver.

“Your sire gave his word. We care not for your foolish invocations. Our due is owed. Grant us what we seek or we shall exact in full the price of that which was bestowed upon you.”

“Foul wretches! Whores of the devil! I banish you from here! I owe you nothing nor did my father before me!”

Before my body, I made the holiest of symbols. To my horror the rightmost one of these three hags separated from her sisters and flew across the ground. Her talon-like fingers tore into my throat drawing rivulets of blood as she lifted me from the earth that birthed mankind. I was as a child sniveling as I was thrown away bodily. So much pain sends my heart racing to a far away place. She was on in me in an instant. Once again I was pulled into the air by my throat.

“Tell me child, what shall Nemain take from you first? Perhaps your sight which is so useless to you shall cease.”

Her voice alone was a horrible thing. It was a discordant combination of the wailing of those who were mortally wounded on the battlefield and the chaos of armies savagely hacking each other to pieces. A deeper power existed beneath this tone. Death ran in abject fear from this creature. Fate bent its ear and bowed with humility as a slave to its sovereign when it spoke. The sound was an ocean without end. Being trapped for a moment was equal to an eternity of moments.

My sword hung sheathed at my waist, but I was unable to draw it. For all of my power here I was to die. For the first time in many years a tear slipped down my face. I know well the stench of men who were fearful, that was I. However, in these last moments I would not beg for my life from this consort of Lucifer.

“Nemain, we sisters three cannot be so divided by the dull words of man. As the Morrigna we smite. Alone mortal man would bind us. You know this well. His blood be forgotten O’ carnage of war. Return to us and let us be whole again.”

There was something unnatural about the way that the two other demons spoke. Their every word hung in the air with an uncertainty that defied explanation. It seemed as if they were truly stricken by the behavior. At a certain level they seemed unsteady and shaken by what they were witnessing. This rift made all of that raw power that usually flowed off of them melt away to nothing.

I looked into the eyes of the nightmare and spit upon it. If this would weaken them I might yet have the chance to slay these monsters. To my bafflement, the one who was slowly depriving me of breath smiled revealing terrible razors that dripped and scorched the earth. She leaned in and licked the tear from my skin. Slimy flesh took in my sweat and seemed to relish my alarm.

“I can smell your terror. Humanity has forgotten why they feared us. You shall not soon forget. We don’t have to kill you yet. You will sleep and we will be all that you see. Every sound will be our call. Son of Uthyr, you had your chance. Everything will be taken from you and even then you shall live. Nemain, never forgets betrayal.”

The one called Nemain dropped me to the dead earth and turned from me. Shaky legs supported me as I attempted to stand. I barely managed to get to my feet. There was not enough strength in my entire body to do more than keep myself from staying on the ground until Hades came to drag me to the river Styx.

“Know this betrayer you have not received mercy this day. On this day your punishment has begun in full. Where will you run and hide? Will Guinevere your champion if she still lives, shield you from us? Your madman seer is lost to you O’ fallen one. Now you will understand the price that oath breakers must pay. There will come a time when you will call out to us and beg for our mercy. You will pray to your invisible gods to aid you against us. All that you have we shall take back. None can stop us for you are he that called upon us to restore justice to this realm. If you suffer it is because you are worthy of it.”

“What is my crime that I am visited by you? The flesh of my people is what you want? Take them all for your table. Let children scream for their mothers and husbands cry silently in the night. Drink the tears of parents divested of children and wives made widows in their youths. Glut yourselves until you can feast no more. Restore what is mine. A kingdom and wealth beneath my feet is my desire. What care do I have for them at the cost of my birthright?”

My eyes are wild and my mind consumed by a single vision. I see a way back to what was taken. When I gaze at them my soul cracks. No accord is in their eyes. Something akin to disgust slaps me across my brow.

“Bribery is what you resort to little Dragon? Are we mortals, that you can simply throw gifts at our feet to escape judgment? Nothing that you can do will spare you. There was a time when you might have been able to give what you promised. Now all that you have are wasted words. Hide in your little forest and write your tale. That is all any will have of you. If justice allows even that.”

“Vengeful and heartless deities you sisters three. Do you think that your threats inspire fear in me? I shall rise and see you destroyed.”

“We shall see, Pendragon’s heir.”

The three of them took to the air as a murder of crows that turned my day into impenetrable night. To the west they flew and soon were gone leaving me so very alone.

*1st of the new year- My eyes have beheld most unholy things during these eight days of Christmas. Madness must have sunk deep into my soul and corrupted me. I lack so much wisdom that I cannot help but weep. No god in heaven and earth could have done the things that those crones said. Nor could I have seen them. A vision during the day is what I must have experienced. Hunger and thirst bringing fever upon me is what I beheld. There were no crows nor vengeful deities. It is impossible that the chosen of God could ever be subjected to evil, but by the hand of the fallen one. When my supporters are rallied I shall bring the holy light back to

this now accursed realm. Now I wish for any who see this to know from whence I came. Let us step through the annals of time to my earliest years so many eons ago.

The castle walls were what I knew from the time when awareness from Pallas on high came to my young mind. Ector's servants dwelled far from me. I was alone when first I came to those sacred precincts. However it was the day when I first set out for there that set me upon my divine path. It is here that we must visit.

The first rays of Helios' charge rode through the window set into the stone of my personal chamber. Cool ocean air and the presence of another stirred me from my slumber. I recall rubbing the last vestiges of sleep from my eyes and gazing in fear at the figure dressed head to toe in a cloak of black fur who stood at the foot of my bed. They wore their hood up and did not look directly into my eyes, rather their gaze was turned in humility toward the earth. Whoever had come for me, I never saw their face. With a gloved hand they beckoned me from my bed. At that moment my father strode through the simple door of my tower room. Since I had been born I recalled my father being every bit the monarch that I was destined to be.

Uthyr, also named Pendragon, had aged a great deal in the five years since he had sired his first born son. I learned later that his hair had grayed rapidly in the early years of his rule. He was as hard and unyielding as the cliffs that guarded our home from the onrushing of the sea. My lord had always told me that I would rule the vast court that he had acquired. Lords from as far south as London came to us bearing tributes of gold, silver, spices, and delicacies from strange lands. At his knee many squires and knights learned their martial trade. Envy was a sin before the lord god I was told. However, when I watched how he taught them and left me to be raised by others I grew envious.

"Father, who is this?"

I pointed at this fool who disturbed the crown prince in his bed chamber. My father did not immediately respond. There was something far away in his gaze as stared at an empty cage that hung above my bed. Even as a lad I saw that something was troubling him. After a few moments, his trance dissipated and he spoke."

"You must go, my son. This very hour my servant will take you from here."

Something frigid like a serpent of ice gripped my heart in its coils and threatened to stop it in mid- beat. Emotions had always exercised absolute control over me. I knew well that my father was not a man prone to exaggeration or lies. For the first time, heat saturated my blood. Though I was too young to yet know what I wanted, tears welled up in my eyes. From the bed I flew in an instant. The cold stone beneath my feet sent shivers up and down my body. I went to my father and boldly threw my arms around him as best I was able.

"Don't send me away. I'll be a good knight. Don't you love me? Please don't make me go away."

I whimpered on for a time saying things that to this day escape my memory. There was an emptiness in me. At so young an age my father was ready to toss me aside. What of mother and my sisters? Were they going to make me as poor Oedipus upon the wild crags? When my father put his hand on my shoulder I knew no good would come of this.

“I am not casting you aside, my son. It is for my love of you that I do this. A king must look toward the future. Once I was that man. Now I am not. You must learn to be that which I cannot be.”

When I refused to release him he pried my arms off of him. He snapped his fingers and servants with warm clothes lined with fur poured into the room. When my father stood aside they pounced and began to dress me with both care and speed. I struggled, but their sheer numbers overwhelmed my defenses. My night shirt was stripped off in a moment. A pair of both silk shirts and breeches of thick grey silk replaced it. They carried me back to the bed and socks of emerald cashmere were placed upon my feet. Boots of rough waterproof leather were secured to my feet. Around my neck they wrapped a crestless cashmere scarf. Without a word they left as they had come earning for them a stare that might have smitten and shattered the pillars of Hercules down to their roots.

My father gave a muted grin upon seeing my stare. He walked to my bedside and sat down beside me. The bedding of satin and silk sank beneath our weight. There was a genuine warmth in his touch as he rested a hand on my quivering back.

“There is so much that I wish you understood. You are yet too young to know that which drives a king to do what he must. You and your sisters are this kingdom’s foundations. More than that, you are my blood. What I do for this kingdom and for all of you is for your good and the good of our people.”

He removed his hand from my back and reached to his belt with his right hand. In a smooth motion removed an ornate dagger which I had never seen before. It’s sheath was of a sapphire tinted steel that was studded with a multitude of stones that sparkled blindingly even in the early morning light. Flowing and mysterious script that I could not read encircled the hilt up until the pommel. The pommel was made up of rose gold in the shape of a breather of hellfire such as the one that took the king of the Geats. In the mouth of the beast was a ruby that burned as a living ember with our crest engraved into the stone. Without hesitation he took my hands and he pressed into them the heavy blade whose size might as well have been a broadsword.

“This is your birthright. I had this forged on the day that I became king to remind me from where I came. It is now yours. There comes a day when a king must confront themselves and ask whether they are worthy of the divine mantle placed upon them. In time you will understand this and the blade that you hold shall answer for you. Remember, my son it was not by might that we came to rule. How was it that I became king?”

“You and mother said that we were blessed and that we must show devotion to God to keep our thrones.”

“Yes, Artorius. We are blessed and we must show devotion.”

He turned to the figure who had not moved since he had entered to wake the young prince.

“Leave us and seal the door behind you. Ensure that none disturb us.”

It nods and steps backward out of the chamber. The figure pulls the door shut behind him.

“The sisters three blessed us son. Babd, Macha, and Nemain gave us all that we have in exchange for our worship. These five years we have gained what is ours by right. We must not fail to serve them or all will be lost. When you return as a man you will be told what you must do. For now you must know that even we must answer to greater powers.”

He stood and quickly walked to the closed barrier of pine. In urgency he pulled the door open and motioned for me to follow. The deep desire to bow to my father’s will drove me to slide off the bed and run toward him as quickly as my short legs would carry me. When I stood by his side we descended down the steep stone steps of my tower. In my mind I said goodbye to this place which had sheltered me for the whole of my life. All of the laughter as I spilled throughout this tower and the rest of the castle came rushing back to me. I tried so hard not to cry, but I was doing poorly in that regard.

At the foot of the stairs the cloaked servants and my mother waited in silence. Her beauty made the dawn weep or so I thought as a light snow had begun to fall outside. When she saw the dagger in my hands she stiffened. She knelt down and wrapped me in her arms.

“Mother, I don’t want to go.”

“I know my son. Soon you will return to us. Our love and the almighty will go with you.”

There was something calming about her voice which set me at ease. All of my fears melted away as if they had never existed at all. She rose and together we walked across the courtyard to a plain coach into which a plain chest was being placed. Half a dozen heavily armored knights atop mighty horses which I now know were girded for war surrounded it. My mother led me to the carriage and helped me inside. I sat with my back against the satin covered walls and fidgeted with the knife that was sitting in my lap. Before I could draw it from its sheath the carriage door slammed shut and I was held back by invisible bonds.

Through the gates of the only home that I had ever known we rode swiftly as we dared. Winds rushed to greet slapping my transport with the palms of their hands. I dropped the dagger to the compartment floor as I hugged myself and slammed my eyes shut. Images of home, of my mother, and grand feasts where I was paraded around for diplomats rose before my shuttered eyelids. A calm held me while these visions played out. Everything faded away as the currents of my own mind pulled me into the furthest reaches of my memory. Time became irrelevant and soon both Hypnos and Morpheus embraced me. Shouts pulled from the comfort. Ringing steel slapped me into full wakefulness. My transport wrenched to a stop which shook me as a lone leaf upon a storm-battered oak.

“Where is the gold?”

Harsh voices outside of the carriage brought the most frigid feelings to me. I slid down to the floor as the door was wrenched open. A man with a short wild beard that was flecked with grime and blood stood in the doorway. His shadow fell across me and he gave me a horrible smile of jagged and chipped teeth.

“A welp is our prize, boys...”

Before he can utter another word his head falls from his shoulder in a glint of steel. Blood geysered from his neck into the interior of the carriage painting it with the brushes of the

Avenger. With a heavy thud the body falls onto the floor next to me. Those eyes bore into showing me the darkness of his soul. A new shadow appears. It is that of the hooded figure whose sword drips with the essence of the man that he had just slain. He turns to defend the carriage door when a weak cry escapes his lips. Gargling and a harsh rattle escapes his throat as he clutches at a spearhead that tore through his body. As a puppet whose strings were cut he collapsed, his right hand wordlessly reached out for something as he fell.

A bandit with a glint in his corrupted eyes took several quick steps forward before he leapt into the carriage and onto the back of his companion. There was a knife on his belt, which had I not been crying I might have noticed. He knelt down before me and grabbed my arm.

“Stop your sniveling boy!”

He slapped me across the face, drawing more tears. Enraged he began to pull me from the carriage. It was when I was in the doorway and he had slid out that both he and I noticed a shimmering ruby peeking out from beneath the body of his comrade. I know not what possessed me, but I lunged for it and managed to draw the dagger. A shaking hand held it wardingly before me.

“Take it easy boy. Don’t do something stupid.”

Voices behind him made the man pull on me harder in urgency. He reached for my other arm. I lashed out and the knife found his throat. So much red covered me. The dagger tumbled away as though it had taken on a life of its own. Cool sunlight combined with my scarlet covered me with shivers. Wailing is all that I could do. Life slipped away from him and I watched. There was no sound when the end came. His spirit fled without ceremony, as is the way of all mortal flesh. That gaze staring into eternity drew me to it. If I held onto it forever there I would have remained until I was no more than food for the flocks of carrion that were sure to come. It took little time for me to clamber over him to slide out of my hellish prison once I truly realized that he could not harm me anymore.

“My prince, are you alright?”

A weary pair of weary knight foot rounded the carriage with their blades drawn. The younger looking of the two was a broad-shouldered man who could not have been many years past his youth. I was he who spoke in a voice that betrayed his exhaustion. Sweat flowed down their faces. In the early afternoon light all that I could do was nod my head as I stifled the wails that flew from deep within me. This knight saw the dead hand that gripped me. Though I shied away from him he did not flee. With the greatest care he pried open the dead man’s fingers and set me free.

“We have to go, my prince.”

The other warrior silvered hair was matted with perspiration. He looked like he could barely support himself. There was a wisdom that could only have been born of experience about him. An aura that was both immensely calming as well as unyielding flowed off of him.

“We have to leave the coach and the dead. There is an inn a distance from here where we can rest, but we must leave now if we are to get there before nightfall comes.”

I did not understand what was happening, but I knew that I did not want to be here. As I was able to look around I saw so many men and horses laid out on the ground in their own entrails and humors. Bodies ripped to shreds in ways that made them unrecognizable surrounded the carriage. Again I started to cry and when the stench worked its way into me I turned my head and heaved. Dazed and frightened as I was, I turned back toward the coach, but one of the knights put a hand on my shoulder to stop me. In panic and with my breathing becoming more rapid I bolted back inside the cabin. Gore seeped into my clothes when I dropped to my knees. As the knights watched on I flet around beneath the first body and pulled the sheath from beneath it. Sapphire was now ruddy. Not caring about the blood I clutched it to my chest. What shocked the knights was when I exited that nightmare for the final time and picked up the dagger which was still coated in the man that I had just put down like some diseased animal. In a smooth motion I replaced the blade with a skill I should not have had.

The younger of the two tried to take the dagger from me. For the first time since this journey began I spoke. It might not have been speech persay. Really, it was a chant of a single word which was all that I could think of. I choked it out of myself and could not even summon passion.

“No.”

Bloody tears washed narrow paths down my face. They stung me and drew an even greater number of tears. Neither knight knew what to do except press forward. Walking over to me and taking my hand in his own, the elder knight led me to two of the three surviving horses. The elder released my hand and mounted one. Once he was firmly atop the saddle the other grabbed me about my waist and hoisted me onto the saddle.

“Ahead, I shall ride with the boy. Return to our lord and tell him what happened here. Ask him to send more men at arms to the inn.”

With one arm around my waist he flicked the reins and off we rode. Countryside that I had never before seen held no interest for me. All that I could think about were those bodies including the corpse of the man that I had killed. The vision of the blood spilling from him and draining him of color painted itself a prominent place in my mind’s most central vault. How he stared into the vastness of eternity would not leave me. It was carved so deeply into me that I was still able to feel that gaze accusing me of committing some mortal sin. I had violated the seventh commandment of god almighty. Already I could feel the gates of hell opening up to receive me. Judas the betrayer, Cain the first killer, and I would reside together forever in damnation. Cold bit into me and made me sink deeper into this nightmare.

The knight must have sensed my distress, for he gripped me tighter into him as we rode. Light filtered around us and for just a moment the darkness subsided. If he stood by me I could not be on my way into the depths of damnation. How could a figure who seemed to almost be the vision of the lord himself guide and protect a sinner? No. I must not believe that I had placed my immortal soul in danger.

Then those eyes returned to mock me. They spoke to me in a way that surely only those who had spilled the blood of man could ever understand. Every word smote my young heart and

cut away a bit of the innocence that had once resided there. Raw and torn these whispered secrets crawled as serpents into my spirit laid bare.

“Little prince, you killed me little prince. You murdered me. Lucifer waits to snatch you from your bed. I wait for you, slayer of men. Know that you have broken the law of god. Salvation is lost to you forever.”

My mind traveled to a realm of torment and brimstone where I would endure suffering without end. The smoke would obscure God's light and I would be lost to my most saintly parents and sisters. That is why I had been sent away. They knew how bad I was and they wanted the stain of evil to be removed from their home. How else could I explain their actions? I could not be loved, for I was evil. The instrument of my evil burned merrily in my hands, almost swallowing the droplets of blood whole in its thirst. Something so very powerful soothed away the voices. It was as if the knife was killing the nightmare. Yelling was filling my head with echoes.

“The prince is not yours he's ours. No, he killed a man. He is ours for the rest of time, begone.”

Who were these voices I still do not know. However, after a time the visions returned and only the words had stopped. I could not stop my shaking. It was not just from cold, but also from terror. What if others came to me as that man had? Could I take from all that he was before he hurt me? At the time I was not aware of the true nature of my thoughts. However, today they are as clear as the rising of Aurora from her slumber. I never wanted to have this dread as my ruler again. There was fever burning up inside of me gnawing at my flesh from the inside in a desperate desire to escape its confinement. There was something in the wind that almost seemed to inflame these feelings. Boreas was softly coaxing me to rise and be stronger. No. That had to be the voice of the lord. No one else could say such words. To speak otherwise would be both blasphemy and madness. I was certainly neither a blasphemer nor a madman.

How the land silently demanded that I pay it tribute for taking my sins. We rode for a time as I withdrew deep into myself. It was only when we stopped that I re-emerged into the world. An inn oozing with the stench of unconsecrated peasants stood out starkly in the light of the descending sun. My protector removed his arms from around my waist and dismounted. He then took hold of me and lowered me to the ground all the while watching everything at once and nothing at all.

Chaos of a primordial sort played out around me. In the evening hours so many peasants dressed in rags and caked in dirt rushed about before the door. A gate into the realm of the unfaithful stood open before me. The absolute depravity seemed to draw me in. I struggled against my guardian and attempted to rush into this crush of sin. All of this action made my eyes go wide and I so desired to be a part of it. Those protective arms hold me back as the eyes caution me to stay where I was.

As we wait a commotion rises from behind us. Clashing hoof beats fly through the air and turn both of us on our heels. High upon a charcoal warhorse rides an unremarkable thin lipped man wearing threadbare clothes. No armor rests upon this lord's hearty flesh. His eyes try

to remove his high birth. Some level of virtue falls from him to a place of death. However, none are fooled by his impious acting. When he slows down and sees the most sacred of men he stops and grimaces. From atop his horse he jumps and leads his steed stand beside us.

“Where are the others?”

“We were attacked. There is only my charge, myself, and a brother whom I sent back to my lord.”

“Report back to your master that I have taken the boy under my care.”

I felt ice locking my limbs in place even while my protector released me. Without so much as a word he left me alone among these waves that so entranced my soul. Betrayal struck me and I reached for him. Emptiness met me. That stranger that claimed me as another object to be placed in cages of stone. What emanated from him was something so lacking emotion that for the briefest moment I thought him to be Satan’s own herald.

“Go away, I want to return to my father.”

He eyed the dagger clutched in my hands and carefully knelt down before me.

“Lord Ector is waiting for you. Come now to eat and sleep. Tomorrow at first light we set off.”

The speed of the wind allowed him to pull the dagger from my grasp. Tears welled up within me threatening to flood the world. A single disappointed look froze the ocean that was on the rise. Somewhere within I could sense the regality of my station hiss at me as though to show its displeasure. I allowed myself to be led away from where we had been standing and into a den of demons that could never properly be purified.

*6th of the new year- For many days I have dwelled upon that first day that I met death and cast him aside. Those crones weighed upon me as I considered those days. However, their words must have been falsehoods for the memories of a child are so flawed a thing. Sleep hides from me as I was stalked both during my waking hours. This can be the only way to explain the things that I pretended to remember. Brambles and stone have taken royal blood and reduced me to rags. Loyalists to the south will aid me if I can but free myself from this desolate place and ascend again to purity. I was a squire until my fifteenth year drew itself upon me. It is upon the day that everything again changed that I will resume my chronicle.

In the forests near London did I ride alongside Cai. A brother and warrior broad in the shoulder if narrower in wit was he. A routine of knights surrounded us in such a holy cloud that even the apostles might have been at a loss as to how these might be described. We carried stags slain in the conquest of the world as is the duty of mankind. The whole of our camp burst from the wood to silence. Where there should have been cheering voices of the unworthy worshipping the saints among them there was nothing at all. Something so wrong fanned the flames in my heart. I was a conqueror. This world would be mine and yet none praised me for it?

From the city came a lone rider dressed in black. His head was bowed low as though some great secret were carved into the earth. So tightly did he pull upon the reins when he grew close that the horse very nearly tossed him aside like the worthless sinner that he was. The son of Ector’s blacksmith stopped before us and would not bow.

“What news have you that in the sign of mourning you come to greet us?”

Cai’s voice was measured in a way that I knew that mine would not be. How could he possibly allow his honor to be so infringed upon by this boy?

“It is news from Tintagel my lord. The city is under siege and its master is dead. All knights and squires led by lord Ector himself have ridden to its aid. You are to leave this very hour to join him. Artorius is also a squire no longer. He rides this day as a knight for the martial skills he has shown. A boon from our Master was given to me to deliver.”

From his belt came the dagger that had been kept from me for ten long years. Rage is all that I felt. My birthright was being touched by an unclean bastard. It took all of my control to not rush him and take what is mine. That birthright seemed to call out to me. There was something incomplete that I could not describe. I barely looked at him as he rode up and held it out to me. Without betraying the true weight of my emotions I took the knife from his hand.

“Armor and a squire will be waiting for my lord at Lord Ector’s encampment.”

Then he scurried off like some vermin riding upon too noble an animal. Those feelings of power from so long ago returned to me. Like some mighty wave washing over my exposed soul came my lust for conquest. Rulership was mine to possess and every moment I grew surer of my invincibility. I tucked the dagger into the sash that girded my waist and turned my horse toward the road away from the city. With a flick of my reins I flew away from my comrades. They called to my back, but I ignored them. My blood was an inferno most unquenchable. It licked at my organs setting all of me aflame with a want to spread to all corners of this realm talk of my deeds. Behind me heavy hoofbeats attempt to chase me down. None would catch me as I spurred the horse to rush ever faster. Mercury lent me his speed as the whole world became ash around me.

“Artorius hold!”

A booming voice roared behind me as a hand caught my reins. The sound rang in my ears and I jerked to a stop, almost being unhorsed in the process. Cai was by my side now. His Herculean grip stayed my forward progress. When I turned to him, I felt Mars himself in the form of the Avenger take control.

“What is this? Are we not meant to ride in the service of our lord?”

Cai frowned and his chestnut, scraggly beard drooped lower to the ground. There was no subtlety to him. His shoulders were tense and ready to lash out at me. I almost longed to best him and take my place as the most honored of Ector’s knights. Reason was all that prevented me from venting my fury upon the one who for these few years I had served.

“What did you think to do? Would you ride alone to our lord’s camp? He did not summon you alone. A boy runs alone toward the enemy. You are vain Artorius. Forget tales of glory. Today, Lord Ector needs all of us as comrades in arms.”

Carved into my eyes were flames that no deluge could put out. If Cai saw the truth I do not know. The other knights caught us and moments later a shout joined us. It echoed in the air as though we were in a vast cave deep beneath the earth.

“My lords wait.”

An elder of the city militia rode from the city upon a nag. His patchwork armor of metal and leather sat listlessly upon his gaunt form. Despite being only about two-score years of age he appeared to be much older than that. Thinning black hair streaked with gray is trembling as he forces as much speed out of his horse as he can without driving its soul away. Weights press down upon him shattering any pride that he might have had into a bow of humble submission. This pitiful man so lacking in honor has his steed practically collapse when he pulls it to a stop.

“Don’t go fair knights! The bandit lord moves to retake his compatriots from our fortress a little more than 3 leagues from here. Lord Ector gave us his word that we would have a contingent of his best knights to capture the one who has made a fool of us.”

“We cannot help you. This common thief should be no problem for you. Our lord has summoned us to aid him and that was where we were racing for before you came here to stop us.”

All of my fellow holy warriors seemed to almost pity this fool. They turned their backs to me and Cai spurs his horse away from mine. Such a short distance was in many ways an immeasurable chasm. I was unsurprisingly alone in my quest to raise my own honor. Is this not the holy mission with which all humanity is tasked?

“We know of the pledge that was made to the civic militia. Were we not bound by the command of our common master, we would ride by your side. Alas, this cannot be. However, there may yet be help to be offered.”

He wheeled back toward me a partially bemused look floating up from beneath the hardness that I had come to know. He drew from a simple scabbard the blade of a lord’s heir. I knew well the flowing Greek scroll that heralded a past blessed by the pagan gods of Argos.

“You seek to possess glory this day? Very well. Captain, we can spare our mightiest knight. He will drive fear into the soul of the self proclaimed king of the bandits. When we can we will send more aid. Artorius join us once you have decapitated the serpent.”

Cai drew close to me. What amusement flowed off of him before, was stopped up and all that I could sense was a heaviness that sucked all of the strength from me. He leaned in and met my eyes. There was a challenge in his gaze. I could see his doubt. A thousand words that he dared not say aloud rushed across his face.

“This is no game, Artorius. You can still stop this foolish hubris that drags you down to damnation. You can’t do anything on your own for them. Even if you were able, you must answer our lord’s call!”

His words slam into me grabbing more strength from my limbs. The grave seems to call me into its hold. Ice sweeps through me. I spur my horse into action. We wheel away and approach the pathetic nag. My eyes with a glow that none seem to see and I hear an unnatural cackling drift upon the air and enshroud me. When I draw up to the elder I enter an almost trance. Everyone and everything else fades away.

“Lead me to this lord of sin. He will not plague you any longer once I have dealt with him.”

The elder gazes into my soul. He does not react to my words at first. When he speaks there is only reproach contained within his voice. Even his horse appears to stare at me in complete disbelief.

“Lad, return to your knight. Squires who desire glory have no place here. One day you will understand that those who seek glory leave this realm with nothing.”

I recoil as though from a serpent’s bite. My sheathed blade is in my hand. Very little is holding me back from drawing it. A song demanding flesh and blood fills my ears. An iron hand on my shoulder and the hiss of steel stays my dagger.

“I am no squire seeking to ascend above my place. I am Artorius, son of Uthyr also called Pendragon. This is the blade of my birthright. By it I swear to you that I will end the vermin that has made this land its home.”

All of the blades, but my own fall to the ground and the hand at my shoulder falls away. Everyone descends from their mounts and lower themselves to a single knee as I finish speaking. Their lowered heads feed something within me that I cannot begin to explain. My spirit ascends and all of the teachings of my youth are lost to me. Clarity comes to me as a raven across the expanse of a day disturbed.

“Rise. We shall aid this man before riding out to Tintagel. It shall hold until we arrive. Any blame that is cast upon us shall I bear.”

They all stand, but their movements reveal their minds. Every one of them gazes off into the distance. As they sheath their swords and re-mount their horses they are stones. Were flames to swallow their flesh, they might just as soon remain silent as call out for a deluge to rescue them. Chains forged by Sir Ector drag them away into slavery.

I call upon any power that might listen and allow a mask of regality to fall over my face. The dagger returns to my belt. My shoulders are mightier than those of Atlas as I take the weight of their fetters and bind them to myself. A strength infuses my eyes as I meet the eyes of the elder and then wheel the charger around so that I can see my fellows.

“We cannot ignore the bandits that lord Ector swore to help destroy. Many lives will be destroyed and the most sacred of bonds must surely be shattered if nothing is done. A legion of defenders stand atop the walls of my birthplace. So few have risen to drive out the blight that fills the flesh of this land with rot. No one in this world lusts to join our brothers in Tintagel more than I. Yet, the time to do so has not yet come. With speed and the aid of the almighty we shall excise this evil and rush to aid our comrades. Do you stand with me this day or would you have me alone stand by the defenders of this region?”

These words come from a place that I cannot begin to describe. Somehow they appeared upon my lips and flew true toward the hearts of those who I need to put an end to the “bandit lord”. Before my eyes stone fills with vitality. A fog burns away and as one they let out a cry.

“For Almighty God, Tintagel, and Artorius.”

A trio of voices float as their cry dies away.

“Ride for the sisters three. Sacrifice well and destruction shall consume your foes.”

I could not have heard such things for none had spoken. My head jerks this way and that clouding over the eyes of those who are with me. At my urging foolish thoughts of unseen voices which waste precious moments are no more. For the final time I turn my horse and as one we ride. Mercury above blesses us with vigor most unnatural. How we fly across the earth. The winds fall before us in submission and time loses all meaning. Almost too soon we burst free of woodlands. Across the vast plain, which spreads out before us 2 rivers appear to my comrades and I. On our right side the vastness of the Thames burns as the chariot of Helios begins to descend. In the distance I can see the shape of what may be a rectangular structure of stone rising toward the heavens. As we approach, I can't help, but be impressed by what sprouts from the ground.

Ramparts of earth built on the other side of a ditch seem to completely encircle a fortress of stone. A tower at the corner of the wall closest to us stares across the land as a sentinel protecting the most precious of treasures. In the air above our destination something hangs imposingly like some kind of specter heralding death's arrival. Pillars of ebony smoke fly skyward as we approach. Then come the faint cries which grow sharper the closer that we come to the guards whose might seems to be born from the bones of Terra.

With a roar I spur my horse forward and race across the field. My fellows don't wait a moment. They draw their blades and charge forward on my heels. The winds strip my flesh from my bones. I am no longer a mortal being bound by the limitations imposed by the gods. Boreas carries me upon his shoulders. Even as I fly my dagger separates from its sheath. Flashes of the outside world are all that I see once my foes appear before my eyes.

A force of several dozen in burning armor slam a heavy ram against sealed gates of iron. Bucklers of steel deflect stones and arrows that attempt to dispel them. The gates shake and tremble in fear. No deity rides to the rescue of the defenders. When all is lost and Mars seems ready to consume those who stand upon the walls an unnatural creature arrives.

My horse takes flight and lands among those who can be no other but the plague that has infected this land. In the midst of a sea of steel something awakes in me. The hooves of my charger lashes out and smites the nearest mortal before they can react. A whimper makes me smile as the vermin falls. This broken body grabs the plague and turns them back to back. Several of them swarm toward me with gleaming knives drawn. I know that I need only to survive until my brother knights arrive. Without a sound blood spills and my mount drops beneath me when a dagger flies true striking it through its right eyes. All of the air flies from me when I hit the hard earth. Somehow I jump to my feet before anyone can land a blow. Sweat pours down my brow. Steel rains down around me. With a growl I loose wild slashes which keep anyone from getting too close. One blow catches an unprotected limb producing a scarlet geyser and a shout. Each strike that falls pushes me back. Wild abandon whispers in my ears. Behind me I hear cries of aid and I leap forward to clear a path for them.

On foot my brethren leap into the fray smashing into the rear of the attacking force. From behind they are a wave that shatters the superior force. In moments half a dozen bodies rest for

all eternity in Thanatos' realm. More corpses drop and the attempt to batter down the front gates are forgotten as all is anarchy.

In the midst of this death I am the right hand of Thanatos. I spin about avoiding all harm while laying open throats or any other exposed flesh. Lifeblood paints and transforms me into a most triumphant one. My garments drink deeply as I become something bestial. Bared teeth are razors while gore spills from my prey. Blow after blow slides away from me as I swim deeper among the corpses who have yet to die. Breath comes in gasps and I sink deeper into the mire of split skin and twisted metal.

Exhaustion claws at my heart the longer that I sacrifice a legion for the kingdom. All that I can do is scythe my way through the living. Oceans pour off me as I wade through scum begging for mercy. Their voices are drowned out by something so much louder. Deafening calls to destroy the disease that keeps me from returning home makes me shiver in a kind of ecstasy. They ring out in a chorus that comes from everywhere and nowhere. It won't stop and so neither can I. This frenzy swirls upon stormwinds that cannot be tamed. My skin is aflame and each movement draws a shadow down from up above. Out of the corner of my eye I can almost see it. As the spirits flee there seems to be three dark forms staring back at me.

One crying pitiful voice reaches for me. There is one yet alive fallen to his knees at my feet. I don't even look at him as I grab his sweat matted hair. Before any might stop me I draw back my knife and cleave open his flesh. A geyser of scarlet sprays into the air catching the rays of the sun as they descend. The blade hacks away at him and in almost the blink of an eye his unstarving head is clutched in my grip. For the briefest time I hold it up for all of mankind to see.

Everything crashes into me at that moment. My trophy tumbles from my now trembling hand and rolls away. Men butchered like offal stare back at me. The stench of entrails slaps me to my knees. Bile rises up and I spill my heart and what is left of my soul onto the ground. I am an empty vessel broken and forgotten. Tears stream down through the blood, but I cannot feel clean.

