



The King is Dying

*King Uther is dying.
I will do anything to make sure
Arthur rules Caerleon after him!*

Metal struck metal with a crash that sent birds flying from the treetops in panic.

'One for me!' shouted Arthur as his sword thumped Cai's ribs. A cheer went up from some of the warriors standing nearby. The rest just stood with their arms crossed, watching silently.

I glared at them. I hadn't realised how many supporters Taran had. Arthur will be king when his father dies, if all goes well. But Taran is the strongest warlord. The Council could choose him to lead the kingdom, if they wanted.

Cai leaped to one side, raised the long sword and connected with Arthur's shoulder. Arthur staggered and the birds scattered again.

'My point!' Cai grinned in triumph. As Arthur's cousin, he tried twice as hard to win. Though small he was quick on his feet, except when he tripped himself up.

'Careful!' I called to Arthur, ignoring the warrior's sniggers. I knew the swords were blunted but they could still wound, even with padded tunics and fish-scale armour.

Arthur thrust neatly past Cai's shield and knocked him flat on his back in the dirt.

'Arthur, good!' Bem shouted.

I smiled at Bem, who was perched next to me





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on the stone wall by the field. He was born with a weakness all down his right side, which gives him a lopsided look. No one thinks about it, he's simply cheerful singing Bem, who's always right in the middle of everything.

I clapped wildly and others joined in as Cai jumped up, ready to fight again.

'Time for lessons, Arthur!'

'Ooo, better go Arthur,' jeered a warrior. 'Can't keep your *little sister* waiting.'

'No, no,' Bem chided the warriors.

'It's all right, I'm used to it.'

I jumped down from the wall and busied myself scratching the ears of Stinker, the huge shaggy brown mongrel who never left Bem's side. He'll eat anything smaller than a barrel, which makes him have farts so strong you can almost see them. He licked my hand and let one out now. I moved quickly aside, joining Arthur who was leaving the training field.

People think it's odd the king's son treats me like a sister. I can't say why, it just happened. My father was a warlord, one of the strongest and bravest men among all the tribes of Caerleon. After he was killed in battle three years ago, my mother shut herself away in the Abbey on the High Hill. I can go and see her any time I want, but she never leaves the compound. I think there's a rule that the nuns and monks must stay there.

'I didn't mark the hour,' Arthur said, pushing his blond hair off his forehead.

A servant darted forward to slip the heavy armour and padding over his head. Underneath,

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his simple belted tunic showed how slender he was. Thin, almost. As usual his tunic was dirty and fraying at the edges. I thought if he dressed more like a king's son the people would respect him, but he always said respect had to be earned, not snatched at greedily by wearing fine clothes.

'I won!' Cai shouted.

He threw his sword in the dirt and turned a cartwheel. He forgot about the weight of his armour and overbalanced, landing flat on his back. The men broke out laughing and Cai's dark face turned as red as a painted vase. He obviously had the wind knocked out of him and made a few feeble swimming motions like a tortoise turned on its shell. Arthur and I couldn't help giggling.

'You did not win! Arthur clearly beat you!' I added for his ears alone, 'You need to make every win count, let the men see your skill.'

'You worry too much, Little Sister. That was just for fun. When we train properly we use wooden swords; they're twice as heavy.'

'I'm not really 'little' any more, you know!'

Arthur grinned at me. Until this year he was a head taller but I was catching up with him, even though he's a year older than me, almost fifteen. He never tries to make the warriors stop teasing me about being his sister or wearing tunic and trousers all the time instead of the long skirts of a woman. I guess he knows I can take care of myself!

Cai got to his feet and sulked along behind us as we walked down the hill past the war-house, a whole complex of buildings where the warriors lived and trained and stored their weapons.





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'You didn't see the whole thing,' Arthur added. 'We were counting points. Cai had ten to my seven, but tomorrow it's my turn.'

I was wasting my breath, as usual.

'We'll sit for a while with Magnus to keep him happy,' he said, 'then I want you to meet us at our place on the High Hill. There's something I have to show you.'

'All right—what is it?' I noticed how serious he looked all of a sudden.

'Later!'

'You're practising with the wooden sword as well, aren't you?'

'Of course!'

'In battle, everything will depend on your skill.'

'An hour each day, without fail. I can kill a man any day with a bit of oak!' Arthur grinned and his eyes sparkled. They looked almost green now, but they changed with his mood.

He simply wouldn't take it seriously. The whole warrior training was an amusing game to him, and to Cai. Why couldn't they understand that Arthur's future, and even that of Caerleon kingdom, depended on him being a better warrior than anyone else? I'd never thought the Council would pick Taran over the king's own son, but now I was starting to wonder.

The villa below us shimmered in the hot summer sun. It was a large square of rooms around a central courtyard, with buildings such as stables and sheds for carpenter and blacksmith outside the square. The river Usk flowed between the king's villa and the town of Caerleon, where the Second Legion





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had been quartered years ago. After the Romans left, some of their buildings were dismantled and the stones carried across to build the villa compound and wall around it.

'Come on, hurry up, we're late for our lesson!' The boys were dragging their feet as we entered the courtyard by the small east gate and crossed to Magnus' room.

'Greetings, pupils!'

Magnus stood in the door of his work-room, his smile making the lines in his face look even deeper. He was the king's advisor, easily the cleverest man in the whole of Caerleon kingdom.

'You are late. Dare I ask why?'

'We were at training.'

'And you, Vibiana? Are you also training to be a warrior?'

'She's our keeper,' Cai said. 'We'd never get anywhere on time if we didn't have her to boss us!'

I crossed my eyes at him when Magnus wasn't looking and we followed him into the room, a combination of sleeping chamber, study and science laboratory.

Magnus tries his best to keep Roman language and customs alive, which is why he lets me join in the lessons, even though I'm only a servant girl. The Romans left over a hundred years ago and I reckon in another hundred we'll have forgotten all about them, but not if Magnus has his way.

We worked hard for the rest of the morning but I hardly felt tired, unless I looked at the exhausted faces of Cai and Arthur. I held out my wax tablet and glanced up at Magnus.





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'Good?'

'Good, Vibiana,' he said with a smile. 'You progress every day. Boys, take note! You will have to work hard to keep up with her.'

Arthur sighed and pushed the hair off of his sweaty forehead. Cai was bending over his tablet, his tongue sticking in his cheek and his dark hair nearly touching the wooden frame. I felt a bit sorry for them; they didn't think learning to read and write Latin was fun, the way I did.

'Have you begun your record-book?' Magnus asked me.

'Yes. I work on it at night when your mother sleeps.'

Magnus had told me write down what happens to me each day, or things I'm thinking about, to practice writing in Latin. He gave me some thin sheets of wood and a quill and sooty ink. I'm hiding the sheets in the chest where I keep my winter cloak. Not that anyone will want to read it. My mother doesn't care what I do; she just sits all day in her cell at the Abbey, praying.

'It's hard work!' I added.

'Your hand will accustom to forming the letters.'

'I mean, it's hard to think what to say. I want to write important things, not just *Today I brushed my hair.*'

'For you, that would be an event!'

I scowled at him and untied the string I use to keep my unruly hair out of my face, then tied it again more tightly. He was one to talk! His hair was like dark earth strewn with snow, and stood out in every direction.

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'Now tell me: what is the vocative of *Brutus*?'
'*Brute.*'

'Good! Arthur, it's your turn....'

The lesson continued. After another hour I looked up from my tablet and gazed out the window. From this room at the front of the villa there was a view all the way down to the river and the ruined Roman theatre beyond. Suddenly I realised all the shadows were short and thought of Magnus' mother.

'I must go! Your mother needs me to wheel her out of the sunshine.'

Magnus sighed and nodded. 'Just think, I had hopes of making a scholar out of you!' He frowned, making the lines in his face look like furrows of a ploughed field.

I looked closely and saw his eyes sparkle.

'Go on then! I'll have to make do with these two.'

I heard Cai and Arthur stifling groans as I ran from the room, dodging bottles and jars heaped everywhere on the tile floor.

I never can quite figure Magnus out. He's a bit mysterious and I sometimes wonder what he gets up to when the rest of us are asleep. Especially, what he does with the huge globe of green glass which hangs suspended by heavy ropes over his work bench. I've asked him about it more than once, but he never gives a direct answer.

Sure enough, Zea was sound asleep in the hot sun. I felt guilty. I'm Zea's personal maid now, and her welfare is my responsibility. I had left her in the shade of the largest apple tree, one of many fruit trees which





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border the beds of dog-roses and vegetables in the centre of the courtyard. It was where we usually sat in the mornings, while she told me stories from her childhood or from the Scriptures. Arthur used to join us most days, but he's grown out of that now.

Zea was old, the oldest person I'd ever known and not even as strong as a sparrow. Magnus had made her a rolling chair out of an old wicker war chariot stuffed with cushions, but of course she could not wheel herself. She depended on me to do it.

Now here she was, baking in the noon heat. I moved behind the chair to grab the handles and she woke with a start.

'Oh! Vibiana, it's you.' She peered up at me and smiled. I touched the enamel clip which held her grey hair in a knot, and scorched my hand.

'You'll catch fire!' I exclaimed, wheeling her across the yard towards her room on the other side of the court. 'Summer should be over, but the days are still hot. You should rest.'

'I already have. No, come and sit with me a while, and I will tell you my dream.'

This was a game we often played, to see who had the best dream. Zea usually won. Most nights I slept like a stone, so I didn't dream.

I guided the chair into the doorway of her chamber and across the bright tiled floor to her usual place by the window. From there she could look out on all the comings and goings in the vast courtyard which was the heart of the villa compound. There wasn't much that escaped Zea's eye! I was thinking I should apologise for leaving





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her to roast in the sun when she smiled up at me, her face wrinkling like a dried walnut.

‘You did no harm. My old bones need the heat.’

‘Grandmother, you always read my mind.’ I smiled, settling down on the cushioned couch next to her. Of course she wasn’t really my grandmother, though sometimes I wished she was.

The light went from her face. ‘I had a dream that troubled me greatly.’

Something made my heart squeeze tight. Zea rarely had bad dreams. She always said she was so close to Heaven, it filled her thoughts even at night.

‘It concerns you both. You and Arthur.’

