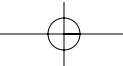
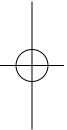
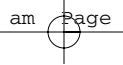



**SOUTH-WEST BRITAIN**

**AROUND AD 500**





Even the woods are burning. I plunge past the torched byre and hard into the shoulder-deep growth of brambles between the trees, but there's fire ahead of me as well as behind. The hall on the hill's top where I thought I'd find shelter is already blazing. I can hear men's voices baying like hounds on a scent, the hooves of horses on the winter earth like drums. I see their shadows long before the riders themselves come in sight. Fingers of darkness stretch from their raggedy banners, reaching through the smoke which hangs beneath the trees. I duck sideways into a brambled hollow and wriggle deep. Thorns tug at my dress and snag my hair. The ground's frosty. Hard and cold under my knees and fingers. Fear drags little noises out of me. I squeak and whimper like a hunted cub.

But it's not me these horsemen are hunting. I'm nothing to them. Just a lost girl-child scurrying across the corners of their war. They thunder past without seeing me, the firelight bright on spears and swords, on

mail and burnished helmets, on shield bosses and harness buckles and fierce faces lit up like lanterns. Their leader's out in front on a white horse. Big, he is. Shiny as a fish in his coat of silver scales. The cheek-guards of his helmet ripple with fire-gleam and his teeth between them are gleaming too, bared in a hard shout.

You've heard of him. Everyone's heard of Arthur. Artorius Magnus; the Bear; the *Dux Bellorum*; the King that Was and Will Be. But you haven't heard the truth. Not till now. I knew him, see. Saw him, smelled him, heard him talk. When I was a boy I rode with Arthur's band all up and down the world, and I was there at the roots and beginnings of all the stories.

That was later, of course. For now I'm still a snott-nosed girl, crouched in the brambles, giddy with the thump and stink of horses and so still that you'd think I'd been turned to a stone by my first glimpse of the Bear.

I didn't know then who he was, nor why he'd led his fierce, shiny riders to burn my home. All I knew was it was unnatural. Wrong as snow in summer or the sun at midnight. War's a thing for autumn, when the harvest's in and the rains not yet come to turn the roads to mud. When men can be spared to go harrying into other lands and carrying off other men's grain and cattle. So what do these horsemen mean by coming here in winter's dark, with the trees bare and the hay-stores half empty and cat ice starrng and smashing on the puddles they ride their horses over? Are they even men at all? They look to me like Dewer's Hunt. They look like the Four Riders of the world's end I've heard the monks talk about up at

Lord Ban's hall. Though there's more than four of them. Five, seven, ten, more than I can count, heaving uphill on a steep sea of horse-muscle.

Uphill, and past me, and gone. Their wild voices blur into the crackle of burning brush and the steady bellowing of scared cattle from the byres. I sneeze on the smoke as I make myself move, slithering across the flank of the hill, over the knuckles of tree-roots, over the granite boulders furry with moss, through sinks of dead leaves in the hollows. Don't ask me where I'm going. Away from the burning. Away from those angry riders. Just away is good enough for now.

But then I reach the road, down at the bridge where it crosses the river, and there's another of the raiders there. His horse has come down in trampled mud at the bridge's end and the battle has left him behind. He's on foot, furious, flailing at the horse with the flat of his sword. A young man, his white face framed by wings of red-gold hair, a thin beard clinging to his jaw like fluff the wind has blown there. His eyes are full of angry tears and a desperate hunger for blood. Even the blood of a girl-child, I realize, as I somersault out of the scratchy undergrowth and land thump on the path before him. He forgets the horse and comes at me. With his blade in front of me, the steeps and fire behind, I turn, looking for a way out.

Ways out are all I have been looking for this evening, ever since I woke in my master's house to find the thatch ablaze, the women screeching, the men scrambling sleepily for staves and spears and sickles. I remember how the shadows of horsemen flicked past

the open doorway. How my master had run out shouting and how a sword came down on his head and made the women screech louder. How I scrambled between the horses' legs and over a fence the pigs had trampled down in panic. Gwyna the Mouse they call me, and like a mouse I always have the sense to scurry out of trouble.

Except that now all my quickness and cunning have brought me to this a dead end, cut off short by a shouting boy.

And for once I'm more angry than afraid. Angry at myself for running into his way, and angry at him and his friends for their stupid, unseasonal war. Why couldn't they stay at home, wherever their home is? I dart at the boy, and he flinches back, as if he thinks I mean to fight him. But mice don't fight. I duck by him quick, feeling the wind of his sword past my face, hearing the hiss of sliced air. I run towards the bridge, where his terrified horse is heaving up, mud and white eyes and a smoke of dragon-breath. I go sideways to avoid it, and lose my footing on the ice, and fall, and keep on falling.

And I leave the fire and the noise behind me, leave everything, and dive down alone through darkness into the dark river.