



IGNITION

EMMA SHELFORD

MUSINGS OF MERLIN SERIES

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DEDICATION

For Steven

My inspiration, my enabler, and my sounding-board

PROLOGUE

Time. It rules our lives, ticking away the seconds, minutes, hours of our days. It's time to get up, time to leave, time to return. Suffering can stretch minutes into eons, and happiness can exist for only a heartbeat, yet stay with us for all time. From a baby's first angry wail to an old man's last sighing breath, our lives are subject to the coursing river of time. The only certainty of life is that everyone's time on Earth will end.

Everyone, that is, except me.

Time passes for me as it does for everyone else. It's just that I have seen so much more of it pass. For over fifteen hundred years I've walked this Earth, never dying, never aging. I'm waiting for someone to return. He was first my student, then my brother-in-arms, and finally my friend. They say he'll be back one day when he's needed again, and I promised that I'd wait for him to return. He'll need my help when he arrives. I'm pretty useful.

My name is Merlin, and this is one chapter in the story of my life.

CHAPTER I

I'm at my psychologist's office for the first time. Yes, I just started seeing a shrink. I've tried everything else in this world—why not get my head examined? Of course, the poor woman won't know what hit her once I open up. She's used to dealing with divorcées and troubled kids, not centuries-old magicians with abandonment issues and more baggage than would fit in an aircraft carrier.

Of course, I doubt I'll fill her in on the whole story. She'd laugh in my face—I've seen it before—although she might hide it behind a professional mask of genial understanding. If she thought I was serious, she'd likely urge me to check in for psychiatric examination. I don't look centuries-old. Thirty, give or take.

More likely I'll give her a condensed version—just enough drama to comfortably fit into one lifetime. We'll see how much the woman can handle. My life can be too difficult for regular people. It can be too difficult for me sometimes, and I've lived it.

I wonder how long the sessions will last, since half the things I tell her will have to be fabricated. She even has problems right off the bat with my name.

“Please sit down, Mr.—” She looks down at her notepad, and pulls a lock of shoulder-length brown hair behind one ear with a nervous twitch. “Lytton. My name is Dr. Minnie Dilleck. May I call you—” She squints at her notes again. “Merry?”

She's definitely new at her job. That's my fault for picking the youngest, prettiest female psychologist in Vancouver, B.C. Not that it's a problem—I came for the experience of being in therapy, not to delve deeply into my psyche. I might as well enjoy the scenery along the way.

“Yes, of course. And before you ask, yes, Merry like the hobbit.” Although I came up with the name long before Tolkien ever dreamed of Middle Earth. I make it a game with myself to choose names similar to my true name. Depending on the country I'm living in at the time, this can be difficult or easy. Merry Lytton is my nom du jour. Given my tanned complexion and black-brown hair, cut short for this time, it's not difficult to fit in wherever I please. And I've always had a flair for languages, especially after centuries of practice. It's easy to slide completely into whatever persona I've chosen. I'm eminently adaptable.

“Am I supposed to lay down on the couch now?” I flop onto the surprisingly uncomfortable couch covered in gray faux-suede, swinging my legs up and resting my ankles on the armrest.

“If—if you're more comfortable that way, by all means.” She looks a little flustered at my teasing. I take my fun where I can, so sue me. The experience will be good for her. Builds character, as my mother was fond of saying long ago. So very, very long ago.

“So, Merry.” Dr. Dilleck smooths her pencil skirt over her thighs. The glass coffee table between us houses a bowl of oranges and a discreet box of tissues. “Let's talk about you. Merry is an interesting name. Is it short for something?”

“It's short for Marybel, actually,” I say. Her eyes widen and her hand grips her pen more securely. I relent. “Only joking. Don't look so worried.”

“If your name were Marybel, it would be perfectly all right with me,” she says. I raise my eyebrows. Perhaps the little mouse has a spine. This might be interesting after all.

“So, Merry, what brought you here? Is there anything in particular you'd like to discuss?”

Hmm. Good question. Luckily, I have my answer ready.

“I fight off and on with depression, and I’ve never come to anyone to deal with it. I thought maybe it was time. I’m feeling good now, you understand, but it always comes back. I figure it can’t hurt to explore a bit.”

She’s nodding before I finish.

“It’s great that you’re here, Merry. Good for you. It takes courage to face your inner demons. Now you have help—we can face them together.”

I settle in for the hour. We talk for a while about what happens when I get depressed—I sleep, mainly, because it’s not as if I need to worry about wasting my life away—and how I improve my mood. I don’t have high hopes that anything will come of this. It’s not depression as people today classify it, brain chemistry gone haywire. It’s simply too many layers of loss, and sometimes grief gets the better of me. There’s not much this doctor can do about it. That’s okay. She has a very calming voice, and her eyes are large with pale gray irises—quite mesmerizing.

“Do you find there is a trigger, some way to release you from your depression?”

Air puffs out of my nose in a mirthless chuckle.

“I try to remember that someone might need me, someday.”

“That’s good. Try to hold onto that.” She nods before continuing. “Do you have any family? A significant other?”

I stare at the ceiling. Did she really have to go there? I guess I should have expected it. Oh well, I can give her some real fodder to work with.

“Family long since dead. Never knew my father. No children. My wife,” my most recent wife, that is, “died years ago also. Honestly, I’d rather not talk about it.” There’s the truth. It’s only taken me thirty years to move on from Josephine’s death. I swear, each time a woman I love dies, it gets harder.

“Okay.” Her voice is soothing and low. “Whenever you’re ready. There’s no rush.” I glance over to see her biting her lip and looking down at her notes. She’s obviously itching to ask more but is professional enough to respect my wishes. I almost feel bad denying her. Maybe I should throw her a bone.

“I guess I should tell you—I have very strange dreams.”

She sits up straighter.

“Oh?”

I try not to smile.

“I keep reliving my past. They’re very vivid dreams. More like memories, really.” I used to dream properly when I was younger, the usual nonsense about talking horses and flying castles and other bizarre things. Now, though, I’m only visited by the ghosts of my past. The intense memories fill me with joy and plague me with sorrow and guilt.

“Dreams can be very important parts of our subconscious. Often our brains are processing things in the night that we don’t want to deal with consciously. May I suggest you start a dream journal? In fact, journaling in general can be very beneficial.”

She’s about to ask more when I notice the clock strike three.

“Oops, looks like we’re done here.” I swing my legs to the ground and push to my feet with alacrity. That’s just about enough soul-searching for today. Perhaps this wasn’t such a good idea after all.

She almost looks a little disappointed.

“Yes, of course. Well, it was wonderful to meet you, Merry. I think we made some progress here today. I’d love to see you back here soon.”

We’ll see. I smile noncommittally and say goodbye.

A few hours later, I cross the quad at the university where I work. One would think I could retire after fifteen hundred years in the workforce, but I doubt social security has figured out the paperwork for an eternity of pension benefits.

And besides, what would I do all day? Play golf? It’s not as if I need to rest. I have the body and vigor of a thirty-year-old man, and a brain filled with centuries of knowledge and experience. Honestly, it’s a relief to do something. It helps me avoid long contemplative introspection. Makes me wonder why I’m starting these shrink sessions, although I do enjoy talking about myself, which I’m rarely able to do.

“Hey, Merry! Wait up!”

To my left, a pretty girl lopes toward me across the grass, her long, slender legs in their tiny butt-hugging shorts dodging the clusters of sprawling students in her way. Her black hair swishes around her shoulders and sweeps forward as she falls into place beside me, her face beaming.

“Hi, Jen,” I say. Jennifer Chan took one of my classes a few years ago—a translation course focusing on Old English texts, mainly pre-Norman Saxon. She was by far the brightest student in my class, an absolute prodigy at languages of all sorts. She’d come with great questions, and we would often fall into long conversations after class. We struck up a friendship once exams finished and prying eyes in the department were satisfied that the teacher-student relationship was dissolved. Not that I feel anything more than friendship for Jen, surprisingly. She’s a beautiful girl, all slender limbs without sacrificing curves in the right places, with a pleasant oval face from her Asian father and large, friendly eyes gifted by her Danish mother.

If I do have a weakness, it’s for women. It’s got me into plenty of trouble in the past, more than I care to admit. I may have a centuries-old mind, but the rest of me hasn’t caught up. But Jen feels off-limits, somehow. It’s refreshing, actually, to be friends with a woman without lust taking the driver’s seat. As far as Jen is concerned, I’m simply a young sessional instructor at the university who’s not much older than her. Hah.

I’m still not sure why she befriended me so readily. Perhaps it was our shared interest in language and history, and she wanted conversations with a little more depth than her circle of friends could give her. Or maybe she can tell I’m different, and who isn’t attracted to something new and exciting? Whatever the reason, I’m not complaining. Friends don’t come my way often enough, and I don’t want to analyze this one.

“You look pretty peppy for exam season.” It’s true—Jen always has a bounce in her step, a physical release of her natural joie de vivre, but today she is positively springy.

“All done! Mandarin yesterday and ancient Hebrew this morning. The rest were last week. I totally aced them all, of course.” She winks at me. She isn’t very good at winking—her eyes sort of squint simultaneously—but it’s endearing, and I get the message.

“I would expect nothing less from my finest pupil.” I give her a one-armed hug. “Nice work. So does this mean you’re done? As in degree, long robes, silly hat?”

“You better believe it!”

“Well, congrats. That’s big news. I, on the other hand, have a huge pile of marking to do. Where your work ends, mine begins.”

“Poor, long-suffering Merry. All those terrible essays. Never mind all that. You can buy me coffee tomorrow to celebrate my accomplishments and distract yourself from the drudgery of marking.”

I laugh.

“I guess that’s fair.” We walk in companionable silence for a few moments until Jen checks her watch.

“Oops, got to run. I have an interview for an interpreter job that starts next week.” She rolls her eyes. “My dad set it up. The firm is run by an old buddy of his, so I’ll probably get the job no matter what. But it doesn’t hurt to be on time.” Jen’s father is the CEO of a very large, very successful corporation headquartered in Vancouver, with satellite offices all over the world. I know it bothers Jen to take advantage of her father’s position, but it’s hard to turn down the opportunities she’s afforded.

“See you tomorrow. Come by my office at ten,” I say. She waves goodbye and strides across the grass to the bus loop. She doesn’t notice that she’s walking straight into the middle of a Frisbee game. When she reaches the center of the grassy boulevard, the whirling disk spins directly toward her head. Without thinking, I tweak the *lauvan* surrounding Jen. The Frisbee bounces harmlessly off the air above her head and skitters across the grass. Jen doesn’t even break stride.

Soul-searching with the psychologist left a bitter taste in my mouth, only momentarily alleviated by Jen’s buoyant presence. I’m tired, the weight of memories threatening to pull me under the surface. My face lifts toward the sun in an attempt to banish ghosts. I don’t have much luck.

I continue to walk across campus, deciding against marking any more today, and enter an outdoor breezeway to get to the car park. On the right wall hangs a poster for a Harry Potter movie marathon at the campus theater. My head shakes and my mouth twitches upward involuntarily. People nowadays love the idea of magic, at least around here. It’s all wands and sparks and mind control. No one believes it, of course, except maybe the hopeful kiddies jumping off their beds on kitchen brooms. It’s simply blissful escapism. I can understand that. It’s much better than the witch hunts in the sixteenth century, or the lynchings and burnings in certain parts of the world today.

The thing is, magic doesn’t exist. Not like that, anyway. The only person I’ve ever seen do anything out of the ordinary is me. And it’s not wizard fire and “you shall not pass.”

What I do is more—how do I describe it? It’s as if there’s a layer of extra matter around everything that is invisible to everyone. But to me, the layer appears as a vast covering of translucent, interconnected threads woven around anything that has inherent energy. A fire has plenty of threads, as does a rock flying through the air. A rock sitting on the ground, though, doesn’t have much in the thread department, although if it’s an igneous rock it may have a few leftover threads from its fiery birth in a volcanic eruption. I call these threads *lauvan*, which means “rope” in my native tongue—a language nobody speaks anymore.

Living things, especially, have an abundance of *lauvan*. In humans, they’re an extension of the body, but also of the spirit. It’s complicated. If the human body is like Earth, then the *lauvan* are the atmosphere around it. The atmosphere can’t be seen except by a precious few astronauts, but without it, the Earth would be a barren, lifeless void. So too with the *lauvan*. The *lauvan* help make us who we are, and when we die, our *lauvan* unravel and dissolve into nothingness. They are an extension of

energy from the physical body, what gives it animation. The soul, if you will.

As I said, it's complicated. I've had centuries to think about it, and that's the best explanation I can muster. It doesn't help that I'm the only one I've ever known who is like me, so there's no one to ask. I've certainly looked. Any vague rumor of magic or sorcery used to have me running to examine the hopefuls, but no one could ever see the lauvan. I gave up after the eleventh century.

Not only can I see the lauvan, I can touch them if I wish to. Manipulating the lauvan affects the physical world—when I pulled at Jen's lauvan, I prevented the Frisbee from slamming into her head. It's certainly useful, and I've had a lot of time to be inventive.

My car waits for me in the car park. It's a dark blue Lotus Elise. I should really have something more inconspicuous, although in a city rampant with Ferraris and Maseratis, mine doesn't stand out as much as one might expect. I've taken the glamorous route in the past, but the less noticeable I make my life, the longer I can stay in one place. I have the money—it's not hard to make it when you're as resourceful and experienced as I am—but to keep my cover, I can't show off too much. This city is comfortable for the moment, and I don't want to leave it right now. But the car was too hard to resist. I've always loved the rush of speed even from my days on horseback, and the luxury of a fast car is an indulgence I'm not willing to forgo.

The car purrs to life. I back out of the parking spot and the radio kicks in.

"...with their newest single. Up now, your quick-bit news bites, the quickest news so you can get back to listening to the music you love! The big local buzz is volcanic activity on Mt. Linnigan, just outside Wallerton, B.C. Hikers reported steam coming out of the mountain's peak. Seismologists say that this is unusual activity from a dormant volcano, but insist there is nothing to worry about. I say, time to get the popcorn! We could have an awesome lava show in the near future!"

I grunt and hit the "off" button. Typical. The announcer seems to know very little about his topic. It's doubtful we'd get much lava in this region. It's possible, but not common, given the geology of the tectonic plates here. When plate tectonic theory emerged a few decades ago, I read everything I could about it. I like to keep up to date, especially where the Earth is concerned.

After a short and blissfully quiet drive home, I pull into the underground parking of my apartment block. Perhaps it's an odd choice for someone who could live anywhere he chose. I could say that it's to keep my inconspicuous cover—what would a sessional instructor be doing with a house in this expensive realty market?—but, in truth, it's comforting living among so many people. I can hear their lives occurring through the remarkably thin walls, and I can chat to them when we pass in the hallways. Their lauvan also occasionally float through the walls into my apartment. Did I not mention? It's mostly peopled by the elderly. I'm pretty sure I'm the "youngest" person living in the complex by a wide margin. Older people often have a greater number of loose lauvan. I expect that it's a function of a slow release of life, letting go of the spirit from the body. They often also have more connections outside of themselves, more of their lauvan stretching away in connection with distant friends and relatives. It's comforting to touch the lives of others, however tenuous the association, however minor. It makes me feel connected, part of something.

Not just a spectator living on the fringes, a part of the world but not of it.

My own lauvan are much looser than anyone I've ever met. Years of living and loving and losing have ripped the lauvan away from my body. After every loss, they have a harder time tightening up against my physical form. Now, after so many centuries, they tend to wave around me in a wispy

cloud of chocolate brown threads rather than the coils I see surrounding most people. I'm still here, though—my lauvan haven't left me yet.

The elevator takes me to the fifth floor where I step out to walk directly into a particularly strong lauvan floating by. I smile. Mrs. Watson is telling off her husband again. Annoyance vibrates through the lauvan when it hits my own, but an underlying affection hums below it. It's their ritual, one I can sense they've been doing for decades. Gary Watson usually turns his good ear toward me when we play chess together, but I gather that his deaf ear gets a lot of use too.

Key sliding into lock, bolt clicking open, hand twisting on knob. How many doors have I come home to? This door opens up to a fairly decent view, as far as my past homes are concerned. I've had much warmer and welcoming homes to enter in my time but also some far worse ones, so I suppose I can't complain. It's simple and clean, a one bedroom with a view of snow-capped mountains, providing a uniquely restful view in the city. A lone bookshelf hugs the living room wall. It's full of my eclectic collection of keepsakes—a group of holy objects from different religions that hum with lauvan, such as a folded bundle of Tibetan prayer flags, a shrunken head from the Shuar tribe of Ecuador, and a splinter of wood reputedly from the Christian cross, among others. Although these items are neither moving nor living, they still have lauvan. Any inanimate object that is valued or worshipped for long enough will collect the lauvan of its worshipers. All the relics I own, whether or not they have any intrinsic value or truth, are imbued with enough lauvan to have worth in their own right. There's also my sketchbook, a few of my favorite weapons that I've held onto, as well as some musical instruments. One is a small fifteenth-century harp I was given by the blind harpist Turlough O'Carolan when we played together one winter in the hills of western Ireland, and I transcribed some of his original melodies for him. The décor in the rest of my apartment is minimal. After living for so long on the move, I've learned not to keep many possessions. Even my keepsakes are disposable, except for my sketchbook. That has too many memories to leave behind.

I flop on the couch, too tired to stay upright. My mind flits back to the memories my therapy session dredged up. Josephine's laughing blue eyes torment me behind my eyelids. It's been thirty years since she died, and still she haunts me. My mind travels back through time, flipping through friends and lovers and wives on the pages of the book that is my life, further and further back. I fall asleep, my thoughts filled with some of my first memories, from so long ago.

CHAPTER II

Dreaming

I lie stomach-down on a large flat rock on the banks of a sluggish river. The water is clear and the dark shapes of river trout move in the depths beyond my reach.

My mouth waters at the thought of fresh fish roasted over a crackling fire. It's been two days since I've had a proper meal—game is scarce with winter fast approaching. I curse my wanderlust. What madness compelled me to leave the south?

“Here we go,” I say out loud, and slide my hands carefully into the water. The lauvan of the fish are barely visible in the clear water and I can't see any breaking the surface.

My hands tingle and bite with the cold almost immediately. I grit my teeth and feel for the lauvan.

“What are you doing?” A voice breaks my concentration. I drop my head in frustration and look up at my interrogator.

A boy of about ten stares at me with curiosity in his brown eyes. His dark curls are a tousled mess around a plain but pleasant face. He has an open, hopeful expression, as if he expects me to say something exciting that he can tell all his little friends about. His lauvan match his face, lively and a fresh spring-green at odds with the falling brown leaves of autumn surrounding him.

I'm too tired and hungry to pander to a child. I settle for the truth, and hope it will be boring enough to make him go away.

“Fishing.” I turn away from him and plunge my hands into the frigid water again. I close my eyes to concentrate.

A few moments go by, and then close to my ear, “With your hands?” My eyes pop open. The boy is on his stomach beside me, peering into the water.

“No, with my toes. Now shush while I concentrate.” I close my eyes resolutely and find the lauvan of a particularly large trout swimming a few arm-spans out of reach.

The boy is perfectly still beside me, surprisingly. With the lauvan firmly between my fingers, I risk a peek at him to make sure he isn't jeopardizing my dinner. He watches my fingers intently with a curious frown wrinkling his brow. He senses my gaze and smiles hopefully.

Little squirt. I'll give him something to tell his friends. I find myself answering his smile with one of my own, suddenly eager to show off my skills. I don't let many people see—it's far too dangerous when the fearful can easily blame me for all their woes—but this is just a boy. Who would he tell, and if he did, who would believe him?

“Are you watching?” I ask. He nods vigorously. I turn back to the water and wind the lauvan around my fingers, slowly, so slowly. The fish moves imperceptibly our way, as if it were meaning to do so all along. I know better. My hold on the fish is tenuous, and if the fish startled I would lose it. But my pulls are more of a suggestion than a command, and as the fish comes closer I snag more of its smooth and slippery lauvan. I twine them together into a coarse rope.

The fish is almost within my reach. I keep my eyes on the fish, but say, “Are you ready?”

“Yes,” the boy whispers.

I grip the fish's lauvan tightly and say quietly, “One, two, three!” On the third count I heave the lauvan up with a jerk.

The fish leaps into the air. Scales glint in the dull afternoon light. The fish writhes in fear and

lauvan spasm around its body. I roll onto my back, away from the boy, and lift my arms.

Just as I'd planned, the fish lands exactly in my outstretched hands. Feeling very pleased with myself, I roll over again and bash the creature's head against the rock until it stills.

I find myself breathing heavily from excitement and grinning broadly. I look to the boy, one eyebrow raised, looking for his reaction. His eyes are wide with shock and his mouth hangs open. He stares at me for a moment, before his face expands with a delighted smile.

“Wow, that was amazing! How did you do that?”

It feels good to be admired, even if it's just by a ten year-old boy. But I'm only twenty-three myself and appreciate an ego boost in whatever form it comes. I push myself up to my feet and hang the fish by its gills from my fingers.

“So, little squirt, are you joining me for dinner? Know that I make visitors collect firewood to earn their meal.”

The boy considers this. His face brightens.

“You could bring your fish home with me, and eat with us tonight. Father loves having visitors, and cook made honey cakes today.”

The boy's family is rich enough to hire a cook? Suddenly a solitary fish in the woods is much less appealing. I pretend to consider for a moment.

“I'd be happy to accept your offer, little squirt.” The boy beams and starts down a nearby path. I sling my bag over one shoulder and grab my harp case in my fish-less hand. “Wait. What is it that they call you?”

The boy runs back and relieves me of my harp. His eyes are bright and eager and his lauvan dance around him.

“My name is Arthur.”

I awake. My eyes are full, and drip out onto the pillow when I squeeze them shut.

CHAPTER III

Jen sips on her coffee and smiles in satisfaction.

“Mmm, it’s perfect.”

Of course it is. I made sure that the temperature was just right before I handed her the drink. It was a simple matter of twitching the lauvan of the hot coffee to release a little heat, enough to avoid a scalding.

“Well, I do have excellent coffee-ordering skills. It must be that.”

“No, it was definitely you flirting with the barista. She put in an extra effort for you.”

I laugh.

“So, my master plan is working. World domination via seduction.”

Jen bumps my shoulder with hers playfully, and her long braid thumps against my back.

“Don’t forget about me when you’re king of the world.”

We walk for a bit along the boardwalk at Steveston, a neighbourhood south of Vancouver with a history of fishing. Seagulls swoop and cry in a frenzy at the scent of fish sold straight off the boats. Families out for the first real summer warmth swarm the docks, ice creams in hand. We stroll up a set of wooden stairs to emerge onto a dusty side street, neglected by the happy family traffic. Jen slows down to look in a window and I match her pace.

“Check it out, Merry. There’re all sorts of weird crystals. Ooh, that one’s bright blue.”

I peer through the glass in the direction of Jen’s pointed finger. On a midnight-blue velvet cloth is a collection of jagged quartz crystals of varying sizes and shapes, some with veins of milky-white bisecting their structure, some with brilliant colors embedded in their surfaces. All the crystals are writhing with lauvan, a sure sign that they are valued to have power. The crystals sit next to a small fan of books with titles like *The Modern Tarot* and *Spiritual Mysticism and You*. Sheer fabrics of many brilliant hues are artfully draped above the display. They provide color as well as prevent a peek into the rest of the shop.

“Hey, look, they have free palm readings today.” Jen grabs my elbow and tugs me toward the door. Her golden lauvan dance, framing her eager face with color and energy. I love Jen for her vibrancy—around her, the burden of my years lightens. I hang back for a minute, resisting.

“Really? You want to go to a psychic? I can tell you your future.” I grab her hand and flip it up so her palm faces the sky. I trace the lines and say in a deep portentous voice, “Your life line is long and your head line is short. But beware a dark-haired man who provides delicious coffee, for he will surely buy you an ice cream later.”

Jen giggles and swats my hand away.

“It’ll be fun. And then we can laugh about it later over that ice cream. Come on, I bet you’ve never had your palm read before.”

In truth, I had my first palm reading courtesy of an old Gypsy woman in the side streets of Florence during the Italian Renaissance. She told me I had a very long life line. I said, “Tell me something I don’t know.”

I allow Jen to drag me across the threshold. We pass through an old wooden doorway painted a vibrant aqua, out of place alongside the metal and glass of the surrounding shops. It looks like a retrofit, and a DIY job, judging by the gouges in the doorframe where the hinges were misplaced. I

glance around the small shop after the door tinkles closed with the sound of wind chimes. They make a jarring jangle when I have to shove the ill-fitting door closed with my foot, ruining the ethereal mood they were clearly placed there to create.

The shop is tidy with minimalistic displays on round tables of varying heights. Directed spotlights on the ceiling highlight the contents of each table, while the rest of the shop is kept in cool dimness from the partially covered window. The displays contain more of the same from the window, plus some other offerings—stylistically illustrated tarot cards, candles, statues. The perfume of incense lingers mildly in the air. A murmured greeting floats to us from the corner, and when my eyes adjust I see a woman standing behind the counter dressed in a long, flowing shirt of undyed linen. Her graying hair is held back in a loose braid and her manner is friendly but not effusive, confirmed by muted silver lauvan that swirl calmly around her torso. She isn't trying for the hard sell, in any event.

Jen wanders around the shop to glance at a number of the displays. I follow her, amused by her show of browsing for politeness' sake. I wonder if it's as obvious to the shopkeeper, but conclude that we aren't the first skeptics to enter her shop on a whim. I haven't been in one of these new-age spirituality-type shops before, and my fingers hover over the lauvan of the nearest crystals with real interest.

After a minute, Jen must feel that she's done her time and approaches the shopkeeper.

"Hi. I saw you offered free palm readings?" She holds out her hand tentatively.

The shopkeeper smiles.

"Of course. On the house. It's always nice to have a little forewarning, isn't it? Think of this as an insight into the weather forecast of your life. Of course, nothing as detailed as rain on next Tuesday, but the signs will all be there. The interpretation is up to you." She grasps Jen's wrist gently and stretches out the fingers with her other hand to search the palm intently. Jen glances at me and we exchange raised eyebrows. The shopkeeper stays intent on her task until we turn our attention back to her. I wonder how much of our reaction she saw or guessed.

"It seems that you are waiting for someone. Waiting for your true love to arrive." The woman frowns and glances up at Jen, whose wrist is still clasped in her hand. She smiles at Jen's confused expression. "Don't worry. It will take time, but you will recognize him when he finally arrives and your eyes are opened."

Jen smiles uncertainly when the woman releases her.

"Thank you?" It's almost a question. She turns to me. "Okay, Merry, your turn."

"No, seriously, it's fine. I like my future a little foggy." I don't think I can handle the future as well as carry around all this past.

"Oh, come on, Merry." Jen grabs my hand and slaps it down on the counter. "Let's see what's in store for you."

I acquiesce—it seems easier. The woman cups my knuckles in her own palm. Her fingers are cool and dry, and I let my hand relax while she pulls each finger away from the palm.

She takes a long time to examine my hand. I stare at the top of her head, and wonder what she thinks she sees. I've never yet met anyone who I felt was actually practicing real magical ability, except myself. Perhaps they are all really good at hiding. I certainly am, after all. My eyes travel down to her neck and I'm startled to see orange lauvan, quite different from the woman's own, swirling around a gold chain. Lower, pulses of orange lauvan emerge from under the woman's collar. I'm intrigued. Does she have a lauvan-embedded amulet on her? Does it somehow help her see the future? I've

heard of such things, but they are rarer than hen's teeth, and I'm dubious that they actually work.

Jen kicks me and I jump slightly. The shopkeeper takes her free hand and carefully closes my fingers in a strange, somber gesture. It's as if she puts something precious in my hand, or rather, gently closes it around something she cannot bear to see.

She takes a while to raise her eyes. When they meet mine, they are filled with confusion and a little pity. I'm curious now. What does she think she saw? Or, with the help of the lauvan-infused necklace, did she actually see something?

The woman clears her throat.

"I saw a few things. First, you have a tremendously long life line." I try my level best not to roll my eyes at this, but it takes all the effort I can muster. She continues. "Second, you are also waiting for someone, but it is not your lover. You have been waiting a very long time. Know that your patience will be rewarded."

This startles me. It's not exactly a cookie-cutter response for a palm reader, and it's a little too close to the truth. I glance again at the chain and see the orange lauvan twining around her neck.

"Third and last, I see signs that are somewhat unclear." And the previous ones were crystal? I try to keep a serious expression on my face. "All I see is that you must be aware of the portents of doom that are presenting themselves to you. They must be heeded." She shakes her head briefly and swiftly, like a dog shaking water out of its fur. She takes both her hands and passes me back my own fist across the counter in a ceremonial gesture.

"Thanks very much. It was very enlightening." Jen grabs my elbow with strong fingers and pulls me away to the door. The woman stares after us, looking pensive. I echo Jen's thanks and follow her.

Once outside and three stores down the road, Jen lets out her breath with a whoosh and laughs. I try to shake the lingering questions I have about the truth of the shopkeeper's warning. Normally, I would never take the word of a fortune-teller seriously—I've seen too many charlatans in my day. But that necklace makes me wonder, especially when she told me I was waiting for someone. And then the warnings about portents—what did she mean? I clench my teeth in frustration. Stupid fortune-tellers—always telling you just enough to be curious, but not enough to be useful.

"Well! Now I've got to wait for my one true love to come sweep me off my feet." Jen holds out her arms and mimes running in slow-motion. I laugh and try to forget the comments of doom.

"Yeah, that was pretty bog-standard palm reading tripe. Are you happy now? You've had the best of the stereotypical fortune-telling visit."

"Oh, it was fun anyway. She was so serious about it, too. But your fortune was weird—she was trying to branch out a bit with you. Maybe she was trying to distract you from looking down her shirt."

"Is that why you kicked me? What you must think of me! I was checking out her necklace, that's all."

"Sure, sure. That's okay, I don't judge. If you prefer elderly women, that's your prerogative." I mime pushing her shoulder and she ducks away.

"That's not the wisest way of needling an ice cream out of me, just so you know."

The sun is low in the sky, even with the ever-lengthening days of approaching summer. I'm cooling my heels in my office, biding time until my obligations here are done. I offered office hours for any

last-minute questions before final essays are due for my classes. Two students came right at the start, but since then I've been swiveling in my office chair, lost to the world. I descend into this state at times—I faze out and hardly anything attracts my attention. A by-product of endless life, I suppose. I have to make it pass somehow.

A sharp knock wakes me from my reverie, and a young man peeks his head around the door.

“Dr. Lytton?”

“Come on in.” I stop my twirling with a solid planting of my feet on the floor. “You're just in time. What can I help you with?”

“I'm writing my essay on the Taming of the Shrew. Shakespeare, you know.”

“I'm familiar with it, yes,” I say drily. He doesn't notice my tone, which is just as well.

“I'm confused about the part when Petruchio acts annoyed and angry in front of Katherina. He yells something about being choleric. What's that about? Shouldn't that be a bigger deal if they've all got cholera?”

I try not to laugh. He's referring to the part in which Petruchio berates the servants for serving “choleric” mutton to two “choleric” people.

“Petruchio is referring to the four humors, a popular medicinal belief during that period. The theory goes that there are four fluids within each person that regulate their health and moods—blood, phlegm, and black and yellow bile. Lovely, I know. Too much black bile and a person grows melancholic. Too much yellow bile and they become choleric, or irritable and quick to anger. Often certain foods associated with each humor were fed to the afflicted person in the hopes that they would address the imbalance.”

I remember when my wife, Maria, died in 1553. We were living in Italy at the time and I grieved as I tend to do, by shutting myself in and sleeping for weeks on end. My landlady was certain I'd fallen prey to the worst case of melancholy she'd ever seen. She tried for weeks to get me to call the doctor for treatment, and eventually resorted to feeding me her own concoction of garlic-infused milk. I moved away quickly after that, so perhaps her treatment worked after all.

“So Petruchio is saying that they've got too much yellow bile? That's kind of disgusting.”

“It was a different time, certainly. It's all about creating a balance in the body. If one aspect is out of sync and is overpowering the others, then the body cannot keep a straight course. A balance of power is essential. Without balance of the parts, the whole will be sick.” Although I agree with the principles of balance, it's less to do with fluids in the body and more to do with the lauvan. I can see if someone is sick through a gathering of their lauvan in different places than in their center. Sometimes, I can even help fix it by manipulating the lauvan. Sometimes.

“Okay,” he says. “I guess I'll write about how Petruchio is trying to show Katherina how irritating she is.”

“Sure. But you'd better write quickly. The essay is due the day after tomorrow.”

“Okay. Thanks, Dr. Lytton.” He swings his backpack over one shoulder and hustles to the door.

“But not too quickly! I want it understandable,” I say to his back.

His retreating footsteps patter distantly before the door in the far hall slams shut. The clock tells me it's definitely time to go home. I gather my coat and a stack of papers to mark from another class and move quickly to the door. I don't want to be waylaid by a tardy student.

Once home, I settle myself onto the couch and rifle through the pile to find an essay by one of my better students. It's too late to start reading a terrible essay. Even so, it's slow progress. At every

page, I look at my watch and am surprised anew. Time never seems to pass so slowly as when marking.

Dear reader,

I hope you enjoyed reading this teaser of *Ignition* and meeting Merry for the first time. He sprang into my head practically overnight and would not be silenced until I got him out on paper. I've noticed he tends to get his way!

If you did enjoy *Ignition* so far, you can find it on [Amazon](#). *Winded*, book two in the Musings of Merlin Series, is also available, and book three is in the works. Keep an eye on the newsletter for news about my releases.

Thanks for reading,
Emma Shelford

ALSO BY EMMA SHELFORD

Musings of Merlin Series

Ignition

Winded

Breenan Series

Mark of the Breenan

Garden of Last Hope