



IGNITION

EMMA SHELFORD

MUSINGS OF MERLIN SERIES

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IGNITION

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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.

CHAPTER IV

Dreaming

Arthur's father Uther places his drinking bowl on the table with a definite thud. His white hair glows orange in the light from the fire, and his eyes appear sunken in the shadows. I was welcomed as a novelty and news-bearer as Arthur predicted, and I spent most of the meal telling tales of events in the south where I passed the summer. Uther is keen to hear of developments in the east, where Saxons made a large raiding forage into the southwest in the spring and killed many people. Arthur keeps quiet but his eyes mostly stay on my face.

I use the brief silence to thank Uther for his hospitality.

"No need, no need. News is a valuable commodity, and I thank you for your tales." Uther pours himself more wine and offers some to me. I reach forward to give him my bowl, a handsome—and likely very valuable—vessel of pottery with distinctive markings indicating its origin in faraway Aquitania. My sleeve snags on the edge of the table and exposes my forearm. On the inner skin of my arm is a blue tattoo of an oak leaf. Uther finishes pouring and frowns. "Is that..."

I hold up my arms to display the tattoo and its twin on my other forearm.

"Initiate of the first order of the druids of Eire." I shrug my sleeves back down. Arthur gapes, and I suppress a smile. "I would have carried on further, but my wanderlust is strong. Besides, experience is the best teacher."

"The druids are renowned for their learning and wisdom, even from across the sea. You were fortunate to have an opportunity to study with them." Uther takes a sip of his wine and considers me.

"Indeed. And one of the most useful things I learned was music. It's how I make my way in the world—there's always someone willing to take in a bard for a time. Would you care for a song or two in exchange for your generous hospitality?" I pick up my case and open it to reveal my harp, fashioned out of wild cherry and carved with delicate knots. It's not my work—sadly my carving skills are minimal—but another initiate's, in exchange for introductions to a particular girl he had his eye on. I think I got the better end of the deal, since the girl was shrill with a very annoying laugh, whereas the

harp is perfection itself.

“Please. It would be a gift to our ears.” Uther settles himself lower in his chair. Arthur wriggles a little and leans forward to watch my fingers.

I sing a song I learned this summer from another traveling bard, about the exploits of the warlord Vortigern. Arthur remains fascinated throughout. Uther looks as if he ponders a weighty decision.

Near the end of the last verse, light footsteps echo in the hall and the door opens. I expect the cook or a slave to clear the empty platters, but instead am greeted with the sight of a girl—young woman, really—of about sixteen. Her long black hair runs down her back in a thick braided rope. Delicate features surround sharp and lively eyes of deepest brown, and her robes only partly hide a body just beginning to fill out into womanhood. Her lauvan glow with a ruby-red gleam. She pauses at the doorway, obviously wondering what she interrupted. Her eyes light on my face at the end of my song.

“Wonderful!” Uther claps his hands and Arthur jumps from his chair to examine my harp. I hand it to him. Uther spies the girl and beckons her forward.

“Morgan, my dear, come meet our guest. Merlin, this is my daughter Morgan. She takes very long walks and tends to miss dinner. It is something I like to discourage, especially at this time of year.” He frowns at his daughter in a resigned way, and she bows her head in a gesture that somehow does not indicate contrition.

I stand and sweep my hand out in a bow.

“It’s a pleasure, Morgan.”

She nods back but maintains eye contact. When she speaks, her voice is light and self-assured.

“Likewise. Please, don’t let me interrupt you.”

Uther raises his hand.

“Actually, I want to ask you something, Merlin. Although I have lands and a place on the war council, I am a simple man without much learning. I want more for my son. I want him respected, not only for his fighting prowess, but also for his mind. I have a proposition for you—stay with us for the winter and tutor Arthur, and in return I will provide you with comfortable living quarters and meals. What do you say?”

This is a development I wasn’t expecting. I look at Uther, whose frank and open face seems to hide no ulterior motives. Arthur looks ecstatic and

bounces slightly in his chair, his lauvan bobbing along with him. My gaze travels briefly to Morgan, who looks both amused and exasperated at her father's hasty decision. I look to the fire. If I leave, I travel through the coming winter in the lessening hope that a lord or chieftain will want a bard for the winter. If I stay, I take on the new and strange role of tutor—what am I supposed to teach him?—but I also have room and board for the worst of the cold. I can move on in the spring. Who knows what the winter will hold, but with this opportunity at least I'll be warm and well-fed.

“Add in two ounces of silver in the spring if you're satisfied with my work, and it's a deal.” I hold out my hand.

Uther laughs.

“You're a man who knows what he wants. I like that.” He grasps my forearm and we shake. I wonder what I've got myself into.

Arthur and I stare at each other. Uther's departing footsteps echo on the tiled floor in the hall. Tutoring seemed like a wonderful idea by the dim of the fire last night, but in the pale morning chill I am dubious.

“So, what exactly does your father want me to teach you?” I ask Arthur.

He squeezes his lips around and wriggles his nose in a show of thinking.

“Stuff,” he says. I continue to stare at him. “Lots of stuff. What do you know? Teach me that.”

I aim a gentle swat at his head which he ducks, grinning.

“Very helpful, little squirt.”

Morgan pipes up from the other end of the table.

“He only hired you because Lord Aelius has a tutor for his sons, and Father doesn't want to look inferior.” She piles the breakfast dishes together. “Just teach him what the druids taught you, or whatever you think is useful. Father isn't going to care too much exactly what you're teaching him.”

“Whatever I want? Maybe this could be interesting after all.”

Arthur leans toward me.

“You could teach me how to *fish*,” he says.

I tousle the little squirt's hair. He's beginning to grow on me.

CHAPTER V

Late in the morning, feeling bleary and out of focus, I brew a strong pot of coffee to fuel my essay-marking. I plow through the first one doggedly, claw and scratch my way through the second, then give the third one up as a bad job and toss the pile onto my coffee table. I throw on some jeans and give my hair a cursory comb. Ten minutes later I'm driving down the quiet weekend road, and half an hour after that the car purrs to the top of Cypress Mountain. In the winter it's crawling with skiers and snowboarders, but by this time the snow has mostly melted. I pull into the empty parking lot and strike out onto a familiar trail.

A vigorous hike straight up rewards me with a spectacular view—the cloudless sky reveals a vista spanning muted farmland on the left, glistening ocean on the right, and the glittering city nestled in the center. The air is unusually still. It's the perfect conditions to test a few lauvan.

I like to come up here and feel the pulse of the world. It keeps my lauvan-manipulation skills fresh—here I can focus on them without distraction. But it also connects me to the intense energies of the Earth.

There's nothing quite like the rush from touching the very spirit of Earth itself. The immense power from the vast energies of this planet, the explosive strength of its molten core, the whipping winds that howl across its surface, the might of its swirling oceans—these all add up to a potent conglomeration of energy. The Earth is much like a living human being, surrounded by its own swirling lauvan.

But the immensity of energies involved means that the Earth is surrounded by an enormous network of lauvan. Different cultures have intuited the presence of this network. Some have called them ley lines, some *feng shui*, these invisible lines of power across the Earth.

But if you're me, that network can be seen and felt.

Stretching across the city, and up the mountain to the peak where I stand, lies a solid path of lauvan. To my eyes it appears as a vast electrical cord, lauvan upon lauvan bundled together to create a massive cable. As with all lauvan, their otherness lends them a semi-transparent appearance, but their sheer volume makes the ground below difficult for me to see.

The cable weaves its way up the mountainside and meanders beside the

promontory on which I stand. Its pulsating twists snake their way over the peak, and flow beside the path to disappear behind a swath of trees, the diameter of the cable taller than I am. It lies along the Earth as much as possible, since the Earth is what sustains it, connects it, and gives it form.

But a cable that size cannot contain itself. A mist spreads, resolving itself near me as a fine network of loose lauvan fanning out from the cable. They twist and wind their way slowly across the land, becoming less dense further away from the cable.

I crouch down and reach into the fine filigree of silvery-brown threads. It can be a jolt connecting to the Earth's network deliberately—the absolute power contained in the network is awe-inspiring—but when prepared, it is a pleasurable one. I remember the first time I worked up the nerve to approach a lauvan-cable. I was sixteen, walking along a path high on a barren ridge, and I plunged my hands straight into the cable there. I must have flown twenty paces through the air and was dazed for half an hour after, but it was an incredible rush. Now that I know what I'm doing and approach cables with more caution and preparation, I'm not blasted through the air.

It's still a rush, though.

“Ahh.” I lift my chin and close my eyes involuntarily as the sensation takes over. It's a mixture of immense power flowing through me and filling me up, making me more than I am. It's intoxicating. I let myself revel in the feeling for a moment and allow my mind to go blissfully blank.

Then I pull myself together and start to examine the pulse of the Earth under my hands.

This examination keeps my lauvan-sensing skills sharp. In the nineteen seventies, after Josephine died, I spent the end of the decade sleeping through my grief and then experimenting with all the drugs I could find in order to escape from my memories. When I pulled myself out of the haze, I was horrified to discover that my control and sensitivity had degraded. I've been making these little practice expeditions ever since.

The lauvan in my grasp slide through my fingers, each one hitting my skin with a small zing. The corners of my mouth turn up slowly as I connect with the power of the Earth, even in such a small way.

I open my eyes and search the mountain below me. A large boulder rests on the slope a hundred paces away, perhaps an arm-span from the streaming flow of the cable. I let the translucent threads in my hand fall out, one by one,

until I find what I'm looking for. With a short, sharp contraction of my fingers, I tweak the last lauvan in my grasp.

There's a crack like a gunshot. A small fragment of the boulder flings high into the air, twisting wildly, and drops to tumble down the slope between pine trees.

I lean back on my heels, grinning, and plunge my hands again into the writhing mass.

I pull them out again just as quickly when a sense of vileness hits me. My heart pounds with the feeling that something is terribly wrong. More cautiously I slide my fingers through the flowing lauvan, searching. After a minute, I find it—a lauvan buzzing with the same uneasy energy that I felt before.

My stomach protests at the sensation, and I carefully lift it out of the mass to examine it better.

The usual silvery-brown of the Earth's lauvan is muted on this strand. Its pale shade is tinged with a sickly yellow, repulsive to my eyes. I grit my teeth and close my eyes to sense more.

I follow the lauvan with my mind, tracing its path back to the main cable and into the stream. It travels behind me, away from the city. I follow it, the sensation less a visual one than a sense of knowledge of where on the Earth this lauvan leads. I swoop down valleys and climb up precipitous slopes, following the repulsive sick lauvan.

The feeling gets worse, and I realize that my lauvan is not alone. Other sickly strands join my cable and the nauseating sensation only increases.

I begin to sense the presence of many cables nearby. A center must be ahead.

Every human has a central area where all their lauvan gather. There's been much debate over the centuries about the location of the soul—Egyptians thought it was the heart, Plato philosophized that the tripartite soul sat in the head, chest, and stomach, and modern people in this country, although they don't use the word "soul," consider the powerhouse of the body to reside in the brain.

Actually, it's none of the above. If lauvan can be considered our souls, our life force, that which drives our inanimate flesh, then they tend to congregate just above the navel.

Although each living person has a center where the majority of their lauvan

coalesce, the Earth is too vast for that. Instead, a multitude of centers dot the globe. Each center helps to both strengthen and control the Earth's lauvan. The cables stretch across the Earth's surface and meet at the centers. Sometimes they are places of great physical power, like Iguazu Falls in Brazil. Other times, they are solid and unchanging like Uluru in Australia, but give off such an otherworldly aura that even the least sensitive people can identify them as exceptional. A minor center can be as simple as a crossroads of three cables at a natural spring, usually accompanied by a legend of a sacred well or waters of healing powers.

I reach the center in an overwhelming surge of power, almost too much sensation to bear. A mixture of thrilling pleasure and actual physical pain runs up my own lauvan to my body. Before I accustom myself to reaching the center I'm hit with overpowering foulness. Imagine a sulfurous, rotting low tide assaulting your nostrils, the bite of earthy toxic mold filling your mouth when you expect fresh bread, a cankerous growth on an otherwise perfect apple.

The sensation is so disgusting that I pull my mind back to my body and find myself on all fours, retching. I release my grip on the offending lauvan and try to relax my shuddering body. A center that out of balance, that sickening, it shouldn't be possible. Surely a catastrophe is on its way.

I fear disaster may be sooner rather than later.

CHAPTER VI

I take the road down the mountain more quickly than I should, and pass dawdling tourist cars with plates from Washington and Alberta. My hand won't stop trembling on the gearshift and my fingers tap the wheel nervously.

I roll down the driver's side window and gulp in deep breaths of cool mountain air.

"Calm down, you idiot." I grip the wheel firmly to try and stop my finger-tapping. My encounter at the center rattled me. I try to think whether I've ever come across a center like that. Nothing comes to mind.

The fresh air helps, and I pull into traffic at the base of the mountain with more composure than at the top.

I take a right and wind my way past townhouses and twee shops to the ocean. Of course there's no parking at my destination, but I slide in at the end of a row of cars anyway. Once out, I surreptitiously bend down as if to check my tires, and spit onto the ground. I grab the lauvan of my saliva and force them to stretch in a long line parallel to my car, and tweak them again.

A solid white line appears, identical to the others in the parking lot. I smile. Sometimes it's good to be me.

My destination is a little hole-in-the-wall coffee shop entitled "Bean There," tucked between a high-class seafood bar and a musty secondhand bookstore. I have no idea how the café manages to pay rent on ocean-side property, and I expect this complex will be torn down shortly to make way for pricey condos. Not much makes me feel older than seeing a forty year-old building slotted for demolition, as is common on this side of the Atlantic. At least in Europe many of the buildings are old enough that even I have a hard time remembering their origin.

But until this shop winks out of its brief existence, it's a good place for a coffee.

The girl behind the counter greets me with a smile of recognition and reaches for the size of mug I always order. I stop her.

"I'm going to need a larger one today, thanks."

She grins at me, showing off the dimple in her left cheek. Her blond ponytail swings when she turns to the coffee machine.

"Long hike today?" The machine whirs to life and I wait to answer. She

beats me to it. “Hey, have you heard about Mt. Linnigan? Scary stuff, eh? You think it’s going to blow?” She grabs a saucer and tucks a chocolate cookie next to the cup. “Wouldn’t want to be living in Wallerton right now.”

“No,” I say. A thought strikes me, an unwelcome, disturbing thought. “You grew up around here, didn’t you? How far away is Mt. Linnigan?”

“Well, the news said if it blew it wouldn’t be so bad here, just some ash maybe. Wallerton is probably a four-hour drive from here, heading north up highway one. I went camping there once—there’s a great lake for swimming nearby.”

“I’ve never been camping around here.” Not in your lifetime, anyway. I smile at her when she hands me the coffee. “Sounds like fun.” Our hands touch on the saucer. She keeps her smiling face steady, but her auburn laven squirm. I make eye contact. “I see you’re encouraging my chocolate addiction. Good girl.” I give her a conspiratorial smile. Her cheeks color and she giggles.

Feeling better already, I weave through the tables to slide into a prime seat in the corner of the balcony. It’s free today, but sometimes I have to persuade interlopers to vacate. Usually a slight increase in the wind does it, although I once had to be particularly aggressive with a young couple who were mooning over each other, oblivious to all else. I made the nearest seagull fly low and take aim. The resulting white smear on the girl’s perfectly curled hair did the trick. Her shrieks of disgust had me biting my tongue to stop myself from laughing out loud. I reasoned that this was an excellent test of their relationship. If it couldn’t survive the shame of seagull excrement, then it wasn’t worth continuing.

Really, though, I just wanted my seat. Is that too much for an old man to ask?

Before checking out my hunch, I take a moment to savor the sun, sip my coffee, and let go of the last of the lingering jitters from the mountain.

The coffee helps. These days it’s strong and smooth, not much relation to the swill they served in the Parisian coffeehouses where I first tasted it. My wife at the time, Celeste, was a real dynamo who was always in the thick of things. She loved the vibrancy and intellectualism that flowed freely in the coffeehouses, much freer than the expensive new drink did.

I dig out my phone and connect to the café’s Wi-Fi. Only those of us who grew up in a village where the most advanced technology was a three-legged

stool can understand how much I love the modern world. I thought I was well-connected all these years, but anyone with fingers and some money can access the world, right here, right now.

I do a quick search for Mt. Linnigan and get a whole collection of news articles. I open one with a map and study the mountain's location. It's suspiciously close to where I think I traveled along the lauvan-cable, to the foulness. Are they connected? I stare out to the ocean, frowning, and sip my coffee.

In what seems like a few minutes later I feel a hand on my shoulder for a brief moment, like a fluttering bird. I look up, jolted out of my reverie, and see a whole new clientele surrounding me. The coffeeshop girl stands before me looking concerned.

"Are you okay? You look—" She pauses, as if searching for the word that will least offend. "Lost."

"Lost," I repeat, still a little dazed. My brain is slowly clicking away, and suddenly the word holds more meaning than I'm sure the girl intended. I think I know where to go to figure out where the foulness is. "Yes, I am lost, and—I need a map." I push back my chair with a sudden motion, and she takes a small step back.

I reach for her hand, the one that's not holding my empty mug, and bend over to kiss it.

"*Merci beaucoup, ma cherie,*" I say, and leave her pink and smiling.

At home, I breeze past Gary in the hall with only a simple "hello" instead of the chat he's obviously itching for. I need some answers about the foulness. I need to find a map.

Among the diverse items on my bookshelf are a sheaf of maps drawn on vellum and varied qualities of paper. I pull the sheaf down carefully and cart it to the dining table. My fingers flip through the pile as I go.

For centuries now, I've been following the cables and plotting centers around the world. I did my homeland first, and even today the European maps are the best documented, with almost every center accounted for and all the maps covered in spiderwebs of interconnected lines.

I put the maps of Europe aside. The South American maps slide out next, the continental sketches covered in far fewer lines. Although I'd heard rumors of the Americas from the Norse, I didn't make it over to explore until much later, by which time everyone else in Europe had already barged in. I simply haven't got around to filling in the gaps yet. I go through bouts of industry as my interest waxes. When I'm busy with living a life or am in a funk, my map-making lapses.

My shuffling has finally produced the map I'm looking for—Western North America. I spread it open and lean over it. Maybe now I can figure out which center has the foulness. If I can just trace the cable from Cypress...

A sharp rapping on the front door jolts me upright. I rub my face in my hands on my way to the door. I don't feel like shooting the breeze with Gary right now.

Jen's beaming face greets me when I open the door.

"Hi!" She holds up a bag of sushi takeout. "You bored? I thought it seemed like a good movie night, and my roommate is out of town."

I look at Jen's hopeful face and push my worries to the back of my mind.

"*Mi casa, su casa.* I suppose I should be satisfied to be your backup plan? You're too magnanimous, my lady, gracing me with your presence."

"Hey, I brought food."

"She doth honor me too much. There'd better be Tobiko Nigiri in there."

"Oh, Merry, you act like I don't know you at all." Jen shakes her head. I head to the kitchen to grab some plates and drinks. I should really keep looking at the maps, but it's against my nature to refuse a woman an evening of entertainment, in whatever form. Moments later, a rustling noise emerges from the living room. A sense of foreboding creeps over me and I move to the other room.

"What're all these maps?" Jen leans over the table. Her long fingers leaf through my papers. My hands clench on the plates and I rack my brain for an explanation, but outside I remain calm. The best way to distract someone from a secret is to pretend there isn't one at all.

"Oh, they're old maps that the dean wants me to catalog." I'm a pretty smooth liar. I've had a lot of practice.

"Wow, some of these look ancient." Jen holds up an early map of Scandinavia I charted in the ninth century on scraped goat hide.

"Yeah, and I'll thank you not to paw them with your grubby fingers. I

thought you were choosing us a movie.” Jen drops the map and sidles over to the couch. Blame and distract—works a charm.

Quickly, I bundle the maps into their folder and shove it back on the bookshelf. I’ll figure out the center tomorrow.

“Do you remember that manuscript you brought in for English 341?” Jen asks.

“Sure.” I settle onto the couch and start opening containers. “The fragment of Beowulf I sweet-talked the curator of that traveling exhibit for.” The curator was a mild-mannered woman in her early forties with a decidedly and unexpectedly wild approach in the bedroom. It’s always the quiet ones. She had handed over the manuscript in its Plexiglas carrying case with a stern warning to bring it back promptly after my class, her sternness somewhat diluted by her parting ass-squeeze. God, I love women.

I brought the fragment into class and the students politely examined it, a few even lingering for a closer look. But Jen was drawn to it like a moth to a candle.

“*Scealt nu dædum rof, æðeling anhydig, ealle mægene feorh ealgian; ic ðe fullæstu,*” Jen pronounces.

““Your deeds are famous, so stay resolute, my lord, defend your life now with the whole of your strength. I shall stand by you.’ Very good.” I’m impressed, but not surprised. “You remember after all this time.”

Jen leans back into the couch, the remote clutched in her hand.

“My favorite class! Of course.”

“Well, I can understand. You did have an exceptional teacher.” Jen nudges me with her knee and flicks on the TV, then pauses. She turns to me.

“Do you think they were much like us? I mean, physically we’re all humans. But,” she purses her lips and looks pensive. “Did they *think* like us?”

“How do you mean?” I say, but I think I know where she’s going.

“Life was so much more—brutal than today. Everyone in Beowulf knows how to use a sword or ax, and they quite happily chop off heads and arms and whatnot. They must have thought completely differently back then. I have no idea what kind of person I’d be if I’d been born in the past. How different would I be?”

Part of the reason I love Jen is because she has an old soul. Comments like this elevate her above her peers.

“Yeah, I suppose they would think a bit differently.” I put my feet up on the coffee table and recline into the couch. “Even if you travel around the modern world you can find hugely different viewpoints. But at the end of the day, everyone wants similar things—life, purpose, community, love. You can find those common threads in any time.”

Jen ruminates briefly.

“I guess that makes sense.” She sighs. “I wish more than anything I could meet someone from the past. It would be so amazing, enlightening. I have so many questions.”

I try to keep a smile off my face, but it’s difficult.

Jen reaches for the plastic container. She jerks back.

“Ow!” She holds up her index finger. Blood starts to well along a nasty-looking cut. “The stupid container was broken and sliced me open.” She bites her lip and holds her finger out to me with her eyes closed. “How bad is it?”

I take her hand and examine her finger. The wound is much deeper than I expect, and blood oozes out swiftly. Jen peeks through her closed eyelids.

“So? How bad is it?”

“Close your eyes while Dr. Lytton takes a look. You know you’re no good with blood.” She obediently closes her eyes tightly again. It’s true that Jen tends to gag at the sight of blood, but it’s more for my sake than hers that I make her close her eyes. I bring my other hand to hers and quickly unknot the lauvan entangled above the cut. The wound slides shut and the oozing stops. I leave a small gash for appearance’s sake and dab at the excess blood with a napkin.

“You big baby.” I stash the napkin in my pocket. “Getting overexcited about a glorified paper cut.”

Jen examines her finger.

“Wow, it felt so much worse than this.” She holds her finger up to see it better in the light, frowning. “Thanks, Merry. I’m always so much luckier around you. Remember when we had that terrible fender bender last year?”

“I don’t need to mention that you were the one behind the wheel, despite your dislike of my driving abilities.”

“Yeah, yeah, no need to be all smug.” Jen prods my ankle with her foot. “I could have sworn that I banged my head on the sidebar, and fully expected whiplash for the next six months. But we walked away without even a scratch.”

That's because I took the opportunity while she was unconscious to unknot all the luvans that had tangled themselves from her injuries.

"I guess it wasn't as bad as all that."

"I totaled the car, Merry. My dad was furious with me—he'd bought me that car for my twenty-first birthday."

"Well, cars these days are made to crumple."

She shakes her head, but turns to the television to flick on the streaming video and select a movie.

"Oh, come on, Jen," I say. "You're not going to make me watch *The Notebook*. Again."

"I bought dinner, my choice," she says, staring at the television. I smack the back of my head against the sofa in a gesture of exasperation and defeat. She starts to giggle.

"You idiot. Of course we're not watching that. I'm not that cruel. I just wanted to see your face."

I snatch the remote from her unresisting fingers.

"Give me that."

CHAPTER VII

Dreaming

Guinevere sits upright on the cold stone bench, her feet tucked beneath her skirts. She's tall enough to look me straight in the eye sitting down, although I still have a handspan on her when standing. Her long braid, blond and gleaming in the afternoon sun, lies across one shoulder and down her front where she twists and fidgets with the end in her lap. She worries her bottom lip. I know she's searching for the right words.

"Oh, it's no use, Merlin!" she bursts out in Saxon, her native tongue. "I can't think of the words. I'll never learn this stupid language. Brythonic is impossible." She presses her hands down onto the bench and leans forward. Her head turns so I can't see the tears that threaten to fall.

I reach out a hand and place it on her cheek to make her face me.

"Look at me, Guinevere," I say in her own language. Her eyes remain downcast. "No, look at me. You started from nothing, and now we can speak together in Brythonic, and you understand so much when others talk. You're getting better every day."

She gives a small sniff and looks into my eyes with her gray-blue ones. I give her an encouraging grin. After a minute, she gives me a watery smile back.

"There we are." I remove my hand from her cheek and drop it to her own hand, which I briefly squeeze. "Take heart. You're getting there."

"I don't know what I'd do without you, Merlin. You're my only friend now that..." Her voice trails off and she looks down again into her lap. "I just mean, thank you for taking over my lessons. And helping me—with everything."

"I know you've been lonely since your father sent you here to marry Arthur. I know it's hard, very hard, to find yourself among strangers who can't understand you."

Guinevere sighs.

"I know the peace treaty is good, and necessary. Both our peoples benefit. My tribe was lucky to make a truce with Arthur. We didn't want to fight, we just wanted to settle. Arthur didn't assume we came as enemies, like the rest

believe. We're lucky to have Arthur—many other Saxon tribes invade western Albion by force, and not many can see that we are different." She lifts her chin. "I am proud I can help bring peace to my tribe."

"Of course." I study her face. Her eyes dart to mine and look away. "But still. I understand that it is difficult nonetheless."

Guinevere's back is stiff. Her next words are halting, despite speaking in her native tongue.

"Do you think Arthur will ever forgive me?"

It is my turn to sigh.

"I don't think forgiveness is the problem," I say. Guinevere jerks her head involuntarily, but keeps her eyes fixed into the distance. I pause—should I say what's really going on?—and decide Guinevere needs to know.

"Honestly, Arthur just doesn't have much confidence in himself, at least not regarding women." Guinevere frowns. This is not the answer she expects. I continue. "He's gaining renown on the battlefield and respect from the chieftains for strategy, but he's still very young. When you turned to Lancelot for love and companionship, he assumed he wasn't worthy of your regard. He doesn't expect anything now. He only sees you hurt and in pain, and he doesn't think that he could ever change that for you."

Guinevere releases her breath in a rush and slumps, covering her face briefly. She looks at me for confirmation.

"Really? Is that what he thinks?"

I shrug.

"Not that he's told me as much. But I've known him a long time."

"I just wanted someone I could talk to. The loneliness was unbearable. I felt so lucky that Lancelot knew a little of my language and could teach me yours. Everyone was behind a barrier of words that I couldn't break through. Even my new husband only looked at me with worried eyes and made hand gestures." She gives a heartfelt sigh. "I wish you had been here then, Merlin."

"I'm sorry I wasn't. But those first few months of your marriage were so precarious in the north that Arthur had to send me to lead the defenses."

"Well, at least you're here now, and Lancelot is far away on the eastern borders." She bites her lip and nods decisively. "I am glad of it. I want to make this right. What can I do to fix this? Advise me, Merlin."

I switch to Brythonic.

"Let's work on your words. Communication is vital between husband and

wife, or so I'm told."

Guinevere puffs out her cheeks in resignation and squares her shoulders, ready for her lesson.

It's a sweetly domestic scene—Arthur mends a belt as he sits on a bench in front of the fire, and Guinevere stitches the hem of a cloak beside him. On the surface they're the very image of marital comfort.

I play with the lauvan of the fire absently, making the flames rise and fall at my whim. Guinevere catches me changing one of the flames a deep cherry-red and smiles. She likes my little tricks, thinks they're funny, and doesn't question much beyond that. It's not that she doesn't understand that I'm strange and different, it's that she doesn't seem to care. I'm just Merlin to her, her only friend in this new life.

Arthur clears his throat.

"Did I tell you, Merlin, that Morgan's husband Idris was at the conclave yesterday?" He eyes the new hole he made in the leather of his belt.

"What did he have to say? He's always plotting some big push to get the Saxons out of Gwent for good."

"Yes, and he always expects me to join him, as his brother-in-law." Arthur shakes his head. "My marrying Guinevere was a real blow to him. I still don't think he understands why I did it."

"I'm sure he doesn't," I say. Guinevere looks up at the mention of her name, but I know she's following the conversation.

"He's been traveling around the countryside, drumming up followers. He's making a big push to get all the Saxons as far away from the borders as possible, and people are starting to listen."

"But there are thousands of settlers already in the far east, and hundreds more on our borders. Some of them are the grown children of settlers. I understand wanting to defend against pillaging and destruction, but is he really planning on forcing the settlers out of their homes?" I shake my head. "At this point, it seems like a fool's errand."

"It's only talk at the moment, but people are starting to listen. By the end of the conclave two factions had emerged—mine and Idris'." Arthur sighs.

“Hopefully the harvest will be good this year. Fear of another bad winter is what’s driving some of the warriors to follow Idris, I’m sure of it. Everyone gets anxious when there’s not enough food.”

“Especially when there’s an easy target to blame,” I say.

“Excuse me, my lord,” Guinevere says. Her cheeks are colored and her eyes dart from mine to Arthur’s, as if she searches for her words in our faces.

“Yes, Guinevere?” Arthur says, his voice polite but distant.

“Morgan—sister Morgan—she is here, month before. Yes?” I nod at her encouragingly. Morgan and Idris visited Arthur’s villa for the midsummer festival. Morgan sat with Guinevere and the other women during the day while the men hunted. She looked as annoyed as ever to be left out of the action. Guinevere continues. “She is to say all Saxon leave now, we are bad people. She say to all women. She think I do not know Brythonic. Women...” Guinevere nods vigorously in pantomime to indicate the other women’s approval of Morgan’s words. “She say Idris at Samhain to make Saxon go.”

Arthur stares at Guinevere, a look of surprise and pleasure on his face. I don’t think Guinevere has ever spoken so much Brythonic in his presence before. She blushes with pride and confusion, and looks to the fire to avoid his gaze.

When the content of Guinevere’s words finally sinks in, Arthur’s face becomes grim.

“So, Idris is planning a concerted attack at Samhain. Why doesn’t that surprise me?” He clenches his fists in anger. “What is Morgan doing? I wish I’d known the way she treated you, Guinevere. I’m sorry for that.”

Guinevere lifts her shoulders. I don’t know if it’s a sign of resignation in response to Arthur’s words, or whether she just doesn’t understand. Arthur turns again to me.

“There’s trouble ahead, Merlin.”

“And we’ll be ready for it.” I feign a confidence I do not feel. A sense of foreboding is growing in my mind. Things are coming to a head, and I’m not sure which path we should take.

Arthur smiles.

“Yes, we will.” Arthur’s confidence in me is gratifying. I hope I’m right.

Guinevere puts her sewing down on the bench and stands up.

“Good night, my lord,” Guinevere says to Arthur. He nods in reply. She

wavers on the spot for a moment, then bends down to kiss him on the cheek. She pulls back to search his face as if evaluating his reaction.

Arthur looks a little stunned. Guinevere turns to go, and Arthur grabs her hand.

“Wait,” he says. She looks at him quizzically. He clears his throat then says in Saxon, “Good night, Guinevere.”

Guinevere flushes with pleasure at hearing her native tongue on Arthur’s lips. She bows her head and leaves. Before she passes through the doorway, she looks back at me with a question in her eyes. I nod at her and she smiles back. Of course I taught Arthur the phrase. Why shouldn’t the learning go both ways?

I let Guinevere’s footsteps fade across the courtyard before I speak.

“Arthur.”

“Mmm?” He picks up his dagger with a pensive air and starts to sharpen it against a whetstone. The *snick* of the blade percusses our words.

“Are you ever worried I’ll follow Lancelot’s example? With Guinevere, I mean?”

Arthur lets out a bark of surprised laughter.

“No. Should I be?” He laughs some more and continues to sharpen his dagger.

I neither laugh nor answer him. He looks at me, a little confused, and puts down the dagger and whetstone.

“Should I be?”

“No.” It’s true. I would never touch Guinevere. I would never do that to Arthur. But I don’t expect him to know that.

“Well, then.” He picks up the whetstone again but only plays with it absentmindedly, passing it back and forth between his hands. “Why the question?”

“Surely once bitten, twice shy. And I don’t have the best reputation when it comes to other men’s wives.”

“But I trust you, Merlin.” He looks at me with frank openness. “I trust you with my life and I trust you with my woman. You’re my most valued advisor, my old tutor, and my best friend.” He leans back on the bench, propped up by his hands. “It’s that simple.”

I turn away and stare into the fire so he can’t see my eyes glisten.

I awake to shaking.

“Merry. Merry, wake up.”

I open my eyes, groggy and dazed. Jen’s face is close to mine, her expression troubled.

I sit upright. The movie credits are playing in the darkened room. Night fell while I was asleep.

“You started twitching in your sleep—totally missed a great car chase, by the way—and then, well, you seemed really distressed. I thought I should wake you up.”

Only then do I notice the wetness in my eyes. I dash the tears away.

“Sorry,” I say. “I guess I wasn’t that into the movie.”

Jen looks at me with questions in her eyes, but says no more.

CHAPTER VIII

Up with the birds today. I have a hard time sleeping this morning, but can't place why. I finally roll out of bed and throw on a T-shirt and pajama pants. Maybe the newspaper has arrived. My slippered feet pad out the door on my way to the mailboxes. It's too early for anyone to be up and about, so my pajama bottoms should go unnoticed. Not that I really care—I lost modesty and embarrassment centuries ago—but Merry Lytton should care, and it's important to keep up appearances.

Maybe when I get back I'll give my friend Braulio a call. He's always up early and we're overdue for a chat. I've known him for years and years, but these days he doesn't get around much. We keep in touch via phone and my occasional visits to his home in Costa Rica. Yes, the newspaper and a chat with Braulio sound like a pleasant morning. It's far too early to start marking yet.

I only have time to flip through the headlines coming out of the elevator before I bump into Gary.

"Morning, Merry! Up early today, are we?" Gary pats me on the back.

"Yeah, well, early bird, worm, you know the drill. What's shaking?"

"Ho! What's shaking. Is that what you kids are saying these days?" He laughs heartily. Nothing seems to faze Gary—if you looked up genial old fart in the dictionary, his picture would be there. I admire his ability to not let trials in life bring him down. I've never been able to learn that lesson for myself.

Gary points to the headline below the fold of my newspaper. "Oh, have you heard the latest on the volcano?" He jabs at the page when I flip it over to look. "It's looking bad. Them scientists, they don't even know what's going on. They says it's all a big surprise to them. But you got to believe your eyes, and I sees on the TV that there's smoke. And I guess when there's smoke, there's fire!" He laughs at his witticism.

I scan the article with a shake of my head.

"It says here that Wallerton might be on the path of the lava flow, if it erupts. Not just a bit of ash. They're comparing it to Mt. St. Helens in terms of ash input to the atmosphere. Maybe even global weather changes."

"It's a bad business, all right." Gary nods his agreement. He nods for a

while before saying, “But life goes on. So, are you up for some chess later? What’s shaking this afternoon?” He chuckles to himself.

I only manage a strained smile. My focus is on the newspaper article, and my mind whirls. “Do you mind if I take a rain check on that? There’s something I need to look into.”

“Oh, sure,” Gary says. “I’ll go bother the wife instead. I expect she can find something for me to do. She’s good at that.”

I laugh and say goodbye. Once inside I head straight to my bookshelf. Out come the maps, hastily put away last night after Jen’s prying, and I extract the West Coast chart. My pulse races.

My eyes close for a brief moment to get into the headspace I need to retrace my journey from Cypress Mountain to the center. I open my eyes and focus on the map, where the start of the Coast Mountain Range is clearly sketched on the chart. Vancouver’s distinctive geography makes Cypress easy to find, even though there are no towns or political boundaries marked.

I locate the lauvan-cable that travels up and over Cypress and trace its progress north with my finger. A few finger-widths along, my cable is joined by others to create a swelling of the line. The reference point helps—I remember at which point they joined. Just above, a thick black dot indicates the sick center I’m looking for. It’s located on a peak in the middle of a mountain range. It’s unnamed.

I pull out my phone and look at the map, still open from yesterday. Mt. Linnigan is central. I place the phone faceup on the map, gingerly. I almost don’t want to know.

The maps are a match. The peak is clearly Mt. Linnigan.

I reach for a chair without looking and sit down slowly.

“Dammit,” I say out loud. My voice sounds deadened and tired to my own ears. Mt. Linnigan is a powerful, potent center, and it is seriously out of balance. This isn’t natural—I’ve felt the lauvan of natural disasters before and they never had Mt. Linnigan’s horrible foulness, its palpable sense of imbalance. Scientists are bewildered because science has nothing to do with it.

I stare at the black dot, feeling very lost and very alone. I’m the only one who knows what’s actually happening. I’m the only one who stands a chance at preventing this disaster.

There’s just one problem—I have no idea how.

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

Realm of the Forgotten