

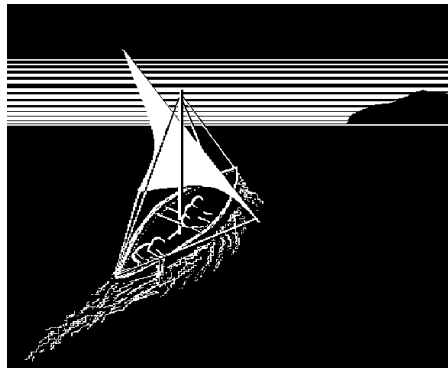
Northborne

The Real and True Story
of How the Infant Arthur
became the Ward
of the Kind and Noble Knight, Sir Ector

Part One of The Compass Quartet

by

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and
Bill Wignall



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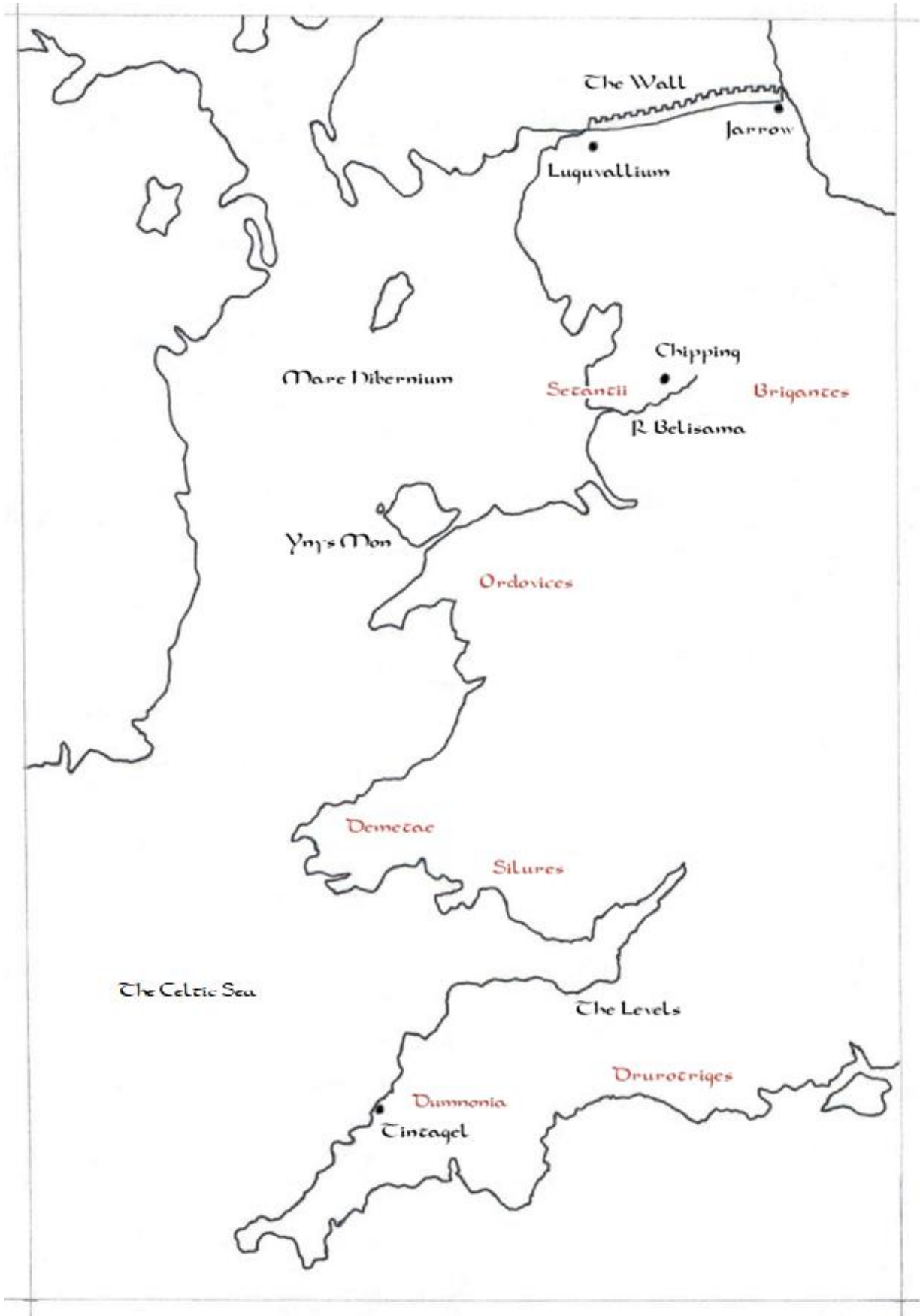
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Chipping

Here, in Chipping, at the Chipe Stone, at the end of the first year of Arthur's life, I set down my account of how he was brought to safety by me, Merlin. I set these things down so that all may know how the heir to the house of Pendragon came to leave his homeland as an infant.

Time will tell whether he ever becomes king.

*Arise, sun in the west
Rise from a dragon
Threads pull together
Until there is peace*

Tintagel

I sense the tides of time and of the earth. The moon-made movement of people and places. I sense a spring coming...

Merlin lifted his head at the sound of the door opening. Framed in the doorway stood King Uther, Lord of the House of Pendragon. He was dressed as if for travel and yet from a chain round his neck hung the Dragon Pendant, heirloom of his house.



Merlin inclined his head respectfully and Uther came forward, stooping slightly under the lintel. He made his way over the rugs strewn across the stone floor and sat heavily in the chair by the fire.

As he waited for the king to speak Merlin reflected that it was almost twenty years since Uther had come to the throne of Tintagel. Now the realm of Dumnonia was threatened by a new danger from the east.

The old enemy, the Romanii, had abandoned these islands and fled home to their warm, imperiled city many miles away. Despite having ruled most of these lands for fifteen generations, the Romanii leaders and soldiers had abandoned their cities and their roads and their villas.

Folk who had embraced the life of the Romanii – those who married their men and women, lived alongside them, and changed to their ways – were suddenly without protection. They were vulnerable and open to attack.

Kingdoms and chiefdoms rose again amidst the ruins of the Romanii. Communication broke down as each warlord gathered to him whatever people and possessions he could. Unless people lived under the protection of a powerful leader, their lands, their goods and even their lives were at risk.

On the western edges of the realm there were still people who had resisted the Romanii invaders throughout their long rule. Tribes, who had been opposed to the new way of life, had fought when they could and melted back into the wild places when they could not. In the years since the Romanii left many of these tribes had risen up and added to the misery of the land.

But in the furthest west, where the warmth of the setting sun promised a new dawn, in Dumnonia, a proud and noble dynasty held sway.

Merlin waited, but the king seemed reluctant to begin. He what was on his mind.

“My lord,” began Merlin. “Is there news of the plague?”

“Yes,” replied Uther. “A messenger has recently come from the edge of the Levels reports that deaths have occurred on our side of those marshes. During the warm summer months, the pestilence has bred in the pools and fens, and it’s spreading towards us.”

Merlin nodded. “I hear he brought more than just news.”

Uther grunted. “Aye. He came with some score of folk fleeing their lands and looking for safety.”

“The noble house of Tintagel has long offered safety from threat of violence and injustice. Your warriors and your strong rule have ensured that. New settlers will be welcome. But I do not know how you can protect people from the plague. Strength of arms is not strength against this threat.”

Uther stood suddenly. “What of my people? And my family? What of those in the plague lands? It is certain that many will seize the opportunity offered by this disruption and seek to expand their wealth and power.” He grasped the pendant firmly and it seemed to Merlin that Uther gained strength from its presence in his hand. “I cannot stop the plague, but I can help those who survive and are in trouble.”

Merlin stood and walked towards the window. The setting sun cast a warm light across the walls of Tintagel. Despite the lateness of the hour the courtyard was busy with people. Most were strangers to Tintagel, refugees from the lands afflicted by plague who had fled west for safety. Amongst them Merlin could see Uther’s servants giving out blankets and food and checking they were as comfortable as possible. There was no more room inside the hall.

“I will venture east with a company of men,” continued Uther, who had also risen and come to stand beside Merlin. Several inches taller than his wise counsellor, Uther stood strong and resolute. “I will use my strength to help those who have none. In the morning I will ride south of the Levels, into the land of the Drurotriges. Those people will welcome me, and I can aid them against the power of Cunobitas. If he is not checked he will threaten the prosperity of our neighbours. His people seem to have resisted the plague more than most.”

Merlin nodded again. He knew that Uther’s mind was made up.

The following day Uther rode east with a company of his strongest warriors. Merlin and Uther's wife, Ygraine, stood on the steps of the hall and watched him leave. She carried in her arms Arthur, heir to King Uther. The child was less than a year old and was Ygraine's firstborn. Around her neck hung that same pendant that Uther had worn yesterday. "I know why he is going," she said. "But still, I wish he would not."

"He knows that he must help those who have no security," said Merlin. "His presence on our eastern border will also increase the safety of our lands."

She turned away from the departing horsemen. "See to it that any newcomers continue to receive a good welcome. I would not have any who flee here treated unkindly."

"I would advise that we house any newcomers further away from the hall, my lady. What if some of them bear the plague?"

"Only if suitable lodging can be found – perhaps down nearer the beach while the weather holds."

"I'll arrange it immediately," said Merlin. He knew that the House of Pendragon would always offer sanctuary to those who needed it.

Below the hall stood some abandoned huts once used by fishermen. The original owners had moved to be nearer the new harbour that Uther had built on the leeward side of the rock. This location offered more protection for the small fishing boats that were used in those times.

Merlin established that most of the dwellings were still habitable and arranged for two craftsmen to repair the few that needed work.

As he walked away from the sea Merlin heard the dull crash of waves against the strong rock on which the hall was built. He had in his life journeyed widely across the realm of Britannia. He was a hardened traveller and had been entrusted by Uther to carry out several visits to other Lords in the realm. Now in these plague-ridden times such visits were no more but Merlin had more knowledge of the lands to the east than any other in Uther's court.

Some days later a messenger rode in with news from the King. Ygraine, along with Merlin, received him in the throne room.

"My lady," began the messenger. "I bring greetings from your lord, King Uther. He is well. But we found it hard to succour the people of the Drurotriges. Many settlements have been attacked by Cunobitas and the people taken away as slaves. We skirmished with one raiding party."

"How is the King? Are all our warriors safe?" asked Ygraine.

"King Uther was unharmed. He fought bravely but two of our number fell. We were forced to retire north and then west. We retreated into the Levels where the tracks are few and it was difficult for the enemy to pursue us."

"Into the Levels?"

"Yes, Lord Merlin. It took us two days to pick our way across the marshes. As soon as we reached firm ground, I was sent ahead to bring you news." The messenger paused but Merlin could tell that he had more to say.

“My lady, the air in the marshes was thick with flies and foul smells. It was hard going. When we reached the borders of our realm many men were weak. King Uther fears...”

“Go on,” commanded Ygraine.

The messenger swallowed. “King Uther fears that they... and that he himself may have the plague.” He bowed his head.

There was silence.

“Where are they now?”

“I left them resting in the shelter of Brent Knoll. The water there is pure and clean. They are in no danger.”

The following day a second messenger arrived and was shown into Ygraine's chamber. Moments later Merlin was summoned to attend the Queen.

“Merlin, the news is worse than we feared. Uther and his men are showing clear signs of the plague. He says he will not come further west at this time. He is too weak and will not risk spreading the disease.”

“Let me go to him, my lady. In my travels I have gathered some knowledge of healing that may help the King.”

“The King has a different command for you, Merlin,” Ygraine continued. “He is concerned for the safety of his family.”

“What would he have me do?”

“In this letter he commands you to take Arthur to safety. He wishes you to find some place where the plague may not come. Is there such a place?”

Merlin thought. He knew much about the realm of Britannia. He knew that the further north one went, the less likely it was that warm weather would assist the spread of the disease. But how far north to go?

The Romanii had never conquered the very north of these lands. The tribes there had been too strong, the distances too great. What would those places be like now?

“My lady, I recall news that I received two years ago concerning a settlement that has been established at the far end of the Romanii Wall. It is called Jarrow and it is in a land “where spring and summer do not visit.” There would be less risk of disease in such a cold land. And those who have set up this place call it a sanctuary – where they can study and pray. They would give shelter to you and your son.”

Ygraine's eyes grew cold. “The King commands that *you* find a place of safety for his son. I am commanded to remain here and rule in his place.”

Merlin stared at Ygraine. “You're not to accompany your son?”

"No, Merlin. Uther writes that my duty..." Ygraine spat out the word. "My duty must be to the people of our realm. I must stay."

She drew a breath and walked away. Then she turned. "Who will care for Arthur as a mother? I must be mother to all our people." She paused. "But not to my son!"

"If Uther dies then this realm will be under threat. Cunobitas must already know that Uther is ill. He may plan an attack. People will look to the house of Pendragon to rule them, my lady."

"But I'm not of the house of Pendragon. You know that and so do our people. If Uther dies of the plague, they will look to Arthur. And they will seek him in vain."

"I will accompany him, Ygraine. I'll stay with him and guide him. This plague will not last forever. The journey to Jarrow is long but not difficult. Send after us as soon as it's safe to return."

"Return from Jarrow? If you ever get there?" replied Ygraine.

Merlin walked over to the table in the centre of the room. He picked up a quill and began to draw on a scrap of parchment. "Here is Tintagel. The winds blow from the south and west. I will sail north, past the coasts of the Silures and Ordovices."

Merlin's quill slid smoothly across the parchment sketching out a coastline that turned eventually east.

"Once I have passed the island of Ynys Mon, I can cross the Mare Hibernium and arrive at Luguwallium, the wall's western end. From there I will only have to follow the wall to Jarrow. It still stands and will shelter us as we cross the hills." He turned to look at Ygraine.

"Oh, yes. Once you have crossed the water and then the land... My son will be safe, and I will never see him again!" Ygraine was scornful. "Have you considered how a child of ten months is to make such a journey? Without his mother?"

"My lady, the journey is mostly by boat. Some nurse or maid may be found to come with us."

"If it is as easy as you say, Merlin, then I will make the voyage and you will rule the kingdom until Uther's return."

"But the letter from Uther..."

"Yes. He commands that I stay. He commands that I be head of his people. My heart speaks to me in a different way." Ygraine threw down the letter from Uther, snatched up Merlin's sketch and left the room.

Merlin sighed. Ygraine had been Uther's wife since before he became king. It was true that she was not of the house of Pendragon but her long reign as queen had endeared her to the people. They would accept her rule. Yet, thought Merlin, Arthur was her firstborn. Uther and she had waited many years for a child. Was she now to lose him after less than a year? Would she accept her lord's bidding?

Merlin sent messengers east to King Uther. With his greetings he sent such herbs as he knew would lessen the fever and soothe the King and his men. He then went down to the shore and sought out Jowan, the fisherman.

Some years before, Merlin had travelled into the land of the Silures across the water to the north of Tintagel. Although he had gone by land into that territory, he had returned by sea. Merlin hated to travel by boat but on this occasion, there had been no choice. He had arranged that Jowan should sail from Tintagel and meet him at a certain place and time on the Silures' coast. Jowan's skill on the water meant that he met Merlin exactly where and when he had said he would. Such a journey was in sight of land nearly all the way, but it required perseverance and seamanship. Merlin would trust no other for the journey to Jarrow.

Jowan was sitting on the shore, his nets spread across his knees. Although he had seen forty summers Jowan still looked hale and hearty. He sat apparently at ease, but Merlin knew of the wound that had made walking difficult for the fisherman. It had not stopped him from sailing, though.

Merlin hailed him. "Aren't you fishing today, Jowan?"

Jowan's face split in a grin. "No. Yesterday's catch was sufficient, even though my net received a tear from the rocks. Look." He pointed across the water. "Sowena, my daughter, has taken the boat."

Across the waves Merlin saw several fishing boats but he knew Jowan's boat at once. Its dark red sail was easily the furthest off the shore and in the stiff breeze white foam was breaking under its bow. Framed by the sail, Merlin could make out Sowena's pale hair, blown by the same wind that sent the boat scudding across the bay.

"I thought Sowena was serving at court," said Merlin.

Jowan looked rueful. "She was, for a while. It was her mother's wish. But she has too much of the sea about her."

Merlin looked at his friend. It seemed Jowan was happy that his daughter preferred the open waves to working as a maid.

"I tell her not to press the boat so hard, but she lacks fear."

"Is the boat not too heavy for her?" asked Merlin.

"It seems that Sowena can charm the wind. Whenever she sails the boat sits lightly on the waves. Look, she is turning to shore now." Jowan shook his head. "But you didn't come down here to watch the waves, Merlin. What brings you to the shore?"

"Jowan, the plague has brought many fleeing west for sanctuary. We'll need whatever you can catch to help feed them all. The harvest on land has been good but we need as much fish as you can catch."

"You need not tell me that," replied Jowan. "Some of the newcomers were here yesterday. They wanted to buy my fish before I had even unloaded the catch."

Merlin sat beside him. "I know. I sent them. I want them to realise that their presence risks straining our welcome. It will be well if they pay for some of the food they receive."

Jowan nodded and Merlin continued, "My friend, I need to travel. But until all is set in place the news of my journey must not be known."

"Do you mean to travel into the lands where there is plague?"

"No," said Merlin. "I seek a land where there is no plague."

"You'll have to travel far, then," said Jowan. "We have met with fisherman from the Silures in the past months. Where once we would trade with them, they now hold their boats away from ours and call over the water. "Do you have the plague?" they ask. It has reached their shores as well, Merlin."

"I need to sail far to the north of the Silures and Ordovices, Jowan. I need to sail to the end of the Romanii wall."

Jowan breathed deeply.

"And I will take Arthur with me," continued Merlin. "He must escape the plague."

Jowan put down his needle and stared at Merlin. "Arthur? He's only a baby. How can he travel so far?"

Merlin stood up but continued to talk softly. "A nurse will be found to accompany us. Can you sail so far with three of us in the boat?"

"I can, Merlin. But it will be a long voyage. With three extra, even one so small, we will have to find some provisions on the way. And although the winds will be with us going north, it will be a slow return."

"There may be no return for us, Jowan. Once we reach the wall's end, we must cross the country to a safe haven for Arthur and we must stay with him until word comes that it is safe to come back to Tintagel."

Jowan bowed his head. "I said I can make the journey. But I don't know that I want to."

Merlin stared across the waves. "I know. But the child has a future that will make the whole realm of Britannia a safe haven, if he can survive."

"How could I leave my child?" Jowan asked.

"She will be well cared for. She could live at court, as she did before, but not as a servant. She would have high honour."

Jowan did not speak.

"I ask you because of your skill," said Merlin, simply. "I know your daughter is precious to you. If you undertake this journey two children may never see their parents again."

Returning to the hall, Merlin found there was no further news from Uther. Calling on the Queen he found her calm again.

"Merlin, you're right. I must remain here in Tintagel." She finished folding the garment in her hand and laid it in a basket. She took Arthur from the sheepskin rug on which he lay. "He's our future and he must be kept safe."

"My lady, your duty is to be commended."

"There is no new message from Uther. Perhaps he is resting before he journeys home."

"I hope that is the case. Ygraine, I hear..."

"Tell me, Merlin, why did you go down to the shore earlier?"

"I went to ask the fishermen to keep fishing as long as they can before the autumn storms come. We will need as much food as possible to sustain the newcomers."

Ygraine cuddled Arthur and rocked him gently. "I thought you might be talking with one of the fishermen about travelling north. But you need not set off immediately. The plague is not here yet and I would spend as much time as possible with Arthur."

Merlin frowned. "Uther's command was to take Arthur to safety. The longer he stays here, the more risk there is that the plague may arrive. Any of the newcomers may be carrying the illness."

He went again to the table and looked at the map he had sketched. "Can you give some thought as to which of your maids I might take with me? She'll need to be hardy for the journey, and a good sailor."

Ygraine cradled Arthur in one arm and gathered up some more clothes. She put them in the basket.

"My lady?"

"Of course. I think I might choose Kensa. Arthur always seems happy in her company." Ygraine looked around the room decisively, picked up the basket and turned to Merlin. "In fact, I'll find her now and tell her the plans."

She left the room and for a while Merlin gazed out of the window, glad that Ygraine had accepted Uther's will.

There was a knock on the door. "Come in," called Merlin.

It was Kenan, Ygraine's page. "Oh, Lord Merlin. I hoped to find the Queen here."

"She left a minute ago, Kenan. What did you want?"

"My lord, the ostler says he has the horses ready for my lady. And food packed for two days."

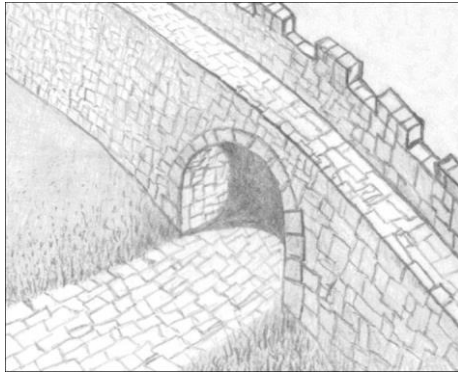
Merlin strode from the window. "What horses?"

"The queen ordered them to be made ready as soon as possible. For her journey west..." Kenan looked puzzled. He thought Merlin would know of any plan of Ygraine's to leave Tintagel.

"Yes. Well done, Kenan. Thank you." Merlin was through the door. "I'll tell the queen myself." If I can find her in time, he thought.

Despite his sudden anxiety, he paused outside the chamber. Perhaps Ygraine meant only to be away for two days as a period of rest. And, of course, she would want Arthur with her.

However, with the King away, Ygraine's duty was to rule in his place and Merlin could not forget the urgency of Uther's other command.



Merlin strode forward. Round the corner towards him came two maids, dressed for riding. Merlin greeted them but instead of responding, they looked away and hurried past. His sense of unease deepened. Further along, Merlin came to a window that overlooked the courtyard. Normally any royal departure would be preceded by much hustle and bustle, but now all was quiet.

Where was Ygraine?

Merlin saw a slim, pale-headed figure run into the courtyard, look around and then head to the entrance of the hall. He hurried to greet Sowena.

“Merlin,” she called. “I’ve come from my father. He wants to speak more to you.”

“Thank you for coming, Sowena. There is urgent business here that I must attend to first but...”

“It’s all right. He’s coming up to meet you but he will be slow because of his leg.”

From behind the building came the sound of horses neighing and the Queen’s voice bidding the ostler to hold them still.

Merlin knew what he must do. He must take Arthur immediately. But how?

Sowena stared at Merlin. “Merlin. Is something wrong?”

Merlin made up his mind to take Sowena into his confidence. He spoke quickly. “Sowena. You have heard the news about Uther?”

“Yes. He’s not going to come back until he’s recovered...”

“He won’t recover.”

Sowena gasped.

“He has the plague. He won’t return for fear of spreading the disease. But it’s coming. Uther has ordered me to take Arthur to safety, but...” he paused.

Sowena was staring at him.

Merlin continued. “You know how much your father loves you because you’re his only child?”

She nodded.

“Ygraine wants to take Arthur away, but she cannot take him far enough. Also, she must stay here and rule. I know where he’ll be safe, but I need him now.”

Can I really ask her to do this? he thought. Ygraine will be so angry if she finds out.

“Go through to the garden and find the queen. I think Kensa will be with her, and there may be others. They are planning to ride away and will be very busy. Go and offer to hold Arthur, like you used to. Maybe even suggest he might need some food. Try and get to the edge of the garden by the tall oak trees.”

“I can’t just take the queen’s child from her. Why can she not come...?”

“Arthur must get to safety,” insisted Merlin. “And it must be now. I know you’re too young to understand all of this, but he has a destiny that must not be denied.”

“I’m nearly thirteen,” she bridled. “And I’m the best sailor here, after my father.”

“Then you can do this, Sowena. Go. I’ll meet you there.”

She turned immediately, set her head high and walked towards the garden entrance.

Merlin went swiftly to the guardhouse. Owen, the commander of the guard, was there.

“Owen, I’ve just heard from Sowena that several boats have come into the harbour. She says they have many people on board and that some of them are sick. Go to the queen and ask her to meet me in her chamber to discuss this.”

“I believe the queen has gone, Merlin. She told me she is riding to Tregear for a few days and has given me orders for the safety of the hall.”

“Yes, she is going,” said Merlin quickly. “But she has not yet departed. She and her party are still in the garden. Go now. If news of these arrivals spread through Tintagel, there may be... difficulties.”

Owen set off across the courtyard. Merlin cast his eyes around the room. There were two soldiers’ packs against the wall which he quickly grabbed. He slung a flask of water across his back and hurried out.

Turning quickly outside the gate, Merlin ran along the walls to where the branches of the oak trees spread out over the stonework. Dropping the packs, he scrambled up into one of the trees and worked his way through the branches so he could observe the garden.

There were horses, and baggage and several maids, and two soldiers. Kensa was indeed there and was tying a basket to one of the saddles.

Owen had reached the queen. Ygraine’s voice came shrilly through the air. “I cannot see Merlin now. I must set off so as to reach Tregear before dark. Tell him, Owen, that he is to make such provision as he can for these new arrivals.”

“My lady, some of them are...” Owen’s voice dropped, and he inclined his head closer to Ygraine. Merlin knew he did not want the news of the illness to be spread widely. Merlin saw Ygraine stiffen. Now she will want to be away even more urgently, he thought.

Merlin looked around. Although the packing was continuing, all eyes were on the queen and Owen. Just below Merlin, slightly hidden by the tree’s trunk, stood Sowena. She had Arthur, almost hidden in his wraps, safely in her arms.

“Pass him up to me,” Merlin hissed.

“What’s Owen talking about?” asked Sowena.

"No time for that. Give Arthur to me and then follow us." He took the baby from her outstretched hands and immediately began to clamber through the tree. He dropped to the ground. Sowena scrambled up into the tree and landed with a light thud beside him on the other side of the wall.

"Pick up those packs, and hurry."

"Where are we going?"

"To the harbour."

There was a shout from behind the wall. "Where is Sowena? Where is Arthur?" Ygraine was calling. "Kensa, where has the girl taken my son?"

"I don't know, my lady. She was here..." Kensa sounded distraught.

"Owen! Find Sowena! Find Arthur!"