

RISE OF THE KING SHORT STORY

# EXCALIBUR RISES

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Vivian stood on the shores of Avalon and watched the dragon-headed prow of the boat break through the mist into the warm sunshine. She could see the cloaked figure gazing out towards her and she waved. Merlin. He didn't make social calls, so he must need something. A flutter of worry passed through her.

A long wooden jetty ran out into the lake, and as the boat docked, Vivian strolled along it. The boat had barely stopped moving when Merlin leapt ashore, and he hurried to meet her. He never changed. His hair was long and unkempt, his long beard straggled over his chest, and his worn grey cloak flapped around him.

His sharp blue eyes appraised her. "Vivian, my dear. You look radiant. This place is suiting you."

She smiled and hugged him. He was taller than her, and he stooped as his arms wrapped around her. "Thank you," she said. "And you look excited Merlin. You're up to something."

He straightened up, looking affronted. "You make it sound suspicious. I can assure you, this is all for the good of Britain."

Vivian stepped back, her suspicions confirmed. "I sense I will be dragged into whatever it is. You better come in."

She led Merlin to the long low stone building that sat a short distance from the lake shore. The Sanctuary of the Goddess. It glowed in

the late afternoon sun, and the light reflected off the windows, so that it appeared to blink like a lazy cat. It was surrounded by gardens, a mixture of formal and informal planting; boxed hedges, wild flowers, shrubs, and vegetables. Gravelled paths ran through the gardens, under trees, and around the building to the rear. A line of beehives stood to the side, and the drone of the bees mixed with the soft shush of the waves on the shore.

Vivian had lived here for a few years now, first as a novice in the service of the Goddess, and now as the Lady of the Lake. She was a guardian of sorts. The Isle of Avalon was a magical gateway between the Realms of the Other and what the fey called the Shadowed Land - what she called Britain. But she wasn't alone. Another eight priestesses lived here, learning magic, looking after the Isle, and guarding its dark secrets. It was an arrangement that had reached back years, long before she was born. Not that the priestesses remained here. They travelled across the Realms and back to Britain as needed.

Vivian led Merlin to a table set in the shade beneath some vines and poured them both a glass of wine. She placed a bowl of fruit and a platter of cheeses between them and took a seat across the table. "How is Britain?" she asked.

Merlin looked down at the table for a brief second, and then met her gaze. "It's in turmoil. Invaders are attacking from across the seas, and we lose ground every day. The Romans have virtually gone, leaving little defences, and the other kings and princes are squabbling over what remains. Wild magics are growing stronger, and dragons are roaming the forests. Other crossing places continue to open between here and there at the usual times. And Uther is dead."

So that was why Merlin was here. Uther, the only ruler who kept the others in check, had gone. "I'm sorry to hear that. Who do you think will take over?"

"Arthur."

"Arthur who?" she asked. "I can't remember any of the local princes called that."

“That’s because he’s not a prince,” Merlin said a little smugly.

She frowned. “So who is he then? And how can he possibly take over Uther’s throne?”

“He is Uther’s son, conceived many years ago in Tintagel. He has been living with another noble family, where I have ensured he is trained in fighting and diplomacy.”

“Why is he living with someone else? And does Arthur even know who he is?”

Merlin sipped his wine. “I wanted to protect him, away from the court. And no, he has no idea who his father is.”

Vivian was suddenly annoyed. “Merlin! Why do you have to meddle so?”

Now Merlin was annoyed too, and he slapped the table. “Because I saw it. He will unite the country, make it safe, repel the invaders. But I had to ensure his safety first.”

“How old is he?”

“He turns sixteen in a few months. I need to arrange something that will show everyone who he is.” Merlin leaned back and nibbled on some cheese. After his outburst he looked tired and a little worried.

“I’m hoping you are going to tell him who his father is soon?”

“All in good time. First I need you to do something for me.”

“I had a feeling I was going to be involved somehow.”

“Now, now, there’s no need to be like that. Surely you want to see Britain safe?”

Vivian sighed. “Of course I do. I’m just wondering what it will cost me.”

“Nothing, except for your time.” He looked at her intently. “You have connections here. You are respected.”

“Enough of the flattery. What do you want?”

“A sword.”

She laughed. “There are hundreds of forgers in Britain! Why do you need me to get a sword?”

“Because it needs to be powerful. It must have the ability to protect him, to shield him from bloodshed in battle. It must give him an aura of leadership. It must enhance his fighting skills. I am going to place it in a rock, so that only he can pull it free. It will be a sort of competition.”

“Whoever pulls the sword gets the throne?”

“Exactly.”

Vivian leaned back. “It sounds a little simplistic.”

“Trust me. It will work. But first I need the sword. And it must look magnificent. A work of art. Everyone must want it.”

Vivian knew of several forgers in the Realm of Earth, but only one who was exceptional. And Merlin knew of him too. “I presume you want the Forger of Light to make the sword?” Even saying his name made her heart sink.

“Yes. Can you arrange it?”

“It will cost.”

Merlin reached into his cloak and pulled a bag from an inner pocket. He opened it, spilling gold onto the table. “Consider this the first payment.”

Vivian picked up a handful of coins. “He’ll want a lot more than this.”

“I know. I have more.”

“I mean more than gold.” Unfortunately, she had no idea what that may be.

Merlin smiled. “You are resourceful. And I will help if I can.”

“All right. I’ll see what I can do. I can leave in a couple of days.” It was a long ride to Dragon’s Hollow, she needed time to prepare for the trip.

They were interrupted by a young pretty priestess with long dark hair, pale skin, and bright green eyes. She approached the table, bowing her head slightly in respect. “Vivian, I’m sorry to interrupt; I need your help in the temple.”

Vivian smiled. “That’s fine Nimue. I’ll be finished shortly. I’d like to introduce you to Merlin while you’re here. I don’t think you’ve met him

before?” She turned to Merlin. “Nimue arrived here a few months ago. She’s one of our new priestesses. She’s going to be excellent. Her magical knowledge is already exceptional.”

Merlin’s jaw dropped slightly, and he stumbled to his feet, his usual composure gone. “My pleasure Nimue.”

Nimue moved around the table with cat-like grace, curtsying in front of him. “I have heard much of you Merlin. It is my pleasure to meet you.” She fixed him with her startling eyes, and once more Merlin seemed lost for words.

Vivian suppressed a flash of concern, although she couldn’t place why she was worried. “Thank you, Nimue. Please return to the temple and I will join you soon.”

Nimue nodded and left them, and for a few seconds Merlin watched her go before turning back to Vivian. “What a very pretty young woman.”

“Very. And one day she will be an excellent witch.”

Merlin nodded, trying to compose himself. “I’m sure you will do an excellent job of educating her. Anyway, I must leave.”

Vivian looked at him concerned. You don’t have to run off Merlin, Nimue can wait.”

“No, no. I have done what I needed to. Can you let me know how you fair with the Forger of Light?”

“Of course.”

Merlin nodded and without another word he swept from the table, down the winding path, and back to the boat.

Vivian sat, sipped her wine, and pulled the fruit-filled plate towards her. Surely Nimue couldn’t have upset Merlin. Why else did he leave so abruptly? She sighed. Merlin was always so unpredictable, but she had other things to worry about. In a few days she would have to negotiate with the Forger of Light.



Vivian negotiated the streets of Dragon's Hollow with ease, looking around at the changes since her last visit. She had travelled here many times, sourcing gems and precious metals for spells - this was the best place to get them. The city had changed in the intervening years. More houses and public buildings had been built, and the city glowed with opulence. She turned to Nimue who rode alongside her, curious at her first impression. "It's a little different from Avalon isn't it?"

Nimue smiled. "It's certainly busier!"

Vivian laughed and said, "Very diplomatic. You'll have to get used to it. This is your first visit of many. I travelled here years ago as a novice with my predecessor, and then returned many times on my own. I thought you could take over in the future."

Nimue looked at her with renewed interest. "I'd like that, thank you."

Vivian nodded, pleased. "Good. You're my most promising student Nimue. But there's still much to learn."

Nimue hesitated a second, then she asked. "Did Merlin teach you magic?"

Something about her question made Vivian pause. "Yes, some, but I don't see him that often. I learnt more from my predecessor. Why do you ask?"

Nimue shrugged. "I'm aware he's very powerful, that's all."

"He is, that's true. His skills are varied, but his prophecies are god-given. Some things cannot be taught."



Vivian halted before a large stone building which sat on the road circling the lake, and she slid from her horse to the ground. "Here's our stop."

Nimue dismounted asking, "Why aren't we staying with Ragnall?"

Vivian laughed. "You'll know when we meet him later. In fact you'll thank me for it. Let's check in and I'll take you to meet him."

After freshening up after their long journey, they headed to Ragnall's home, the House of the Beloved. It was an ostentatious building, but no more so than any others built in the city. It glittered against the mountain, and they rode up to the entrance dressed in their finest. Vivian wore her dress of dark blue silk trimmed with sable, while Nimue wore a vivid green linen dress with delicate silver embroidery. Nimue had grumbled, "It's so hot in these clothes."

"It's important to make an impression with Ragnall, Nimue, never forget that," Vivian said as she rang the bell.

The sound echoed through the house, and then the door swung open to reveal a long hall with marble floors. A sharp faced fey looked at them imperiously and then immediately turned and led them to a small but luxurious reception room overlooking the city. They waited only seconds before Ragnall appeared, a well-dressed fey with long dark hair tied at the nape of his neck. He wore a circlet of silver on his head, giving him a regal air. His clothes were immaculate. He wore a long pale grey silk jacket, beneath which peeked an exuberantly ruffled shirt, dark trousers and shiny boots. He glancing inquisitively at both of them. "What a great honour it is to see you again Vivian, and I see you have brought a friend."

Vivian stepped forward and held out her hand, at which point Ragnall graciously kissed it rather than shook it. "A pleasure to see you too, Ragnall. I have brought Nimue with me, a priestess who has joined me on Avalon."

Nimue smiled, a hint of insider knowledge in her response. "A pleasure Ragnall. I have heard so much about you."

He beamed and kissed her proffered hand too. “Excellent. So you are to partake in the mysteries of Avalon?” He raised an eyebrow and waited expectantly, as if Nimue would reveal countless secrets.

“I don’t know about that Ragnall. I am there in service to the Goddess.”

He narrowed his eyes, and Vivian intervened. “There are no exciting secrets there Ragnall, as I’m sure you know.”

“I know nothing of the sort, seeing as it is forbidden visitors.” He stiffened, a flash of fire in his eyes.

“You do not worship the Goddess. I assure you, you miss nothing.” Vivian moved swiftly on. “Have you had any success in contacting Gioladhe, the Forger of Light?”

He looked as if he were about to argue further and then thought better of it. He walked to a small table filled with glasses, spirits and wine. He poured three glasses of dark red wine and passed them to Nimue and Vivian, and took a sip of his own before he spoke. “I have. He is keen to meet you, and requests you meet him in his workshop. But only you Vivian.” He turned to Nimue. “He’s a little picky about the number of people who attend his workshop.”

Nimue shrugged. “I have plenty to keep me occupied, and I look forward to seeing the city.”

“Excellent,” he said. “I shall join *you*, Vivian.”

“There’s no need,” Vivian said quickly, alarmed at the prospect of Ragnall interfering. “As long as you can direct me, I’m happy to go alone.”

His face fell. “But -”

Vivian cut him off. “It’s something I must do alone, I’m sure you appreciate that Ragnall.”

He looked as if he would argue, but then he turned to Nimue, smiling obsequiously. “Well in that case I can give you a tour of the city.”

“How lovely,” she murmured in response, and Vivian hid a smile behind her wine glass.

Giolladhe's workshop was tucked away half-way up the shoulder of the mountain, accessed by a winding path edged by stones, small trees and bushes. As Vivian walked, she noticed wild herbs amongst the scrub, and as her skirts brushed past, the scent of rosemary, sage, oregano and basil swept around her. The heavy copper burnished door of Giolladhe's workshop stood wide open, tucked beneath a shadowy overhang of rock, and next to it a waterfall tumbled into a small pool. Beyond the open door a long passageway wound into the mountain. Vivian knocked loudly and shouted, "Giolladhe - it's Vivian." But she heard nothing. Looking around the entrance, she couldn't see any sign of a bell, so she shouted again, before giving up and starting down the passage.

The floor was made of stone and the walls were rough, carved from the rock of the mountain. It quickly became darker as she progressed and she whispered a spell, producing a golden orb of light in front of her. Ahead, a wooden door stood ajar and the clang of hammer on metal resounded down the corridor. Beyond the door was a large room, shadowy and dim except for the blazing fireplace at the centre. In front of it was the outline of a tall man, and a glimpse of blond hair. His back was towards her, and his shoulders were rounded as he bent over the fire. Vivian stepped to the side to get a better view. He was oblivious to her presence, his concentration absolute, and Vivian watched fascinated.

He wore thick heavy gloves that ran up to his elbows, and a leather apron that extended almost to the floor. A metal guard like a half-helmet protected his face - and probably blocked his peripheral vision. Using some tongs, he pulled a large metal sheet from the flames, placed it on an anvil, and struck it repeatedly with a hammer, the metal sparking and hissing. He deftly twisted it this way and that, until it curved into the shape of a shield. His movements were sure and he worked quickly, despite the gloves and mask. Vivian also sensed the use of magic, binding strength within the metal. She could see faint lines coursing across the surface of the shield, layer upon layer, rudimentary at this stage, but still powerful.

He was unaware of her for several seconds, finally turning away and dunking the piece into a large container full of water. A loud hiss and steam filled the room, and Vivian stepped back coughing. He turned quickly, raising the hammer, and Vivian shouted over the din. “Giolladhe, I am Vivian, from Avalon. Raghnull arranged our meeting.”

For several seconds he stared at her, his face still covered by the mask, but then he placed the shield on a bench that ran around the room and pulled his mask up and off his face, allowing her to see him clearly for the first time.

His blond hair was shoulder length with a slight curl to it, and it hung limply due to the steam, a tendril stuck to his face. He had bright green eyes, high cheekbones, a full firm mouth, and a covering of stubble across his cheeks and chin. Now he had turned to her, she could see his muscled shoulders and arms, and she flushed, aware of an attraction to him that she couldn't explain. She felt suddenly self-conscious of her appearance, and she desperately kept her hands to her side, despite the urge to run them through her hair. She chided herself. She was the Lady of the Lake, here to negotiate a sword.

He pulled a glove off, smiled and stepped forward, extending his hand. “My pleasure Vivian.”

“And mine,” she said, pleased at his firm grip as they shook hands. He was much taller than her, and she again felt overwhelmed. This close she could see the film of sweat across his face, and a small smile played across his lips as he gazed at her, almost as if he sensed her discomfort.

“Come outside, it's too hot in here.” He abruptly let her hand go, and peeling off his other glove and heavy apron, he led her back outside. He plunged his head under the waterfall next to his front door, sluicing off dirt and sweat, and after squeezing water out of his hair, he pulled two small bottles of beer from the pool beneath. “Would you like one?” he asked.

“Yes please.” She took the bottle from his hands, trying to avoid his touch, and removing the cork she took a long drink, conscious of his gaze before he too drank deeply.

He finished his beer in one long drink, and leaned back against the door frame, laughing. “I wasn’t sure the Lady of the Lake would drink beer.”

“This one does. Especially on a hot day.” She mimicked him, leaning back against the walls, trying to relax.

He nodded. “I’ve been inside for hours and it’s always hot in there. I get used to it.” He narrowed his eyes slightly, “So I gather you need me to make something.”

“A sword. It must be powerful and beautiful. It’s for a King-to-be.”

“Everyone wants power and beauty Vivian. I’ve lost count how many times I’ve been asked for that.” He smiled, “It’s not often I find it embodied in person.”

She hesitated for a second, speechless, and he clarified, “Yes, I mean you. I’ve done my research. A powerful witch who lives on Avalon, the island straddled between worlds. I did not expect you to be so beautiful.”

“You’re very flattering Giolladhe, thank you.” Trying to get back to business, she said, “Are you able to make the sword for me? I have money.”

“When you ask for the sword to give power, what kind do you mean?”

“This king will unite many people, many warring factions who vie for power; he will repel the invaders and bring peace to the land. But he’s young, unknown, untried. It must give him glamour, so that people trust him, so that they follow him. It must also enhance his fighting powers and protect him from bloodshed. Merlin tells me that his swordsmanship is exceptional, but this sword must enhance those skills. And it must be strong.”

Giolladhe nodded, “I can make it do all of those things. I presume then it must impress in looks as well. It will take time, but I can do it. Any specifics as to appearance?”

“I’ll leave that to you – engravings of course, a fine hilt.”

“I will need to use my other forge.”

Vivian was puzzled, “You have another forge? Where?”

He smiled broadly, “If you come back tomorrow I’ll show you.”

She was intrigued, and if honest, keen to see more of him. “Come here?”

He gazed at her with such intensity she felt a flutter of nervousness. “Yes. But only if you can keep a secret. I don’t show everyone my other forge. And it means tonight I can sketch out a rough design to show you. If you like it, you can pay me a deposit.”

He named a breath-taking sum, but she nodded, knowing she had no other choice. “All right, I’ll see you tomorrow.”

He smiled and took her hand, kissing the back of it, and Vivian again felt that flutter of uncertainty and promise. “Tomorrow then.” And then he dropped her hand and walked back into his forge.



The next day Vivian turned up as requested, having left Nimue behind to go to the markets to complete their purchases. For some reason she felt nervous, which was ridiculous, and she had been reluctant to share the details of the meeting with Nimue. She certainly didn’t share how attracted she’d felt to Giolladhe. She smoothed her hair as she entered the workshop. The fire was still glowing in the forge, but with less intensity

than before. Giolladhe was working on the bench under a bright lantern, and Vivian called out and walked over to him.

He turned and smiled, moving aside to make room for her. He was cleaner today, some of his hair pulled up into a short ponytail to keep it out of his eyes. He was wearing a cotton shirt, and his sleeves were rolled up showing his strong forearms. "I'm making a ring for a client." The bench was littered with small tools for precise work, and he was holding a ring made from a dark metal Vivian didn't recognise. Seeing her puzzled face, he said, "Archonium; my client likes drama as well as beauty."

Vivian nodded, "Of course, I haven't seen it for a while. It's not a metal I use often." She took it from him and admired the fine workmanship. The band was wide, and he had started to engrave the area around where the stone would sit. "It's beautiful," she murmured, passing it back to him. She looked at the shelves around the room, which were filled with objects in various stages of completion. "You do several pieces at once?"

"Sometimes. Some are personal projects, some have been commissioned." His gaze never left her face, and he smiled again, shifting his weight against the bench. "I have the perfect piece for you. I made it not knowing who it should be for, but it called to be made anyway. And now I know why. It's almost complete, but I was waiting to finish it, and here you are."

Vivian could not contain her astonishment. "A piece for me? I'm flattered, but I can't afford it Giolladhe."

"There's no cost. It's a gift."

"I can't. Why would you –"

He interrupted, "Because I have to. And I want to." He turned and rummaged amongst some papers. "Anyway, I have the design for the sword." He pulled a sheet free and handed it to her.

The design was impressive and it was clear the sword would be magnificent.

"The engravings look very detailed," she said. "It will take time."

He nodded, "But it will be worth it. I will use several different metals, they will enhance the engravings - it will be subtle though. The sword will sing."

"Sing?"

"With the power I'll weave into it - a gentle pull on the senses," he said. There was a flash of arrogance behind his eyes. "No-one in your world will have seen a sword like it."

For a moment Vivian saw something else in Giolladhe, something unsettling, but she pushed it aside. "Good, that's what Merlin wants. He's going to arrange that Arthur pulls it from a stone."

"Your Merlin is a showman," Giolladhe laughed. "You should probably deliver it in a similar dramatic fashion, in a way no-one will forget."

Vivian laughed as well. "May be I should. Something to remember for all time."

"You're the Lady of the Lake aren't you? Perhaps the lake should carry the sword to shore."

"Maybe my disembodied hand should lift it from the water!" she said, teasing.

Giolladhe became serious. "That's brilliant, Vivian. Who would forget that?"

"It was a joke."

He gazed at her with an intensity that was almost a caress. "No. It will deliver the right amount of mystery to begin weaving the legend of a chosen King. And who better to do that than you?"

Once again her heart beat uncomfortably and she broke his gaze, reaching into her cloak for the money. "You're quite the showman too, Giolladhe. I had better give you the deposit." She placed it on the bench.

He barely glanced at the money, but watched her carefully.

"Do you still want to see my other workshop?"

"Of course," she said, trying to subdue the flutter Giolladhe always managed to produce.

"Then come with me."



He took her elbow and led her into another room, to a large cupboard concealing another door. He opened it revealing blackness. “My private portal.”

“To where?” Vivian had never used a portal and was wary of doing so now.

“To the Realm of Fire. Don’t worry, it’s fixed. We can return here anytime.” He held out his hand. “It’s safer to hold hands when crossing, just in case.”

She placed her hand in his and felt a surge of attraction race through her. He pulled her close, his arm pressed against hers, and then he stepped forward and she followed him into the portal.

All her senses tingled and her magic flared, responding to the wild magic that tied the portal to two realms. The power she sensed was vast and she felt she had barely sensed a portion of it, before it was over and she was stumbling into another room.

Giolladhe steadied her, and still holding her hand pulled her further in, gesturing with his free hand. “Welcome to the Realm of Fire!”

She turned, taking it all in.

She was in another dark cave, but this time the ceiling was high, and the floor was of polished stone with a trace of sand across it. Shelves lined the room, and a deep pit glowed in the centre. A huge tripod was erected over it, supporting a cauldron on a chain. An anvil was almost lost in the shadows on the far side of the room. An archway led into another room, carved around the edge with strange designs. Again the room had half-completed projects scattered about.

“You like your caves,” she observed.

He smiled and said, “They’re usually distraction free.”

“Why is your fire pit so deep?” She pulled free of his hand and stood close to the edge, peering down.

“It’s a river fire pit, channelled from the mountains.”

“How?” She turned to him, concerned. The potential for this to go wrong was huge.

“I made it, and it was tricky. I summon the river fire when I need it. It burns far hotter than any fire *I* could make. It’s perfect for making detailed objects such as swords that I have to work for hours.”

“Isn’t it unstable?”

He frowned. “Sometimes. The djinn worry I will bring down their city, but the fire mountains themselves are likely to do that.”

She tried to disguise her concern. Giolladhe seemed to have a cavalier attitude to safety. Maybe that was what was so attractive about him.

“Come and see the city.” He turned and she followed him through the archway, gasping when she entered the next room.

It was an extension of the cave, but with big long windows on one side, through which a muted pink light illuminated the space. The walls were made of deep red sandstone, carved with bas reliefs like the strange designs over the archway. The room had a couple of low tables with divans around them, piled with cushions. “This is my ante-room,” he explained.

He crossed to a small doorway and led her out into a narrow street. There was another building directly opposite, its doorway shut by a solid wooden door. The street ran right and left, and she could see several doors and archways leading off it. Suffocated by the closeness of the walls, Vivian looked up and gasped again.

The walls towered above them, high and oppressive, so high she couldn’t even see the top. Far above them was a strip of bright blue sky.

“Where are we?” she asked, alarmed.

“The Citadel of Erfann. The djinn call it the buried city, because of the way they have carved it from the rock. Beyond it is desert.”

“But where is everyone?”

“The djinn do not show themselves as others. Have you ever met one?”

“Never,” she looked around as if one would appear. She had heard of the djinn, part fire, part earth, and possessed of a wild strange magic that

was probably more powerful than any across the four realms. "I'd like to meet one though."

"They have mostly left this place. The mountains are too volatile. Let me show you a better view."

Giolladhe turned and led her back through his workshop, and as Vivian followed, she wondered how much she could believe him. He was so confident, and yet there was something dark beneath the surface and she couldn't work out if she liked it or not.

He led her through another archway and up a long stairway cut into the red rock, until they emerged at the top into a large space with high walls, a vaulted roof, pillars, and frescoes. The heat was suffocating, and dust hung in the air, making her cough. A soft red light sliced in through high windows, striping the floor and walls. Gently taking her arm, he led her up the wide aisle to two enormous doors at the end.

"What is this place?" she said, trying to take in everything.

"A meeting place, old, and not used much anymore. Beautiful though, yes?" He stood, head thrown back, as he gazed around, and the faces of the djinn carved into the walls gazed back unflinching.

Vivian could barely believe she was in the Realm of Fire, and yet was still more intrigued at Giolladhe than her surroundings. As if aware of her gaze, he smiled, and then headed through the huge doors at the end.

The building they exited was situated on a high rocky outcrop giving a commanding view of their surroundings. Vivian could see an ocean of sand dunes, and below her the tightly woven walls of the city lay at her feet like a complex carpet. And steadily encroaching on the city were rivers of blackened lava. She realised her glimpse of blue sky from below was misleading; a pall of smoke drifted across the city and hung on the air, heavy and gloomy. The city was dying. Was Giolladhe to blame with his pit? Surely not, the destruction would have happened anyway.

She gazed at his strong profile. He was so handsome, so sure of himself, but so dangerous. She could sense it now. His pride in his knowledge

and power. How far would he go to preserve that? She asked, “So what will you do if you can’t harness the power of the mountains?”

“There’ll be other ways,” he said smiling, but it didn’t quite reach his eyes.

“Thank you for bringing me here Giolladhe,” she said, “But I think it’s time to go. Nimue will be worried.”



She met Nimue in the Dragon’s Tale, the inn on the edge of the markets. Nimue looked as cool and as unruffled as always. She cupped a large goblet of the rich red wine they called Dragon’s Kiss. “How did it go with Giolladhe?”

Vivian decided to keep her own council. “He will make a fine sword, Merlin will be pleased.”

“Will it change Britain’s future?” Nimue leant forward, her eyes bright with intelligence. “Will the invaders be repelled?”

“How can I know that?” she remonstrated. But then she softened. “I think it could. Giolladhe is a master. I think this Arthur could change everything.”

“And what is Giolladhe like?”

“Complex. Clever. Powerful. Beyond that I honestly couldn’t say.”

Nimue looked at her thoughtfully. “Do you need to see him again before we go?”

“No. I will return in two months to collect the sword and pay the remainder. And then Merlin can collect it from us.”

But she would also collect the gift Giolladhe had made for her. He had insisted and she found she couldn't refuse him, and now she was leaving she felt a deep sense of regret she couldn't quite place.



The weeks passed restlessly. Vivian found she couldn't settle to her work and her concentration drifted. There were times she didn't think of Giolladhe at all, and then his image would rush into her mind and stay there. She tried to explain it away as nerves about the sword and what gift he would give, but deep down she knew it was about more than that. She wasn't sure she could trust herself.

She eventually travelled north to Dragon's Hollow and stood once more in front of Giolladhe's workshop, but this time the copper door was firmly shut. She summoned her courage and knocked once, before trying to open it, but it was locked. She paused for a moment, puzzled. Giolladhe didn't strike her as someone who would lock his doors, whether he was in or out. She knocked again, using magic to amplify the sound, and a loud thumping resounded into the hill.

Just as she was starting to think he was out and she had got the date wrong, the door opened and Giolladhe stood on the other side, clean and well-dressed, wearing a fine linen shirt, dark trousers and knee-length leather boots. He grinned when he saw her, and it seemed a flash of relief passed across his handsome face.

"Welcome back Vivian." His gaze swept over her and he took her hand, kissing it gently before pulling her through the door and shutting it behind her. For a few seconds he held onto her hand, and they stood in the semi-darkness, unbearably close.

Vivian's heart pounded and she couldn't decide whether to pull free or lean closer, but then he turned and led the way down to the workshop.

As they entered the room, he stepped to the side and extended his hand, gesturing to the workbench. "Behold your sword."

The sword was mounted on a plinth under a lantern, and the soft yellow light played down it, highlighting the hilt and the engravings down the blade. It seemed to glow, and she stood mesmerised before it. It was more than she had hoped for. She could sense its power, a gentle radiating wave that emitted from it. She glanced at Giolladhe, not wanting to look away from it. "May I pick it up?"

"Of course," he said laughing. "You have to take it to Avalon."

"I'm terrified I'll damage it."

"It will take far more than you picking it up to damage it!"

She lifted it gently, and turned to Giolladhe surprised. "I thought it would be heavier - I mean, don't get me wrong, it's heavy, but not as much as I expected."

"It's the quality of the metals. And it's perfectly weighted. See." He took it from her and laid it flat on his hand, balancing it close to the hilt. "No-one will have a sword as fine as this in your land."

"It's magnificent."

"I have woven power within it, all as you asked. I have even inscribed something along each side - *Take Me Up* and *Cast Me Away* - because of how you will deliver the sword. And," he turned aside and pulled a beautiful scabbard from beneath the bench. "This also has powers, it will shield your Arthur from dying from loss of blood."

She looked at him confused. "But we didn't ask for this."

He smiled again. "No-one should have a sword as beautiful as this without a fine scabbard. Call it vanity on my behalf. I forbid him to store it in anything of inferior quality."

"Of course. You are too generous," she said, feeling a little overwhelmed. She pulled the money from her cloak and put it on the bench. "It is worth every penny. Thank you."

He gazed at her for a moment, his green eyes becoming dark, and then he turned again, pulling a small box towards him. As she watched him, Vivian became aware for the first time of how bare the benches were compared to the last time she was here. "Are you leaving Giolladhe?"

He looked at her thoughtfully, a hint of doubt, and maybe regret flashing across his eyes. "Just for a while. There are other places I need to be."

"What have you done?" A weight like a stone settled within her, and she wasn't sure if it was because he was going or because she sensed that he was untrustworthy.

"Many things, but I'll be back - eventually." He stroked her cheek and pushed her hair back, igniting a heat that spread from her head to her toes. "Does that matter? I hope that one day we can meet again. "

She stepped forward, so close that her skin tingled from the heat she felt radiating off him, and she looked up at him, resting her hands on his broad chest. "Are you in trouble?"

He murmured, "I'm always in trouble."

And swiftly before she knew what was happening, he leaned in, pulled her close and kissed her. A wave of desire rippled through her. The kiss was long and deep and she leaned in, responding to his touch. She could feel his hands on her back and then one hand in her hair, pulling her closer. When he released her she was breathless.

"And now for your present." He held out the box to her. "I hope you like it."

"Giolladhe, you ... "

He rolled his eyes, "Just open it."

The box was small and plain, but when she opened it she was speechless and she looked up at him, to find him watching her intensely.

"Do you like it?"

"I love it." She felt her voice shake. Inside was a pendant made of silver and rose gold, woven into a complicated design that was an oval shape at the top, tapering to a point at its base, like an upside-down tear

drop. Nestled in the top was large green stone with fleck of red. She pulled it from the box and held it by the chain under the light, where it swung gently. “It’s stunning. What is the stone?”

“Dragon’s blood jasper.”

Her hand visibly shook. “What!”

He laughed. “Rare, I know.”

“Are you insane? You cannot possibly give me this!” This was probably one of the rarest and most expensive gemstones that could be found in the four realms.

“I’m not insane. What can I say other than I want to do this. Call it fate, destiny, whatever. But you won’t talk me out of it. It’s yours now. He took it from her hand and stepping behind her before she could protest, placed it around her neck, clasping it into place. He turned her round so he could see her, his hands warm and strong upon her shoulders. “See. It’s beautiful. Just like you.”

She gazed down at the jewel and felt a heat under her throat, and something else. A sense of unease. She looked up, holding his gaze. He was dangerous, she knew that, untrustworthy, but he was charismatic too.

“Stay with me Vivian. For just a few hours.” And then his lips were upon hers again, and all thoughts of past and future disappeared.



Merlin sat across the table from Vivian, gazing at the sword which lay on the table between them, its scabbard lying next to it. The sunshine played along its length and once again Vivian marvelled at its beauty, her feelings tempered by a sadness she couldn’t express.



Merlin's words shook her from her reverie. "Vivian you have outdone yourself. Or rather he has." He gazed at the sword speculatively. "Drawing it from a stone will be good, but I think we need something more."

"I will bring it to you, from beneath the lake. You will take it from me while the mists are heavy - you will see only my hand and the sword emerging from the waters. Make sure you have witnesses. This is to be the start of a legend Merlin." She could scarcely believe she had said it, but she wanted to do what she had discussed with Giolladhe so badly, for many reasons.

Merlin sat back looking at her silently for a moment. "That's quite brilliant - I love it. Mysterious, magical. How did you think of that?"

She shrugged. "It was an idea I discussed with Giolladhe."

"And has the sword a name?"

"Not yet. It is yours to give."

Merlin looked at it again, and then lifted it, running his free hand down the blade. "He said it will cut through anything?"

"Anything and everything - the metals he used are so strong, and the magic so powerful. Nothing shall resist its blade."

Merlin nodded. "I will call it Excalibur."

Vivian looked puzzled, "What does that mean?"

"Roughly speaking, in the common language of Britain, it means 'to cleave through all.'" He smiled. "Its very name shall inspire fear and awe."

Vivian smiled too. "Then the legend is indeed already beginning. I wish you luck Merlin."

"Well worth the cost!" he said. "Did he ask for more than we had?"

Vivian hesitated, considering the personal cost she felt the entire encounter had placed upon her. She was unsure whether she had been played by a master seducer, or had been a willing participant keen to ignore all her doubts. He had drawn her into his secrets from the start. Why had he given her such a valuable necklace? He knew she would bring it to Avalon - a place where no one would find it. No. She knew exactly what she was doing that day - she was willingly seduced.

All this passed through her mind in a flash, and she shook her head. “No Merlin, he asked for nothing more.”

Thank you for reading this short story. Vivian is one of my favourite characters, and I thought it would be fun to write my own take on the start of a legend.

This is a prequel to my series *Rise of the King*. If you'd like to read more, you can buy the first book called *Call of the King* [here](#)<sup>1</sup>. This is what it's about.

King Arthur, the Once and Future King, is destined to return, and Tom is destined to wake him.

When sixteen year old Tom's grandfather mysteriously disappears, Tom stops at nothing to find him, even when that means crossing to a mysterious and unknown world.

When he gets there, Tom discovers that everything he thought he knew about himself and his life was wrong. Vivian, the Lady of the Lake, has been watching over him and manipulating his life since his birth. And now she needs his help.

Danger threatens the old forest of Vivian's world. To save it, Tom must wake King Arthur, who's been sleeping for centuries. But first, he's determined to find his grandfather.

Tom starts a journey that will change his life forever. He discovers that fey and magic still exist, and myths are very real.

If he wants to survive, he must learn to fight, and find courage he never knew he had.

If you love magic, mystery, and Arthurian legend, you'll love *Call of the King*, book 1 of *Rise of the King*.

Other books in the series are *The Silver Tower* and *The Cursed Sword*.

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For more information, please visit my website<sup>2</sup>, as well as Facebook<sup>3</sup>, Twitter<sup>4</sup>, Pinterest<sup>5</sup>, Goodreads<sup>6</sup>, Amazon<sup>7</sup>, and Instagram<sup>8</sup>.

Thanks for joining my readers' group.

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