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LIVREY'S
RICE

Kim Knox

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Samhain Publishing, Ltd.
512 Forest Lake Drive
Warner Robins, Georgia 31093

Nimue's Price
Copyright © 2007 by Kim Knox

Cover by Anne Cain

ISBN: 1-59998-167-X

www.samhainpublishing.com

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First Samhain Publishing, Ltd. electronic publication: May 2007

Nimue's Price

Kim Knox

Dedication

For Teebee and for Mark, who knows the nuclear man.
And, as always, for Edwin, Daniel and Jack.

Merlin

Merlin paced the room, waiting. This was taking too long. It should be a short, simple rite, proving she didn't have the power, proving she was just like all the rest.

He tightened his hands into fists.

Nobody took this long.

He made himself look at her, caught, pinned in the column of burning light. Her milk-white hair crackled with fire. Her eyes sparked with the same fire shrouding her, a glowing, incandescent surge of silver.

His skin prickled.

Raw power ate through her.

Damn it.

Nobody lasted. Not like this.

Nimue should be a pile of quivering pain slumped on the floor. One barely able to breathe. He'd pick her up and clean the blood from her face, his fingers stroking her smooth cheek. Holding his gaze, her brown eyes would reach down into his soul—

No.

Merlin crushed those thoughts. He scrubbed at his face and his hand came away damp.

"This is what you expected..." the Voice taunted him.

Merlin blew out a slow breath, willing away the needle of pain.

Yes. This was what he had known, deep down in his gut. He'd known the Lady Nimue was just the same as him.

That she had the Sight.

His gaze skirted her tall frame. It had to be the difference he'd felt in her from the second she'd appeared in the Great Hall.

A hush had fallen.

Like an inexperienced boy, his mouth dried, and his heart started to race. Merlin had reached for Them in that panicked moment. And had met only laughter...

Nimue's fresh scream ripped his nerves raw.

Merlin stared up at the curved stone ceiling. The edge of the burning column of energy had blackened it. Yes. This was a safer, more humane test than the one to which They had subjected him.

Only Arthur had come as close as this.

A smile quirked Merlin's mouth. He didn't even want to think about the chaos that would've erupted if *he* had the Sight.

"No." Merlin's voice, unused, raw, echoed around the small, circular chamber buried beneath the Round Room. "That's not his destiny." Merlin grimaced. "Not yet."

His gaze fixed on her fire-filled eyes. "Whereas you..." The sight of fresh blood, slick over her mouth, forced him to pause. The ball of anxiety in his stomach tightened. This was wrong.

"Why are you still holding her?"

He reached for the Voices. The familiar ice spread through his veins and he stared at Nimue, at her contorted face—

"Pretty little thing, isn't she?"

The Voice buried a spike in his mind. Merlin winced against the pain, against the pull of Them. He knew to keep it short. Chatter would have him dead. "Answer my question."

"Always so impatient, Merlin." A chorus of voices thickened, driving shards in his brain. *"You are of the same blood. You share the Sight."* Laughter scraped down his spine and Merlin arched against the pain. Nails dug into his palms and drew blood. *"You can't have her, Merlin."*

He wrenched his thoughts away and breathed out the echo of stinging needles. His gut tightened. Only then did he hear the silence. He

stared. Nimue was a crumpled and bloody mess. She wasn't dead. She wasn't. She had the Sight. With the Sight came the ability to commune with the Iselin Dal.

He repeated that fact in his mind.

His hand slid over her throat, searched, and found a thin pulse. Thin, but steady. Merlin's head dropped. His eyes closed and, for a moment, he simply breathed. She was alive. "Nimue." His voice cracked over her name. His dry throat forced him to swallow. "Nimue." Stronger. More like his own voice. Good. "Wake up. It's over."

Her eyelids twitched and a soft groan escaped her. "I smell like an overcooked pig."

A laugh burst out of him. "Yes, you do."

"You aren't supposed to agree, Merlin."

She struggled to sit up and his arm supported her, held her. The heat of her skin brought life back to his frozen hands. No, he couldn't touch her. Not now. He slid his fingers back, curling them into balls. Tight. "The king made me swear always to tell the truth."

"To him." She wiped at her mouth and grimaced when her hand came away wet with blood. It became another stain streaking her dress. Her brown eyes, weary but alive with mischief, held his gaze. "You could've at least said venison."

His mouth twitched in a smile. She did this. She was the only woman to talk to him as if he were just another man. Not Counsellor to the king. Not the Sorcerer who created magic and consulted Demons. Just a man. "You have the Sight, Nimue."

Merlin winced. He hadn't meant it to come out so...bald. But he had to end it. End the...relationship...that had sprung up between them. The Dal's words echoed. He couldn't have her.

It would cost him his sanity. Again.

"I have the Sight?" Nimue blinked. "How?" She stared up at him, but he couldn't hold her wounded gaze. "I mean..."

She stood. For a second, she swayed and Merlin stopped himself from reaching for her.

Stop it now.

Stop it dead.

Nimue stared at him. “There is only you. You’re the Sorcerer. No one else.”

“Not any more.” He straightened. He was Merlin. His power set him apart. Always had. Always would. He’d known that the second the Iselin Dal invaded his mind as a boy. He had to put thoughts of Nimue, of sharing a life with her, out of his mind. Pain spasmed, leaving a hollow ache in his chest. He controlled it. That’s what he did. Controlled the pain and learnt from it.

“You’ll heal. I have to tell the king.”

He was adept at control. This, *she*, would be no different.

Nimue

Damn it, no. He was leaving. “Merlin! Wait.”

Nimue stretched out her hand, caught his, gripped it. Something slick wet her skin. She turned over his hand and found blood and crescent-shaped cuts dug deep into his palm. “You’re bleeding.”

Merlin tugged his hand free and eyes as dark as her own narrowed. “It’s nothing.” He stepped back. “You need to rest, Nimue. We’re strong. It’s how we have the Sight...but we still need to eat and sleep after an...encounter.”

Strong? True. Already, the shakes, the dull throbs of pain through every muscle, were fading. A smile pulled at her mouth and Merlin’s eyes deadened in response. Silent curses ran through her head. He’d wanted her. Every sense had screamed it. Now, that had changed.

All right. She would start again. Morgan had given her time.

Her gaze dropped, fixing on the strong column of his throat. She focused on the strip of black leather slipping beneath his tunic. Nimue had seen the crested ring that hung from it. He had held it up to a flickering candle, the black, carved stone blazing, and told her of his father. The ring was his only connection to that long-dead man. She calmed her nerves. “Will...will you be my teacher?”

“Nimue.”

Her name was almost a growl. She ignored the delicious shiver running over her skin. Morgan had warned her about this. *He will weave his magic around you, Nimue. Wrap darkness around your heart. Resist that. And you can destroy him.* She let out a slow breath. “Who else can

show me, Merlin? It's taken you years." Her eyes lifted and she ran slow fingers over the sharp edge of his jaw. He flinched. "I'm...I'm scared."

Something flickered in the dark depths of his eyes. Then was gone. Merlin backed away. "It's the king's decision."

"Then we go now."

A muscle in his jaw jumped. His mouth opened. Then shut. "Yes."

He stared over her long, creased dress. She followed his gaze and saw the stains of blood and urine "I have to change. I'm sure the king wouldn't approve." A smile twisted her mouth. "And the Queen would be horrified."

Merlin's mouth flattened. "If the king decides I am to be your mentor, your irreverence stops, Nimue."

She couldn't help herself. "So I have till then?"

"You know that's not—" Merlin bit back more words and turned to the solid wooden door. "Let's go."

He shot back four heavy bolts and tugged at the wrought-iron ring. The door groaned. Nimue stared back at the raised circle that had burned her with agonising light. She hadn't told him a lie. She was scared. Voices had whispered in that searing light, whispered of the distant future, the forgotten past. One Voice told her power could be hers. It would be hers. All of it.

Nimue crushed her eyes shut. She had to deny the memories, and shook her head against them.

She drew air into her lungs and focused on Merlin's straight back.

The Voice had promised her his power.

Her bare feet padded over cold stone. Think about the cold. Concentrate on the chill numbing her soles. She couldn't let her thoughts dwell. But she failed. Arthur's sister had sent her to the court to worm her way into Merlin's affections. And she had done that. The ease of doing so still surprised her. However, there was the other side.

She needed to see the brooding lines lift from his sharp, handsome face. To have Merlin smile at her and let that smile light eyes too used to looking inwards and seeing horror.

No.

That was his magic.

Morgan had said.

She tugged at his arm. "Will I have to endure the light again?"

Merlin pulled free and didn't stop his fast pace through the curving, torch-lit tunnel. "No."

"What happens if the king says no?"

He stopped. He didn't look at her, instead his face turned down the smooth-stoned tunnel. His voice was cold, hard. "The Iselin Dal will use you as they wish. As They used me. Until I learned."

Panic skittered through Nimue. She knew the stories of the screaming, insane wild-man Merlin had once been. Sometimes she saw the memory of it flicker across his face. "I—"

Narrowed eyes fixed on her. The power in them prickled over her skin. "It's something you must be prepared for, Nimue."

She forgot her role. "And you would be relieved!"

Merlin's jaw tightened. "Yes."

The shock and pain of that answer shot through her nerves. Nimue grabbed at the carved stone for support, felt the sharp edge dig into her palm. "How could you...?"

"You were a dalliance, Nimue. Nothing more. Now you're a threat to me. And we both know it." She swung her hand without thinking. Merlin's strong fingers caught her wrist, pinned her arm to the wall, blocked her with his body. "Don't we?"

Nimue couldn't breathe.

The mixing odours of stone, leather and Merlin's clean, male scent shot through her. The hard strength of him pressed against her had her heart thumping. She stared up into dark eyes, catching the flicker of fire in their depths.

Want pulsed.

Her hips shifted. Slow. Sure.

Merlin groaned, his gaze dragging to her mouth.

“Just one taste, Merlin.” Was that her voice? Soft, breathless?
“Where’s the harm?”

His lips parted, his breathing harsh, and the liquid fire low in her belly flared. The urge to sink her teeth into his lip consumed her. For her to finally taste him, let his tongue, her tongue—

“Enough!” Merlin stumbled back. “I’m stronger than that,” he muttered. Cold eyes fixed on her. “They must have you for my own sanity.”

“And that’s what you’ll tell the king?”

Merlin’s jaw lifted, his spine straightened. “Yes.”

“You condemn me, Merlin.”

He turned. “You shouldn’t have come to the court.”

Nimue watched him stride down the tunnel. “I had no choice.”

* * *

“So...”

Arthur pulled the wolf pelt tight around his shoulders and settled himself into the chair before the newly lit fire. Pale smoke puffed up the blackened chimney and thickened the small room with the scent of burning wood.

“You’ve been playing in your chamber again?”

Nimue’s gaze flicked over Merlin’s profile and found him staring out the thin slit of window. Ancient rippled glass dappled the early morning sunlight over his face. A face that could’ve been carved out of stone.

“Everyone must be tested, Sire.”

Arthur stretched his feet towards the growing flames, toasting his woollen socks. “So you say.”

Nimue felt Arthur focus on her and caught his light, piercing blue eyes before she dropped her gaze. “And the Lady Nimue has been your latest victim.”

“Yes, Sire.”

“Sit, Lady.” Arthur waved a hand to the other high-backed chair in front of the hearth. “I remember the horror of it all too well. Have you eaten yet?”

Nimue sank into the worn leather. “No, Sire.”

Arthur frowned. “You could have fed her, Merlin.”

There was no reply.

“My breakfast will be here soon. We can share.”

Nimue caught a curve of his bright smile and had to return it. “Thank you, Sire,” she murmured. Arthur was as fair as Merlin was dark. Morgan had said she saw the brightness of summer in Arthur’s face and she would do anything, *anything* to protect her brother from Merlin’s influence.

“And you dragged me from the warmth of my bed, because...?”

“Nimue has the Sight.”

With the sharp intake of Arthur’s breath, something inside of her shrivelled. This would be the reaction to her now. The drawing away. The fear. She stared again at Merlin’s granite profile. He had worn that expression before. Yes, it would be the reaction—a new thought had her chest tighten—for as long as Merlin let her live.

“How is that possible? I thought you...”

“She has to die.”

“What?” Arthur was out of his seat. “You want me to order her execution?”

Nimue closed her eyes. Somehow, she had known that would be his final decision.

A tight knot of fear squeezed in her stomach and her fingers gripped, twisted the smooth cloth of her dress. Merlin’s voice was cold, matter-of-fact. She had never known him at all.

“For the safety of your rule, she must die.”

“Your safety, Merlin,” she muttered.

Merlin’s gleaming black eyes speared her. Nimue remembered that she had to breathe. What they shared, what they must deny swirled between them. Her mouth ran dry. Those eyes seared a path down her face and focused on her mouth. Damn it, she could almost feel the pounding of his blood, the heat in his veins. Felt it echoed in her own—

His gaze ripped from her.

Nimue blinked.

The cold rush of shock burst through her.

She stared down at trembling hands, willing her heart to slow.

“The choice is yours, Sire.”

The murmur of Merlin’s voice ran over her skin, hot, smooth. Nimue shivered.

“It is either her or me, you cannot have both of us.”

She heard Arthur’s resigned sigh and knew, *knew* his decision. “Then—”

A rapid knock and the door burst back. “Sire! A messenger has word of an approaching army.”

The pause of one heartbeat. “Whose colours do they march under?” Silver fire flashed in Arthur’s blue eyes and there was a sudden hard set to his features.

The young page shook his head, still breathless. “None that he recognised. A red banner, woven with shapes.”

“How long?”

The boy’s voice trembled. “A day, Sire. Just a day away.”

Arthur ran a hand over his white-blond hair. “I will see him.” His gaze fixed on the page again. “Bring him and my breakfast to my chamber.”

“Yes, Sire.” And the boy was gone.

“Does this banner sound familiar, Merlin?”

"No." He stared into the fire. "With your permission, I will hear what the messenger has to say and then consult with the Iselin Dal."

Nimue didn't miss the shudder that made Arthur wrap his wolf pelt tight again. "Granted." Arthur strode past her and through an open doorway.

Merlin's eyes slid across hers, stinging. "And Nimue should be confined in a cell, Sire, until your decision is final."

"Is that really necessary?"

"Yes."

Arthur's soft voice came from his bedchamber. "I think you're overreacting, Merlin."

"No." Merlin's gaze burned her, more scorching than the embers in the hearth. "I'm not."

* * *

Nimue lay on the stuffed hay mattress and stared up at the curve of the ceiling. The torch cast a weak golden glow over the smooth stones and left most of the room in thick darkness. Merlin had dumped her there and bolted the door, fixing one of his devices. One that clicked and twisted and secured her better than stone and mortar.

She turned and punched her pillow.

"Saved by an invading army." She let out a slow sigh. "Well, saved for now."

At least Merlin had let her eat, bathe and rest.

"Not exactly going to plan, is it." A bitter laugh escaped her. "Seems I'm not that irresistible after all."

"*You are to him.*"

Nimue's heart stopped.

A Voice. A Voice in her head. *Inside* her head.

Her neck tightened, a dull throb of pain spreading over the base of her skull. Nimue breathed against it and willed herself to be calm. There

was something familiar about the voice. She'd heard it in a dream... No. The memory of searing white light and endless pain rushed over her. Not a dream, a nightmare.

"You're...you're *Them*."

She felt the twist of a smile as if she wore it herself. "*One of Them*." The press of quick spikes into her skull, sharp, fleeting, forced a gasp. "*A new mind. Fresh. Free from Merlin's fixed paths. Yes. You'll do very nicely.*"

"What do you want?"

A grin ran a saw across her brain. "*We know what you're doing here.*"

"I..."

"*Don't bother to lie, Nimue. We know all, We see all. Your little scheme with Morgan is open and obvious to Us.*"

Nimue bit into her lip and tasted her own blood. Fire surged down her spine and she curled her body tight, trying to deny the pain. "Please...I..."

"*We have plans for Merlin. And you are a vital part of them.*"

Nimue groaned against the rapid pulses of sharp pain scraping through every nerve, every muscle. "What do you mean?"

"*You will take everything that Merlin has. But not yet.*" A short pause and the pain washed over her and away. "*He is coming. Remember. This is our secret. Or I will come to live in that sweet body of yours.*"

Nimue breathed in and out. Slowly. So slowly. She slid her knees down from her chest, stretched and found the agony gone. She rolled onto her back and let the tears slip down her face into her pillow. Damn it. And damn the Iselin Dal to whatever hell They—

She cut off that thought.

If They knew everything, They had to know that Morgan had her sisters. That part of the bargain she had struck was for their safety.

Nimue sat up and wiped her hand over her mouth, wiped away the evidence of the Iselin Dal's invasion of her mind. Her bare feet curled into the cold stone of the floor. Well, now she had two masters.

The clank and clink of the lock broke into her thoughts. A hiss and then bolts shot back. The door groaned.

The bright flare of a torch burst over the cell and Merlin glared at her. "They said I need you."

A bitter laugh escaped her. "Nice to be wanted."

Yes, two masters. And now Merlin made three.

Merlin

Nimue looked worn through.

The guilt stabbed sharp in his temple and with it the reminder that he couldn't have her. Not if he wanted to stay sane. The bitter smile cut his mouth. Insanity. As one of older, more distant Iselin Dal had once said, "Been there. Done that."

Them.

Merlin made his feet move forward, pushing the cell door shut behind him. He planted his torch in a rusted bracket. "I did as the king commanded. I communed." He pushed back the memories. It did no good to dwell on it so soon. He needed time to consider the words, the images without the thought of the Dal's torture.

"And?" Nimue brought her knees up to her chest. She rested her chin, her milk-white hair loose and spilling over her legs.

Her mouth.

Red. So red.

Merlin fixed his gaze on the lumpy mattress. "This army will besiege the city. The knowledge I need to defeat them is unlike anything I have accepted before. And I need another to aid me." His eyes moved to hers and found them wary. "To share the pain."

"Ah." Her head tipped. "And that would be me."

"Yes."

"And if I refuse?"

"Then the king's order has been confirmed. You die."

Her soft laughter had an edge to it that he had never heard before. "And if I agree? What's my reward?"

His jaw tightened. "Aiding your king is its own reward."

"I see."

Her feet slid to the floor and she rose. Her scent threaded through his senses. She'd bathed, oiled her body with perfume and then there was her natural scent. Merlin's blood started to pound. Why the hell had he closed the door?

So close.

Her mouth.

He just had to dip his head to—

"I think this army favours me." Her voice was soft as she slipped past him to lean against the door. Her smile shone with false innocence. "You need me. And I can refuse. Then your precious city and your precious Arthur die."

Merlin's hands balled into hard fists. "What do you want?"

"What I first asked for." Her fingers played with a lock of her hair, twining it around a long finger. "For you to be my teacher." Her eyes fixed on his, bright, shining. "I think that's only fair, don't you?"

"Nimue..."

"That's my deal, Merlin."

She was a woman who knew she had nothing to lose. Damn it. He had wanted rid of her...and now circumstances had conspired to make her his pupil. "You help me now and I will judge whether you are worthy of being trained."

She laughed. "I'm not a fool. Agree now. Let the dead Themselves witness it. Given a moment's chance, you'd kill me."

"As would any sane man."

"And I thought we used to be friends, Merlin." She pushed herself away from the door and he couldn't help but watch the slow sway of her hips. A small, smooth hand framed his face. Its cool touch slid over the hard bone of his jaw. "Lying in the Queen's Garden, staring up into the

night sky. I can still hear your voice in the blackness telling me what men will call our stars.”

A look of pain flashed across her face and her fingers curled away.

“I give you my word.” Nimue’s voice was curt. “What we both want...” She stood back. “What we both need is forbidden. I won’t play that game.”

The touch of her hand had branded his cheek. Damn it, where was his voice? “You will leave.” He swallowed. “If I train you, you...are to leave the court, the city...the land.”

Merlin ran a hand through his hair. His insanity had to be creeping back for him even to consider this. But those first few heady nights still pulled at him. His pathetic following around of Nimue like a moonstruck calf galled him. He had found any excuse, *any*, to be in her company. She was as thirsty for knowledge as he was and he had turned that to his advantage.

He could still feel the soft spring of the grass under his head.

The cool breeze brushed over his face, bringing with it the fading scent of the roasted meats from the kitchen. Staring up into the milky wash of stars, her soft laughter surrounded him. The taunting almost-touch of their shoulders as they lay side by side had his heart pounding. It would be so simple to lean over and cover her soft, laughing mouth with his own—

Damn it, the thought of that night still itched his skin.

He had been fortunate not to follow his very strong instinct that night.

Very fortunate.

“Will you swear on it?”

“I gave you my word.”

“Swear.”

Nimue sighed. “On what?”

Merlin’s eyes narrowed. “On the lives of your sisters.” Colour rose over her pale skin. So that obscure piece of information from Them was

true. Nimue was scheming...but he'd not had enough strength for the Dal to elaborate further. "Do you so swear?"

She sucked in a trembling breath. "I swear."

"I'm sorry...?"

"I swear!" Dark eyes burned into him. "Satisfied?"

"With anyone but you, Nimue."

"Very funny." She flicked her gaze around the cell and he had the impression she wanted to look anywhere but at him. "Can I leave here now? As pleasant and as peaceful as this place has been..."

"My laboratory." Merlin waited for her to move from his path before he tugged at the door's heavy ring. "We will commune. Learn what we can and then try to replicate it."

Nimue blinked. "I thought—"

A smile twisted Merlin's mouth. "That my devices, inventions and powders appeared fully formed?" He waved her through the open door into the torch-lit corridor beyond. "And here starts your first lesson. They show me," he paused, grimaced, "us, a way to solve the problem we present. It's our skill, our brains that have to work with the knowledge, us who turn it into a practical solution. Nothing is free, Nimue." He couldn't help it, his voice turned sour. "And knowledge always, *always* comes with a price."

Nimue

Merlin's laboratory.

A place of legend, of magic...

Nimue wrinkled her nose. "It stinks in here."

Merlin glared at her.

The vaulted ceilings and solid, windowless walls reminded her of her cell. The smell wasn't much better. Sweat, the stink of waste and wet straw. And blood. She could almost...feel...the pain and the *years* he had spent in the network of cellars, communing with the Dal...

Nimue pushed her mind away from that, not willing to accept that it would be her life, her future.

"Why do you have to do this, Merlin? And why didn't you already know?"

Her finger ran along the edge of a large table, its littered surface scorched and scraped. She found him staring at her. A dark eyebrow lifted. Nimue bit at her lip and broke from his hard glare. Her gaze flitted over the intricate little metal devices on the table. "I mean..." She pulled in a breath. "The city is strong and defensible. It serviced the Romani for decades. You yourself supervised the rebuilding of the walls and defences."

She picked up a square of smooth wood, embedded with glass. She blinked. It was so smooth that she couldn't find the grain. "What—?"

Merlin took it from her exploring fingers and put it carefully back onto the bench. "Do not touch anything in here, Nimue." He gripped her arm and pushed her into a chair before the great hearth. A small fire already licked at the kindling.

She watched him pace.

"I don't know the future, Nimue. I normally commune, find the enemy's weakness and use...conventional...means to stop them. That's all I do." He ran a hand through his short, dark hair. "That way is easier for everyone. But..." He stopped and his eyes fixed on the flames in the hearth. Drops of gold reflected in their blackness. In the sudden silence, the pop and crack of the wood and coal seemed too loud.

"This isn't Arthur's usual enemy." Merlin sank into the opposite chair. "It's not just some disaffected minor king, unhappy with the tithe and stupid enough to march against us. No." His finger tapped against his mouth. "Someone with the Sight armed these men."

Nimue blinked. "But I thought that I...that we..."

"This is why I test everyone I can."

Lead squeezed her heart. "To keep yourself safe."

His eyes narrowed on her. "To keep Arthur safe. That's my duty, my purpose."

"Look—"

"We should start." Merlin stood, fingers tugging at the fine cloth of his tunic. "Time is limited."

"But I thought they were still a day away."

"The weapon they have will be in range all too soon. The Iselin Dal have shown me its power." He crushed his eyes shut against the memory and Nimue curled her fingers around her knees, stopping herself from reaching up, killing the need to stroke away his pain.

She was an idiot.

He wanted her dead. He'd asked it of the king...and yet... A flutter in her stomach made her pause.

No. Merlin was beyond her. And he couldn't hear the truth. She knew the Dal would visit her, as they had in the cell when she'd been unable to resist temptation.

He was beyond her. For now.

Nimue rose.

“Let’s get this over with.”

“It’s not something to be entered into lightly—”

“You’ve given me no choice.” Her smile was sharp. “Remember?”

Merlin took her arm. His fingers were hot against her cool flesh and she couldn’t help the shiver of goose bumps breaking out over her skin. “I would prefer you not to be here at all.”

He dragged her behind him, cutting a fast pace through the piled junk and furniture of his laboratory. Nimue stared at the torches fixed into metal brackets. A glass dome protected them and, inside, the flame didn’t flicker...there was just a low, disconcerting hum.

The words were out before she realised. “So there’s no magic here?”

“Magic? No.” His gaze slid back to her. “It just looks that way.” He stopped. “Stand. There.”

He turned to two doors, pressing his palms against another grainless piece of pale wood. Silently, and without effort, the heavy metal doors swung inwards.

Heat bloomed over Nimue’s skin. It was unnatural. “And that wasn’t magic?”

Merlin’s returning grin was sharp. “No. Science.”

Beyond was a round, vaulted room, free of the clutter stuffing every corner and shelf of his main laboratory. Carved black into the floor was a circle. Inside that was a raised ring, wrapped in leather.

“There can be no...getting used...to this.” He patted the ring, the sound dull, hollow. “Come here, Nimue.”

Breathing slowly, she crossed into the room. The smell of old blood, of sweat and the pervading stink of pain and fear shot through her. Her stomach tightened. She had to do this. The alternative was death.

“W-What do I do?”

Damn it, she couldn’t stop the quaver in her voice. Why she should be worried about letting Merlin see her fear was beyond her. But she was. She had to call it pride.

“Inside the ring. Grip it. Hard.”

Nimue followed his instruction. The leather was cool, almost damp to her tightening fingers. Merlin stood behind her, the strength of his back against hers, his heat bleeding through the thin material of her dress. Nimue focused hard on the ring. Her mind couldn't go there.

"Now what?"

"Close your eyes and concentrate on my voice. Just mine."

With her eyes closed, the other senses heightened. The press of him against her spine... Heat flooded her, her heart thudding.

"Relax, Nimue."

The soft, dark timbre of his voice threaded through her, wove his magic. Her breathing slowed. "Listen to my voice. They will try to use you, speak to you...but you're with me, to be used by me. Anything else will have us dead. Do you understand?"

Her mouth was dry. She swallowed. "Yes, Merlin."

"Then let us begin."

Her calm, even breaths eased the panicked race of her heart.

Behind her, Merlin stiffened. She knew the Voices were near.

"Stay with me, Nimue." Merlin's voice was strained, but in control. "They're coming. Listen to my voice, just mine. I will share in your Sight, add it to my own, together we will push forward and see a time I have only glimpsed."

"Yes."

Small needles of pain jabbed at her skull. Nimue winced, gripping the leather-wrapped bar until her knuckles ached. There was something else. A strange swirl through her senses, her mind feeling dizzy, light. She couldn't think, had to...

"Don't fight me."

Slow breathing.

The swirl became a rushing vortex.

This was wrong. Her heart pounded, her throat closed with fear. Merlin had found another way to kill her.

What the...?

Slow breathing.

“Good.”

Nimue knew Merlin stood at her back, could still feel the solid press of his spine against hers...but she was also looking at his sharp-boned face, his narrowed eyes. She blinked. Or thought she did. “What?”

“We’re communing. Here.” He held up his hand. “Keep a tight grip. Do not let go.” She slid her fingers into his and she winced at the burn of...something...that flashed over her skin. “This is a symbol of the joining. Break it and we die.” Merlin paused. “If you feel yourself weaken, squeeze my hand.”

“I won’t weaken.”

The flash of power in his eyes made her heart skip. “This is not the place for pride, Nimue.”

“And what will you do?”

“We’ll leave.”

“That’s it?”

“I’ll only see because of your extra strength. Without it...” He stared up to the Chamber’s curved ceiling. “They’re here.” Cold eyes speared her. “Don’t fail your king, Nimue.”

“Ah, the lovely Nimue is here with you. Just as We ordered.”

Each word lanced into her brain and Nimue gritted her teeth. She focused on the hard grip of Merlin’s hand, the calluses rough over her skin. The pain eased.

“And she’s trying so hard.”

“Show me how I can defeat the weapon this army brings.”

“You’re no fun any more, Merlin.”

“Show me.”

A pull to her senses panicked her. Nimue tried to fight it. The quick squeeze of Merlin’s hand made her relax and with it the image of the torch-lit chamber faded. Yet, she could still smell the damp stone, the old leather, feel Merlin at her back...

Nimue stared. Her mouth fell open.

She stood on a white-sanded beach.

A wash of stars, endless, huge, spread across the night sky. The close crash of water broke the heavy air. She drew in the heavy scent of salt and heat. Sweat beaded her brow. It was hotter than scorching midsummer deep into the night.

"Follow me, Merlin."

A man in a white undershirt and loose breeches, his hair cropped like a Roman, grew in size, in colour, in life before them.

Nimue breathed past the pulses of pain. The sand, cool beneath her bare feet, shifted. A crab scuttled *through* her toes.

"We're not really here, Nimue." Merlin's low voice. Tight. Short. "This is hundreds of years into our future. Watch. Remember everything you can. This is only the start."

Crumbled buildings surrounded them, rusted spikes of metal sticking out from the cores of fallen pillars. They found a road, smooth, firm after the shifting sand, snaking into the blackness. Far in the flatness, the fires of a large camp were flickering spots in the dark.

"Take us to what we're here to see."

"How are you enjoying the scenery, Nimue? A balmy heat, isn't it? So much more pleasant than your soggy patch of grass and mud."

Nimue kept her eyes fixed on the road's smooth surface. She breathed out the pain and put another foot in front of the other. She was still in the Chamber with Merlin. She took reassurance from his solid, powerful presence.

"She is trying so very hard for you, Merlin." There was a spike of pain-filling humour in the voice. Their guide's hard grin stabbed an extra barb. *"Odd. Since her plan is to betray you."*

Nimue's heart kicked.

Merlin's hand tightened its grip.

Yes. It was trying to draw her out. Did these...things...want Merlin to know the truth, the full truth about her?

The camp loomed.

Rows of large, well-constructed tents stretched across cleared ground. Solid, unflickering torches dotted the camp, buzzing as Merlin's did. Moths the size of her hand battered up against the glass casing. The familiar scents of roasting meat and vegetables hung in the air. Men, dressed like their guide, strode past them.

Merlin pulled her after the solid shade.

Her legs ached, the dull throb of pain constant, only just bearable.

"Here."

Far beyond the lights in the thick blackness, set away from the camp, was a hut.

"Watch."

Someone was counting and she could hear the scratch and click of something inside the hut, obscured by men. The night was almost silent and with the cool stir of a salt-thick breeze—

Night became day.

Nimue thought she screamed. Had she? Was it her?

The burn of brilliant white faded and a slow green spread over the sky, filling it...and, as she watched, a deep, bleeding red seeped across the green. Now a spike of white lanced.

"...has occurred."

The voice, rusty, broken, cut through the shouting men, the furious scratching.

"Look at these readings!"

A balding man held up a long scroll, scratched, splashed with ink.

"You see, Merlin?" The guide's dark eyes slid to the scroll, a smile lurking. *"The weapon they built blasted the earth, changed it. You can use this power against your enemy's weapon."*

The guide's eyes narrowed and his clean, sharp face was tight. *"Do you accept the price?"*

Merlin closed his eyes. *"Tell me."*

"You know the rules, Merlin. Acceptance must come first." A harsh, bitter laugh cut through the sound of the men in the hut, clinking bottles. *"Acquiring knowledge is a risky business."*

Merlin grimaced and the hand holding hers was fierce.

Fire burned through her nerves.

"There is no other way?"

"For you? No."

"Then I accept."

* * *

The heat of the camp faded.

The now-familiar pull on her mind replaced it. With her hand tight in Merlin's, she let it take her.

The burn of sweet-smelling smoke formed a fog in her lungs. She knew it wasn't real, but she couldn't stop the desperate need to cough. Her free hand covered her mouth and nose. It helped. But her head felt light, woozy.

A small, dimly lit room bled out around her. Men crowded a table littered with bright white paper. One, a youngish man, chewed on an old, shiny stick as he pointed excitedly, scratching unknown symbols over the paper.

Nimue tried to focus on his words but had to watch his mouth move around the stick. Smoke puffed and embers burned in its bowl. She blinked. Did he know it was on fire? It didn't matter. She forced her attention again.

The words were gibberish, a rush of sounds.

"Merlin, I can't—"

"Sh-h!"

He squeezed her hand tight, his eyes fixed on the papers blocked from her view by the backs of the men.

His eyes burned as brightly as the flakes stuffed into the man's bowl.

“This is what Merlin lives for.”

An unexpected lance of pain made her gasp. Her gaze shot to her joined hands, stared at Merlin’s straining knuckles, almost bloodless. Needles edged along her neck, the base of her skull. Something pulsed just beyond her senses.

“He thinks everything can be solved with science and his devices.”

“Merlin built the Round Room, rebuilt the city. Made it the strongest in all of Britain. Arthur is king because of him.”

“You defend him, Nimue.” A sharp caress sliced her brain. *“That’s so sweet. Especially when he wants Arthur to kill you.”*

“You’re not telling me anything new.”

“Now, see, that’s why We like you.” The sweep of fire through her body made her bite at her lip, will herself to keep standing. She forced her hand not to crush Merlin’s in reflex. *“You have a sense of humour, a spirit... Merlin lost that a long time ago.”*

“Possibly something to do with you?”

“Perhaps... However, your world is changing. His mind is rigid, fixed. Yes.” A cutting smile sliced down her spine...but something else, too. Through the haze of pain, she found her focus. Was that Their anger, too? *“His time is at an end. And you must end it. You...”*

Nimue cried out against the sudden chorus of voices tearing, ripping through her.

“...are our next choice.”

Her legs gave out and she slumped to the soft floor, half-dragging Merlin down with her.

“Damn it, there’s more I have to See! What—”

Vaguely, she heard his long string of curses, his attempt to pull her to her feet, but her mind was slipping away, finding the dark peace that held no pain.

* * *

“Nimue? Wake up!”

The crack and spit of a fire cut through the silence and she breathed in the familiar scent of burning wood. Her fingers curled into warm fur. For a brief, brief moment, she thought it had all been a nightmare. Then Merlin's harsh, clipped voice brought her back to the present, to the time after she'd been tested.

She didn't want to open her eyes to see the angered burn in his dark gaze.

She had pulled him away too soon. *They* had pulled her away.

Her eyes snapped open.

Better Merlin than thoughts on Them.

“Pleasant nap?”

Merlin pushed himself straight and she watched him pace before the hearth. Firelight flickered shadows over his sharp features. His fingers caught in his tangled hair.

“What did you see and hear?”

Nimue struggled to sit up. “Thank you. I feel fine. Had a few thousand Voices rip my head open, but I'm feeling much better now.”

“What did you see and hear?”

Her throat was raw, forcing her to swallow. “I could tell you better if my tongue wasn't stuck.”

“Here.”

He grabbed at a wooden cup and an ale skin and pushed them at her. Nimue willed her hand not to shake. She grimaced at the wash of warm, sour liquid down her throat. “It would be easier for me to fill in the things that you missed.”

Merlin cursed again.

“In the room, after the island. What did you see and hear?”

Nimue pushed aside the Voices, glad that she couldn't remember the agony in her flesh. “Men around a table. A lot of smoke...”

“And that's it?”

“The one with the stick—”

“Pipe.”

Nimue shrugged. “He babbled. None of it made sense.”

Merlin sank into a chair and pinched at the bridge of his nose. “I don’t understand...”

She sipped again at the sour ale. “That makes two of us.”

“This isn’t funny, Nimue.” Merlin’s voice was just above a growl. “I don’t know whether I saw enough. And if you...” His gaze fixed on her. “Go and help with the evacuation of the city.”

“But—”

Merlin stood. “You’re of no further use.”

He dragged open a door and Nimue could see the bright glare of his laboratory. A long curve of copper, crossed with thinly beaten metal sat on one of the tables.

“Help get the people on the move. This probably won’t work. And Camelot will fall.”

In the dimness of the small room, Merlin looked tired, grey. Old. Nimue’s gut tightened. She could not feel for this man. If the Voices were to be believed, she was his successor, heir to his power. And she would be the one who would have to take it. It would be insane to let emotion cloud her judgment.

Morgan and the Iselin Dal were her masters. The ones who had power over her.

Not Merlin.

Nails dug into her palms. Hard.

“Did you rest, Merlin?”

Nimue briefly closed her eyes. Wrong question.

His gaze snapped to her. “None of your games, Nimue.” He pointed to the door. “Help the city. Return at nightfall.”

She struggled onto heavy feet, but she had to pause in the doorway. Had to. Her hand gripped the solid frame. She didn’t turn. “Good luck, Merlin.” Her voice was no more than a whisper.

“Don't think about leaving the city.”

A tired smile pulled at her mouth and she pushed herself forward. “Where would I go, Merlin?” She sighed. “Where would I go?”

Nimue, without thinking, found herself back in her rooms. She sank onto her hay-filled mattress and stared at her locked hands. It was odd. She could still feel the solid pressure of Merlin's hand.

A bitter smile cut her mouth.

“Wishful thinking, Nimue,” she muttered. “All right.” Her gaze flitted about the familiar room. The fire had long died and only grey ash remained. The air was chilled because of it and drafts whipped cold around her thin dress. “Find some warm clothes and help get people out of the city.”

Her eyes fell on her clothes chest and Nimue willed herself to her feet.

Merlin obviously saw her as no threat to him now and had taken her word. A pinch of guilt in her stomach made her wince. Soon she would have to break it. “No. Not thinking about that.”

She pulled out thick, woollen hose and a padded tunic. Dragged on socks and her solid boots. Instantly warmer, Nimue grabbed up a strip of leather and absent fingers started to plait her long hair.

She strode down the dimly lit corridor.

Merlin had said they had less than a day. Yet she no idea what sort of enemy Arthur would face. Had they come over the moors and hills or landed down the coast? What was Merlin building? What was he defending the city from?

She found a harassed-looking Bors in the chaos of the Great Hall.

“Merlin sent me to help.”

He peered down at her. “Lady Nimue.” A smile started on his broad face and then faded. The shine went out of his eyes. Yes. He knew. “Should you not already be on the wagons with the women and children?”

“No.” She shrugged and smiled. It itched that he didn't return it. “Merlin said I was to help...so help I will.”

Bors gave her a curt nod, his mind already following the scurry of people out of the double doors and into the courtyard beyond. “We need strong backs to fill the supply wagons.”

“Consider it done.” She bit at her lip. “What’s coming, Bors?”

He glanced back and a muscle jumped in his scarred cheek. “Scouts say ships landed on a wide beach a day’s march from here. They brought a mechanical beast with them, rolled it through the water onto the sand. They *say* it burned a wide path for itself and the men up onto the solid land.” A wry smile twisted his mouth. “We will stay and defend our city and trust that Merlin can aid us.”

“Yes.” Nimue turned to the tide of people streaming out of the doors. “I hope he can.”

In a few short hours, the last of the wagons were trundling out into the hills. People had complained that Camelot was the strongest, the best-defended city in Britain. Its wells were deep and pure and they still had a good store of food. Arthur obviously stocked his city well. It was the end of winter. They seemed confident they could outlast any siege.

But the words “Merlin’s orders” caused faces to pale, caused women to scramble up into the carts and hug their children tight.

Already the sky was starting to darken. Nimue stared down onto the great plain to the silent cluster of houses outside the city walls. A few lamps burned to give the illusion the people there still went about their business.

“Here. Food.”

Nimue jumped, her hand shooting to her mouth. She willed her heart to slow. “I was just coming to find you.” She took the soft bread and cheese and her stomach rumbled. Yes, she had forgotten to eat.

Merlin stared down to the plain, his eyes lost to the shadows. “They’re nearly here.” A smile quirked his mouth. “They have no idea of the power of the weapon their Seer constructed. How much damage they could already do.”

Nimue’s mouth was too full to reply. She chewed and swallowed. “And the device you crafted?”

“Already away.”

He pointed into the sky, the grey clouds darkening to night. A slow, fat bird drifted. Nimue's eyes narrowed, strained. Not a bird. Too round, no wings...and something caught the last rays of the setting sun. There was a glitter of glass and copper. Fading.

“How... What is it?”

“Poison to the metal monster.”

“That's it?” Her heart contracted and her blood rushed with fear. “The defence of the entire city in a floating copper box?”

“You should know that's all it needs.”

She should? Nimue tried to catch sight of the device again, but darkness raced and hid it from her view. “And you're sure it works.”

Merlin scrubbed at his jaw and the scratch of bristles was too loud. “Not exactly. To know that it works, I would have to destroy it.”

Nimue stared at him. “Not exactly?”

His eyes fixed on her. “Believe me, Nimue. Nothing can defend us. If it doesn't work, not one stone will be left standing. I've Seen it. The machine they've created is an abomination.” He stared back into the darkness. His voice was almost to himself. “Mine is the lesser evil.”

She had lost her appetite. “And the army that comes with it?”

Merlin closed his eyes. “They are of no concern.” His hand grabbed hers. “It's almost time.”

The tug of her mind pushed her forward.

She was speeding over the plain. The rush of cool air burst through her lungs, her feet racing, her heart pounding. Merlin ran at her side, his hand firm over hers. An exhilaration, almost flying—

“There!”

Nimue froze as if she had slammed into a wall.

A small army marched over the heath land in the last of the day's light. Armour flashed. There was the rhythmical clank of swords, the whicker of huge, black warhorses. A voice rose, giving the order to stop.

Then she saw it. A squat metal box trundling on iron-rimmed wheels with something strapped to a spike of metal. It looked like a blunt-nosed, overlong arrowhead, but far too big for a man to fire.

“That’s it? A big lump of metal?”

Merlin’s gaze slid to her and narrowed. She thought she saw confusion...but then it was gone. “It’s what they’ve packed inside. Quick.” He dragged her toward a low run of bushes. “Their Seers are with them.”

Nimue ducked behind a bush and watched the men start to set up camp. “Where’s your...”

“There,” Merlin murmured, pointing into the sky.

Against the dark grey of a high cloud, she could just make out the bulbous, floating box. “And how...”

“Be patient, Nimue. It’s—”

For a second time, night became day.

“—early.”

Men and horses screamed.

Fire cracked. The smell of burnt flesh, the hot stink of melted metal was overwhelming. A nightmare seared itself onto Nimue’s mind. Knights melting in their armour, others flayed and raw.

And the earth.

Nimue could feel the earth screaming.

“Merlin! What have you done?” Her heart stopped and all the noise faded to nothing. “Merlin?”

His grip was still tight on hers, but blood leaked from his mouth, nose, eyes, ears. He toppled, crashing back into the singed grass. “I...” Blood foamed from his mouth. He choked and spat. “I’m sorry...”

“Merlin?” Nimue’s voice cracked and trembling fingers stroked his cool skin. She couldn’t breathe, her chest tight. She blinked back tears. “Don’t...”

A smile pulled at his mouth. More blood leaked and he twisted in a sudden spasm of pain. Dark eyes fixed on her. “There is always a price.”

A slow peace drifted down over his face.

Nimue's hands shook. He couldn't be. How could he be...?

There was no pulse under her searching fingers.

Pain knifed her heart. Nimue buried her face in his still chest, breathing in the scent of him. She couldn't hold back the sobs.

Merlin was gone.

Dead.

* * *

"Nimue."

A spike cut through her skull. She shot off the fur-covered bed with a shriek. "What the—"

"Be calm. You're in Camelot."

"I'm..."

She sank to the bed and stared into the flickering flames of the small fire. The room was damp, chilled. Nimue blinked. It looked like *his* room.

"Merlin."

She dug the heels of her hands into her eyes, welcoming the diverting pain, and fell back into the softness of the furs. She was in the little private room next to his laboratory. His hand. She could no longer feel its tight grip. Memory shot through her. The screams, the stench...and Merlin. Merlin growing cold and still.

"Nimue."

Pain bloomed. She ignored it. "Leave me alone!"

"You can change it. Change that future."

The fire and ice in her veins had her hearing things. Future? It had happened. The annihilation of the enemy. And Merlin dead. She bit her lip. "What are you talking about?"

"This is your strength. To know the future and to change it."

Nimue snorted. "I'm a Seer, I have the Sight. I am, after all, speaking to You."

The sharp, returning smile twisted her nerves and she winced. "*Every Seer has their own strength. Merlin's is to See and to solve problems with technology...with...devices. These are growing more and more powerful. We cannot—*"

"Then don't!" Nimue uncurled from a ball, fighting the need to scream. Too much. A shuddering sigh escaped her. "Don't show him." Her words were met with silence and her smile was bitter. "Ah-h. You can't. If a Seer makes a request. You have to comply." More silence. "I'll take that as a yes."

Nimue pushed herself up.

"So you want someone who solves the problems themselves, without resorting to you."

Her heart jumped.

"That means he's alive."

A stupid, stupid smile broke out on her face and she could feel the burn of more tears. Better, happy tears.

"Doesn't it?"

"Yes." Not even the slashing word could dim her joy. "*We showed you an event nine months from now. Merlin's weapon poisoned the earth.*"

"I felt it." She broke into the explanation. "The earth was screaming." Nimue pulled her mind away from those memories. They said she could change that, change what happened to Merlin. However, his final words burned through her, sharper than the agony of the Iselin Dal. *There is always a price.* "What do you want?"

"*Merlin's time is over. You must take his mind.*" A sudden chorus of Voices beat against her skull. Nimue balled her hands into tight fists and concentrated on the words. "*Stop him in his course. This first weapon cannot work.*"

"But we must protect Camelot."

"*You will find a way.*"

They were insane. Completely insane. "And if I refuse?"

A stabbing smile cut through her skull. "*Then We take up residence until you agree. There are enough of Us. A non-stop searing babble.*" A grin slashed her. "*Some of Us are particularly bad singers...*"

"Enough." Nimue fell to the bed again. "Fine." Shaking hands covered her face. If it kept him alive... "What do I have to do?"

"You must seduce him."

Nimue let out a bark of laughter. "Merlin is *not* going to fall for that. What d'you think I've been trying to do since I came to the court?"

"Again. You must find a way. If Merlin sees the power of his device, he is capable of moving forward, of unleashing massive destruction. And other Seers will know of his work."

"Seducing him will take his mind."

"Yes. It will send him insane."

Nimue closed her eyes, breathing past the pain fading in her skull. To send him insane, the thought cut almost as deep as the Iselin Dal could. He would be alive, she had to tell herself that. And Morgan's deal would be kept. Merlin would no longer be able to influence Arthur. He would be a foaming, straggle-haired lunatic, instead.

She pushed herself to her feet.

"So you want me to stop the knowledge of how Merlin built the weapon becoming available to other Seers." She pulled back her loose hair. "That's how it works? Everyone uses Merlin to See? What he discovers, they can use?"

"Yes." A short pause. "*Fortunately, no one has yet matched his genius.*"

"All right. How—" What was that? A clatter from the laboratory beyond stopped her. Her heart clenched. Merlin? "Never mind." She strained to listen, sure that she could hear him.

"Nimue. Finally. You're awake."

The door creaked back. Merlin. Alive. Very much alive.

She threw herself into his arms before thinking took over. Her hands dug into the thickness of his tunic, felt the strength and heat of his body beneath. Her mouth found his neck. The rhythm of his pulse beat hard under her lips. The tip of her tongue tasted him, a slow slide that made her sigh.

She felt his groan. His fingers tightened into her arms with a painful strength. “Nimue...” Her name was a growl and a flick of pleasure to her senses. “Don’t...”

“What?”

Her breath brushed over damp skin and he hissed.

“This?”

Teeth nipping, her hands tugged at his tunic, desperate to get to the warmth of his bare skin. “One kiss, Merlin. Where’s the harm?”

He put her forcibly from him. His eyes gleamed fire. “No games, Nimue.”

Blood pounded in her skull and her mouth was dry. She swallowed. “I thought I was dead. I thought *you* were dead.” Her arm wrenched free of his harsh grip. She curved her hand against the hard plane of his jaw, wanting to soothe away the tightness. “I thought I’d lost you, Merlin.”

Her fingertips traced the smooth, recently shaved skin, catching on missed bristles, skirting the nicks. Not his usual precise and perfect shave. “That I’d never have the chance to touch you, taste you...”

A muscle jumped in his jaw. His whole body coiled tight, she could feel it.

“You swore on the lives of your sisters.” Bitten-out words, anger...and something else...flared in the darkness of his eyes.

Pain shot through her. She had sworn. But to save them, to save *him*, she had to break that vow. Her finger edged his lip, following the perfect shape. “Just once, Merlin. One kiss.” She couldn’t help the smile curling her mouth. “But I promise, no tongues.”

His lips twitched under her fingers. “And what do you promise this on?”

Nimue sank into his gaze. "On you. On your life."

His thumb lifted her loose hair behind her ear, the tip slipping over sensitive skin. Merlin watched it, followed the path over her jaw, her cheek. "It *is* my life we're playing with Nimue. I've been caught before by an artful woman. Sent insane...until one of the Iselin Dal showed me a way back."

Nimue closed her eyes. She let the slow pulse of his touch fill her thoughts. Because then she wouldn't have to think about his words and the guilt they brought. "Please, Merlin..."

The heat of his breath, so close, brushed over her skin. His hand framed her face. "I'm trusting you, Nimue."

The start of tears burned, but she willed them back. "And I you."

She knew he was smiling. "You aren't at risk." Yes, there was bitterness in his smile. "This is just my weakness."

Closer... Until she could almost taste—

He brushed his lips over hers. Slow. Heated.

Nimue stopped breathing, her heart overloud in her ears. Too much. Her fingers slid down his chest, clung to his tunic. Merlin's own uneven breaths filled her. His hand trembled over her jaw. So simple an action, but...

Fire licked through her. It would be so easy to push for more, to take his mouth. The cold slide of a tear slipped over her skin. She couldn't do it. Merlin, it had to be Merlin. He had to instigate his own damnation.

The bite of his teeth on her lower lip had Nimue gasping, her fingers clutching at him. Her spine arched her closer and she felt the slow slide of his hand down her back, pressing her hard against him.

"One kiss." Words growled against her parted mouth.

"Yes."

Just a pained whisper. She knew.

It was already too late.

Her heart cracked.

His tongue flickered against her teeth.

This would save him, save his life. Break him.

Not thinking. Not thinking.

Her fingers slid back up his chest, into the thickness of his hair, trapped his mouth against hers. She lost herself in his hot, drugging kiss.

He pulled back. "You need to lose clothes, Nimue."

"As do you."

He tugged his tunic over his head and threw it at a nearby chair. For a moment, Nimue wavered, but his hand curved around her neck and drew her to the tormenting heat of his skin. Tentative fingertips teased over his back, tracing the defined run of muscle. Her hands slid lower.

His raw whisper burned over her. "Naked, Nimue. Now."

He bunched the thin cloth of her dress and yanked it over her head. That joined his tunic on the chair. Merlin's mouth found hers, edging her back until her calves hit the frame of the bed.

His hot hands caressed her bare skin, dizzying her senses, pulsing a liquid ache that had to be satisfied. Her impatient fingers fumbled with the ties on his breeches. Merlin's soft laughter sent warm air over her tingling skin.

"Easy," he murmured. His lips, tongue glided over her throat and his teeth bit with pained pleasure. His hand slid around the flare of her hip, covered her hand and then easily unfastened the stubborn cord. The breeches pooled at his feet. But his hand stayed. "Is this what you need?"

His fingers teased her, sliding, slipping. Nimue leant into his touch. He cupped her and she gasped.

"Yes. Yes, please."

Circling his fingertip, slow and steady, Merlin found her sweet spot. Rubbed. Heat flared and an unbearable ache throbbed through her. Too much. Light coated her vision. Tremors shook her.

Almost—

"Or this?"

The head of his penis slid over her moist flesh. And back. Then harder. Burning sparks coursed through her. Just... He stopped.

Merlin was killing her. Hardly able to breathe, she gasped, "Merlin, please."

His hands cradled her, laid her down in the still-warm bed. Firelight flickered over his nakedness, burning his dark skin gold. Her breathing slowed and she let herself stare at his perfection. She grinned, watching him curse as he tugged and pulled off his boots.

But that grin was brief. Already more guilt tightened her stomach. She could stop.

His eyes, sparking with firelight, caught her.

No. She couldn't. Nimue lifted her arms and welcomed the weight of his body.

"Where was I?" Merlin's soft, amused voice wove its magic through her mind. "I believe I was...here."

Nimue gasped, arching, twisting, wanting that incredible fullness of him deeper inside of her. "Merlin, I—"

His mouth taking hers stopped further words and she gave in to the rush of him, hard and hot and deep.

More of him. She had to have more. Her hands grabbed at his buttocks, urging him faster. Her blood burned. And the beat of her approaching orgasm demanded he satisfy her.

Merlin whispering her name against her skin, faster, almost lost.

Nimue clung to him. So close. Her body on fire, pulsing, needing—

Her spine arched. She moaned against the overwhelming rush of heat tearing through her body. And Merlin. His whispers, calming her with the soft pulse of tiny kisses against her throat.

"Mer...?" Her voice cracked over his name. Her mouth dry, she swallowed and tried again. "Merlin?"

"It's fine, Nimue." Soft laughter rippled uneasily over her. "*I'm fine.*"

"You are?"

His dark head lifted and coal-black eyes held hers. A shiver ran through her damp body. There was an unnatural glint to his gaze now. His grin was too bright. "And I worried so much." He rolled away from her with a bark of laughter. "Worried that I'd lose my sanity in you...but..." He stretched long, muscled arms, still laughing. "I feel *fine*."

"Yes."

What had she done? Nimue closed her eyes.

Her Merlin was gone.

Merlin

Merlin watched Nimue get dressed, nimble fingers replaiting her long, milk-white hair. Firelight splashed over her pale skin. Skin he had tasted and come away from sane. The grin split his face.

Yes. He had always known the Lady Nimue was special.

His gaze delayed on her smooth curves. He grimaced when she let her dress drop, obscuring them from his view. "Is the dress necessary?"

Her eyes focused somewhere on his left cheek. "Outside this room? Very necessary."

"But we're still *in* this room." He rolled onto his feet and caught Nimue in his arms. "And you can look at me, Nimue." A thumb tilted her chin. "I am still me. I'd know if I wasn't."

A smile curved her mouth, but didn't reach her brown eyes. "I'm just...nervous, Merlin."

He blinked. "Of?"

"Us." She pulled out of his arms and stood back from him. "We...we'll discuss this after the enemy's weapon has been dealt with."

"Ah, them." Merlin scratched at his scalp, uneasy that he'd managed to forget something so important. He shrugged it off. Yes. His gaze fixed on Nimue's lush mouth. He'd had other things on his mind. "Right... My bomb."

He grabbed at the door.

"Merlin!"

His hands shot up in reflex and caught the tunic.

"Clothes?"

He stared down at his nakedness. His eyes lifted and he flashed Nimue a grin. She didn't return it. "I've nothing to be ashamed of."

"Fine. You freeze to death."

She pushed past him into the laboratory.

Merlin shrugged reluctantly into his tunic and grabbed at the breeches thrown on the floor. "Now we see the true woman," he muttered, following her. Her plan to induce insanity had failed. There was nothing left in her arsenal. "Disappointed?"

She looked up from the workbench. "What?"

"That your plan failed?"

Her eyes settled back on the slim copper cylinder, a fingertip tracing over the exposed wiring. "I never had a plan, Merlin."

"So there was no deal with Morgan?" The almost imperceptible stiffening of her shoulders told him he'd hit his mark. Did she really think he had never known, never had a clue? The Voices were his to command. No secret was safe from him. Had she forgotten that he was *Merlin*?

"Time's running out," she said, obviously ignoring him. "Who's the enemy? You never said."

"A minor king from across the German Sea." He batted her hands away from his newly constructed weapon. His blood still burned for her but he trusted the Lady Nimue about as far as he could throw her... His eyes slid over her slight frame. Less. "So you don't deny it?"

"You know everything." She spoke almost to herself. She shrugged and turned from him. "I was protecting my family. I'll do anything to protect those I love."

"Very noble. Arthur should make you a knight."

For a moment, her shoulders slumped. Nimue obviously didn't take failure well. Then she was back to her annoying little topic. "So this king has Seers?"

"We're rare, but we do exist in enough numbers to be useful." Merlin stared at his device. Of course, everything was in order. The design was

surprisingly simple and he had enough solid blast putty to make a forcible detonation. With that, another of Arthur's enemies would be gone. His hand followed Nimue's path over the cool copper. A smile cut his mouth. He was too good.

His reflection twisted in the shining metal. Something was wrong—

Merlin shook his head. An illusion. He was tired, that was all. Stupidly, he was fixating on his counter-weapon with the worry that it wouldn't work. His devices always worked.

He was Merlin.

"Find more suitable outdoor clothes." His gaze narrowed. "Since you insist on wearing the things. Meet me in the Round Room as soon as you're ready."

Her dark eyes held him, cut with something he couldn't name. "As soon as I'm ready."

Some part of Merlin knew that wasn't what she'd wanted to say.

The door closed.

He scratched fingers through his hair, tugging at the roots. The damn woman had his mind fuzzy. Clarity. That was his strength. He could see what others couldn't.

Find his boots and a cloak. Wrap the device and put it in a sack. Then find Arthur.

Yes.

That was a plan.

Now where the hell had he left his boots? He smacked the side of his head. "Damn it. Sex has addled my brain." He laughed and headed back to the small side room. "Should have done this sooner." He couldn't help the smirk and his body twitched at the memories. "Much sooner."

Nimue

Nimue shifted herself over the damp earth, wanting to ease the ache in her spine.

They had pounded their horses through the night at Merlin's insistence, until the poor beasts were lathered. Now, with barely enough rest, they faced the dawn and waited for an army to tramp through the ravine below.

"Are you sure they'll come this way, Merlin?"

His gaze flicked to her and a fist curled around her gut. Even in the pale light, she could see something else, *someone* else in his eyes. "Is this another part of your schemes? Trying to undermine me now?" Merlin's attention turned back to the mist-wreathed ravine floor. His knuckles whitened around the sack squatting on the ground before him. "Never forget. I'm *Merlin*."

"Yes. You're Merlin," Nimue repeated. She stopped herself from scrubbing a dirty hand over her face. Instead, she pulled her cloak tight around her body. The air was icy and bit through to her bones. "What do we do when they come into the ravine?"

"We? Nothing. You? You stay here."

"But I thought—"

"That I needed your help?" His sour laugh made her wince. "No. The king has his troops spread along the ravine. He'll be my protection." He straightened his back, rolled his shoulders. "Not that I'll need it."

"You're still just a man," Nimue muttered.

"No." A sharp smile twitched across his mouth. "I am so much more."

Pain thudded in her temple. She wanted to grab him, shake, him, tell him that he was insane even to think that. It was too late. Nimue forced her attention back through the bare twigs of the bush behind which they both hid. "I'm coming with you."

"Fine." His hand ran over his hair and for a moment, she thought she saw it tremble. His fingers knotted, tugged hard at the roots. Nimue winced in sympathy. "Just stay out of my way."

"Merlin." Her hand hesitated over his arm. It was difficult, but what further damage could she do? The soft leather of his tunic was cold to her touch.

He closed his eyes. His skin greyed and he looked gaunt, old. "I'm tired, Nimue." His mouth twisted. "You've exhausted me."

"I'm sure I didn't. Haven't."

"My mind's whirling," he muttered. His sharp-boned face creased with pain. "If I didn't know better..." He shook his head and scratched at his scalp. Hard. Noisy. "When this is over, you and I have unfinished business."

A warbling bird made her jump.

"They're here," he said.

On the still morning air, Nimue heard the tramp of men over hard-packed ground, the trundle of carts and the clatter of armoured horses. She remembered to breathe.

"If you're going to follow me. Stay close and stay down." His dark gaze raked her. "It's a pity...but it probably was more sensible to keep you dressed." Merlin grabbed his sack and slipped out from behind the bush, his feet cat-silent through the undergrowth.

His words startled her but she followed, her boots picking out Merlin's path.

The clank and clatter of the slow-moving army grew louder.

Darkness still shrouded the narrow ravine but Nimue had grown used to the gloom. Men in burnished helmets, arms banded in circlets of iron, marched only three deep. Mist writhed around their metal-shod

legs. Already, darkness and the uneven ravine floor had the soldiers stringing out into thinning lines. Horse archers flanked a large, trundling cart, the body of it covered with the dull sheen of lead.

A squat man in a red cloak, surrounded by guards, rode behind the cart.

Riding beside him was a tall, hooded woman.

Nimue knew it was a woman. Knew it because, in the blackest pit, she would know that profile, that spark of burning red hair. Nimue's heart was a stone. Morgan. Morgan, the caring, concerned sister marched against Camelot, against her beloved brother.

"You seem surprised, Nimue?" Merlin's soft voice was a hiss from the darkness. "Morgan is a strong Seer."

"When..." She bit at her lip and then kept her voice to a whisper. "When did you know?"

"Now."

Nimue controlled the urge to hit him. "What are we looking for?"

"Whatever she's protecting under that sheet of lead."

"Naturally."

They were close, so close that the stink of the horses on the light breeze twitched her nose, but the mist, the ferns and spiky bushes still concealed them.

"Here." Merlin pressed two small lumps of yellow wax into her hand. "For your ears."

Confused, she obeyed. She watched in her new silence as he tugged at the sack and eased out the short, copper cylinder. His sure hands slipped around it. Nimue's heart was in her throat. Had she done enough? Would he realise? His fingers stopped and Nimue held her breath.

Damn Them for this.

Merlin closed his eyes and his lips moved. His hands came away and went back to the sack. Nimue breathed again. He pulled out a small metal tube.

Dark eyes found her. He mouthed more words. *Get ready to run. Don't look back. Understand?*

Nimue jerked a nod.

Merlin threw the tube, grabbed her arm and half-dragged her away.

She was not thinking, not remembering what the Dal had shown her. The screaming. The men melting through their armour.

Two heartbeats.

A sheet of white lightning. Thunder. She stumbled. Merlin hauled her further up the steep hill. Dulled shouts penetrated the wax. Without thinking, she looked back and found chaos.

Arrows streamed through the air from both sides of the ravine, cutting down the screaming soldiers, piercing the soft skin of lead shielding the cart in a thick hail. Men fought to control the frantic horses, hooves tearing, to stop them bolting. Morgan, trapped between them and the cart, yelled at the red-cloaked man.

Merlin cursed, his face tight with fury. He yanked the gobbets of wax from his ears.

Nimue's fingers snatched at him, finding only empty air.

What the—

She screamed at him.

But Merlin charged back down the hill.

Merlin

No explosion. Nothing.

The Thunder-Flash. Perfection. As always.

But the Pulse Weapon. The one that *had* to stop Morgan's disease-filled missile?

Nothing.

Merlin lurched through another bush. Arrows thudded into the hard earth around him. He didn't care. He had to get to it. He was Merlin. His life was nothing. This was his *reputation*.

Morgan.

Her horse burst through the surrounding guards.

He would never give that witch the satisfaction of besting him. Not after he'd succumbed to her charms. Charms. The charms of a snake. Nothing like his Nimue's perfection.

A cloak now obscured Nimue's long body. Damn. Clothes. They really didn't suit her.

Merlin shook his head. His device. He had to focus on that. Had to make it work.

He was Merlin. That's what he did.

Only he had the real strength to take the Knowledge he needed, had the skill to construct the devices that kept them all safe.

Merlin crashed to his knees, grabbed up the intact cylinder. Shook it. And again.

It hadn't worked. But that was impossible.

He was Merlin. All-knowing. Infallible.

"You failed, Merlin."

Morgan's voice cut through him.

"No," he muttered, fingers tugging at the thin wires. "It'll work. You'll see."

The woman's mocking laughter echoed.

"It'll work," he repeated.

Echoed...

But it didn't. Wasn't.

Echoed...

Until, even with his hands jammed over his ears, her laughter became all that he could hear.

Nimue

Nimue ran.

The storm of arrows stopped.

“Arthur!” Morgan’s voice burst over the dying moans of her men. “Merlin has failed. Meet us face to face so that we can accept your surrender.”

“Merlin?”

Nimue knelt beside the muttering man, her hand hovering over his shoulder. She touched him and he jerked away.

“Don’t.” A man she didn’t recognise stared back at her. “I mustn’t, mustn’t be touched. That is the price. My price.” He clutched the copper cylinder to his chest and scuttled back into a bush. “They...” His haunted gaze searched the pale sky. His voice dropped to a raw whisper. “*They* said the risk was too great.”

Nimue bit at her lip to stop the tears that burned her eyes.

He was alive. That’s why she had done it. But to see him so...reduced pushed a fist into her gut. The feel of him dying in her arms, seeing death slide over his face, was her sharp reminder. He was *alive*. That was all that mattered. Yet, the guilt still gnawed.

“You did your job, Nimue.” Morgan’s voice oozed false to her ears. “And for that you will be rewarded.”

Nimue pushed herself to her feet. “I want nothing from you.”

“Morgan.”

Arthur stood to her right, flanked by two of his knights. The hard twist dropped from his half-sister’s flawless face. Morgan smiled. Her

hand lifted to his cheek but Arthur turned his head. "Arthur, you look well."

"I won't swap pleasantries with you, Morgan." Arthur's pale gaze flicked to the blank-faced king picking his way through the corpses of his men. "Nor your puppet."

"Careful." Her voice had an edge of flint. "I have a weapon, still working, packed with a plague so deadly that it will decimate your precious city within a week. It's over, Arthur. Your Merlin is a gibbering fool. He can no longer protect you."

Nimue snatched her hand. "But I can."

Morgan tugged. "What do you think you're doing?"

She grinned. "I have no idea." Her grip tightened and Morgan winced. "But this is for Merlin."

She called on the Iselin Dal and pain lanced. "Use her." The agony in her bones faded to a dull surge. "Tell me how she constructed this weapon."

"You have a ruthless streak, Nimue." The smile was only a sharp stab under her skin. *"You'll need it."*

"Fine," she muttered. Through the haze of her dulled pain, men surged around her. No. The worst thing that could happen to her now was distraction. Her hand clenched Morgan's and the woman whimpered. "Tell me."

"If you're sure you want to know..." The Voice sounded smug.

Nimue stood in a warm chamber. A fire flickered a wash of light over tables, devices... Her heart jumped. It looked like Merlin's laboratory. Yet, it wasn't. Thin-sliced windows looked out onto a barren mountain.

"Show me Merlin."

Morgan's voice. But not the woman half-curved at her feet. Another Morgan sat in a deep chair, her hands clawing at its arms. Blood baked her skin and her neck strained against the agony of her invaded flesh. Communing. She was communing with the Iselin Dal.

“She has a connection to him. A strong one.” A man stood before the fire, his sharp, almost-familiar profile etched in flame. Eyes as dark as Merlin’s narrowed on her. “She was the *first* woman to send him mad.”

Nimue’s insides tightened, but he wouldn’t lay the blame solely with her. “I did it on your orders, and to save him.”

“Not my orders,” he muttered. “So, you want to know how she did it?” His laugh was hollow and raked claws over her skin. She winced. “She didn’t. There is only one who could build that disease-filled monstrosity. And that’s Merlin himself.”

Nimue stared. “What?”

He waved his hand before the fire and the bright white light of Merlin’s laboratory shone there. And Merlin, working on one of his benches, on a long, grey cylinder secured to the wood. Nimue focused, but there was nothing obvious on the outside of the metal shell. Nothing to show her how it worked. “She has always held a part of him. Just enough to offer suggestions...with the help of Us.” The man snapped his hand away and his face hardened. “Them.”

Nimue glared at the woman kneeling beside her, her face a twisted mask of agony. “But...but she wanted me to...”

“She has no real strength. Not like Merlin. Not like you. If she contacts Us, it withers her.” Nimue couldn’t miss the pleasure, the satisfaction in the man’s voice. “So she wanted a method of disposing of him that wouldn’t affect her.” He bent and jerked up Morgan’s face. “Seems you were wrong, Morgan.” His fingers snapped away. “And you’ll never hurt Merlin again.”

“Then how do I stop this device? Morgan said it’s still dangerous.” She knew she could never understand how Merlin had worked his skill. She had simply loosened the thin metal strands on his copper device. Nothing more.

“It is. Do what *she* did. And after this, *you* will be Our Instrument.”

Nimue straightened. She didn’t have much time. Already Morgan’s sweat-dampened hand grew weak in hers. “On one condition. You make Merlin sane.” A gleam flashed in the man’s gaze and a smile quirked his

mouth. She knew him then. But how was that even possible? “You’re his father.”

The man gave a slow nod and began to pace the room. His boots echoed. “I shouldn’t tell you this.” He stared up at the rough ceiling and sighed. “But I can hide us, hide this knowledge.” He paused and massaged a hand over the back of his neck. “This is the fate of every strong Seer. It’s a fate I would like to deny my son.” His gaze narrowed on her. “Take his power, Nimue. Take it and that will make him sane.”

Nimue’s heart shrank to a stone. “But he wouldn’t be Merlin.”

“Spare him this...horror.” Merlin’s father—Nimue’s mind scrambled for a name...Flavius Claudius—closed his eyes and pain rippled over his sharp features. “Bound to reveal every horror, every wicked thing we have ever done.” He snorted. “Because Seers are vassals to their kings. And those kings, those emperors need to see conquest, power...

“We have to live with that horror, share it with the Seer and inflict so much pain. I’m young. I’ve only been Dead a few years. The Others? Most are insane. A fate that awaits me.”

“Is she strong enough? Will she join the Dal?”

Flavius’ gaze flicked over the crumpled Morgan. “No.”

“Good. Then show me the way back.”

Nimue dropped Morgan’s hand.

And the woman’s raw screams echoed and faded to nothing.

* * *

“Merlin?”

Nimue knelt before the cowering man. His hands were white around the copper tube held tight to his chest. It gleamed in the morning sunlight that splintered through the holes the arrows had made in the lead-sheeted cart.

He wouldn’t meet her gaze.

“Merlin!” Her hand gripped his chin. “Morgan made you build this weapon. You have to help me.”

Knights had lifted him, kicking and shrieking, into the cart and bolted them both inside. Arthur’s men had gone, marching to safe ground with the wounded and the prisoners.

Merlin struggled free from her, scuttled back into the wagon and hid in the darkest corner.

“Her.” Merlin’s voice was a growl from the darkness. “Witch. Deceiver.”

“Exactly.” Nimue inched closer. Flavius had said that she must exploit her link with Merlin, as Morgan had. Her stomach twisted and the sour taste of bile rose. This would free him. Make him sane. *Keep him sane.*

Her fingers hovered over his. “She deceived you, has been with you all along, twisting your thoughts.” Nimue kept her voice soft, slow. Merlin’s rapid breathing eased and he didn’t notice her hand when it slid over his. “Morgan made you build this thing. Now only you can stop it. Help me. Please.”

Her hand yanked at his.

“Show me, Merlin!”

His gaze snapped to her, wide with terror. “You. You’re here.”

Liquid agony raced through her bones. The Iselin Dal were with her, with her as she invaded Merlin’s mind. With her as she stripped his ability from his flesh.

Merlin screamed. Fought. Pleaded.

But the weight of her mind combined with the Iselin Dal was too much.

What he was flashed through her and, in a bright instant, she understood, knew everything he knew. Frantic, she held onto the one piece of his knowledge that she needed.

“Nimue, why have you done this? To me?” He fell back, crumpling into a tight ball. “To me.”

His broken voice tore at her heart. Yet it was done and it couldn't be undone. Her mind still sharp with his knowledge, Nimue opened the smooth, grey cylinder. Its insides hummed and were warm to the touch. Armed. The word faded back.

Her thumbs rubbed fast over her fingertips. This was insane. Merlin's knowledge shrank from her mind with each passing second. Her gaze ran over the casing...and it wasn't as smooth as she first thought. A stray arrow had cracked it. Leaning over the body of the weapon, she found another deep, black splinter in the metal.

That meant something.

But the insides were still humming. She had to deal with that first.

"You could help me, Merlin."

"Why?" His voice was no more than a croak from the corner. "You have what you want. You have everything that I am. And I'm trapped." His knuckles rapped against bone. "Trapped in my own skull."

"Well, you won't even be that if you don't get over here and help me."

"No."

"This thing will deliver a plague. You built it, Merlin. I'm doing this for the king."

His dry laughter ran raw over her nerves. "So you want that, too?" He paused and, in the silence, the device droned. "But I suppose that is your right. Be his advisor. Then you will have everything."

"Have you finished with the pity, Merlin?" Nimue bit at her lip. She didn't want to fight with him. She wanted him to work out how to stop the thing humming, then they could all go home. "Sorry." She rubbed at her mouth. "I did what I had to do, Merlin. I saw you dead. I couldn't let that happen. But please, can we have this conversation later?"

"What conversation?" The floor of the cart creaked. The spikes of grey light shifted and then Merlin leaned over her and stared into the device. "What am I looking at?"

Nimue's gut contracted. "You...you don't *know*?"

His shadowed gaze narrowed on her. He was so close that just a tilt of her head would bring her mouth... Damn it, she had to focus.

“Should I?”

Had she stripped his mind of everything he had been? They were dead. So very dead. “Morgan made you build it.”

“Ah.”

“Merlin.” Her hands balled into tight fists, sharp nails digging into her palms. “Now is not the time for games.”

“Playing games is all I have left, Nimue.”

Now she wanted to punch him. And still the device hummed.

She focused her attention on the weapon’s shadow-thick interior. She flexed her fingers and tried not to think how damp her palms were. There had to be something in her head, some memory. Something.

Was that another crack in the metal?

“Just to make certain that I understand. Taking my sanity and my Sight was all done for my benefit?”

“Yes.”

Were there wires that she could loosen? Or would that make things worse?

“Ah.”

“Will you stop saying that,” she muttered.

“There’s not much left in my brain now. It’s all I can say.”

“I preferred you when you were crazy.”

“Less of a threat?”

Nimue bit back the need to swear at him. She let out a slow breath. That calmed her for a brief second, but her heart thudded. They weren’t safe. And Merlin was *not* helping. “Your father. I met with your father. And don’t worry, Merlin. I’ll be punished for taking your power.” Her gaze fixed on him, caught the disbelief in his face. “Who do you think the Iselin Dal are?”

“Seers?” The word was no more than a whisper.

“And he wanted to spare you that...final...insanity.”

The casing started to vibrate. One vivid detail burst over Nimue's mind. The cracks. In a solid fuel weapon. She was an idiot. “We have to get out of here. Now!”

“I was wondering when you'd suggest that.”

Nimue's boots pounded at the cart's tail gate. Powerful kicks swung it free. She leapt and landed solidly on the uneven ground. “You knew. You bloody knew!”

Merlin grabbed her arm and ran. “You took my Sight, only *shared* my Knowledge. Of course I did.”

If she hadn't been running for her life, she would have punched him. Hard. They raced over the cleared ground. Her heart pounded, her breath burst in short, ragged gasps. This wasn't her day. But the ravine curved, would provide some protection from—

The blast wave slammed Nimue into the dirt.

Slivers of wood and metal pitted her body. Sparks shot through the air and there was the thud of debris hitting the frozen earth. The air stank of smoke and rot.

“Move!”

Merlin had her arm again, hauling her into the cover of ferns and low hanging trees.

“What about Morgan's plague?”

“Incinerated,” he muttered. “I hope.” The soft patter of splinters and ash hitting the protecting foliage and the dying fizz of burning chunks of metal were the only sound in the silent ravine. “The area will be safe soon. I'll dispose of what's left of the plague. Then I'll take you to the king.” He paused and stared at his dirt-stained hand. “After that I'll leave.”

“Leave?” Nimue thumped his arm. “You can't.”

“Nimue.” He let out a slow sigh. “You know I can't go back to the court, to the king.”

“Why?”

“I shouldn’t have to explain it to you.”

“Yes. You do.”

“Nimue...” His jaw tightened and he refused to look at her.

“Merlin?”

“Because I’m not *him*. Not anymore. Satisfied?” He drew in a breath. It seemed to calm him. “I’m not the Merlin they knew. I’m just a man now.”

She couldn’t help it. Her hand curved around his tense jaw, her fingertips stroking his roughened skin. “That doesn’t matter...”

“It does to me.” His fingers closed around her wrist, warm, familiar and pulled her hand away. His dark gaze met hers. “You have that power now. Not me.” His shoulders slumped. “You should have left me mad.”

“I could never—”

“I’m trapped in my own bloody skull.” He slammed back against the gnarled bark of the tree they hid beneath, his face turned up towards the sparse branches. His voice was bleak. “They’d been with me almost thirty years. Made me who I am... Was.”

“And you still have everything They told you.” Nimue’s heart was a stone in her chest. “It’s your pride, Merlin.”

“Damn right, it’s my pride,” he muttered.

“So you’re missing the torture, the pain that every conversation brought?”

“You’ve denied me *my* right to become one of Them.”

Nimue stared. “You’re wrong, Merlin. You *are* still insane. Your father risked Their wrath for you, to save you from that fate.”

“From knowing everything? It would be worth it.”

“You really are an idiot, Merlin.” Nimue risked a glance beyond the protecting branches. The fragments of burning metal had dulled. That made her decision for her. “I’ll find my own way back to the king.”

She struggled to her feet and wiped at the dry dirt that stuck to her trousers and cloak. Doing something, anything, stopped the tears that needed to fall. “Good luck with your life,” she muttered.

"Nimue..."

"No." She pulled her hand free from his. "You've made your decision. *I* was obviously crazy to think that you would appreciate me saving your life."

"*This* isn't my life."

"Nine months from now you would have built a bomb." Images of melting knights seared her memory. Nimue pushed them back. "It tore through the earth, turned men and animals to steam. Killed you."

"Seers know everything because of you, Merlin. And I don't think even the Dal are insane enough to let you release that creation."

"And that's why you slept with me?"

"Yes."

His laugh was bitter. "So now we have the truth. It was just a cynical act."

"You'd like to believe that." Cold sunlight flittered through the grey clouds and didn't catch on any drifting splinters. The air was free of them. She lifted sharp branches and pushed out into clearer ground. Better to leave him, better not to look back. Some secret, idiotic part of herself thought that he would be grateful for what she'd done.

Now that they could be together, it seemed impossible.

She shrugged off the hand that closed around her shoulder. "We must ask the king to ensure the safety of my sisters."

"Please."

That single word had her heart thumping.

Merlin sighed. "You know I have to leave."

"No. I don't."

His fingertips traced over the exposed skin above her collar, drifted over the shell of her ear. The touch was too familiar and her eyes burned with tears. "Nimue?"

She found the strength to face him. In the bleak, morning light his face looked grey, worn. Her chest tightened and a hand moved to brush

over his cool jaw. "You're Merlin," she murmured. "No one can change that."

"You did."

Her fingers dropped away. "So I did."

He caught her retreating hand. "I'm sorry," he said. "This isn't who I am...yet. Just a man with a head crammed with centuries of knowledge, with parts of problems I'll never solve now." A wry grin pulled at his mouth. "I have to get used to that."

"You could get used to that with me?" Nimue kept her voice light and it drove a spike into her gut, more painful than the Dal ever could be.

Merlin sighed. "I'm still wise enough to know that if I stayed I could grow to hate you." His grip tightened on her straining hand. "You know that too, Nimue." His arm held her close and she wanted to resist the lure of his touch. But this was Merlin. Her Merlin. She breathed in the scent of his skin mixed with leather and metal. As much as she wanted to deny it, he was right.

His lips brushed her hair.

Her pulse jumped and without thought her hips moved, her pelvis pushing hard against him.

"If we do that, I'll never leave." His amused words were laced with bitterness. "Let me go. Please."

Nimue's heart cracked. "Yes." She whispered the word into his neck, the taste of him still lingering on her tongue.

"Thank you." Merlin pulled back. His hands framed her face and he pulled a gentle kiss from her mouth. "I'll take you to the king—"

"No." He went now, or she wouldn't be able to let him go. "I can make my own way."

"Nimue..."

"You want to leave? You leave me here. Now."

Merlin ran a hand over his dark hair. "Fine." He stared up the ravine to the high ridge. "You know where he is?"

"I was listening."

His coal-black gaze focused on her and for a brief, brief moment she saw the old fire in his eyes. Her skin prickled. "This isn't the end, Nimue."

And then he turned and left her life.

* * *

Nimue watched his dark figure stride along the uneven, ravine path. Her heart was hollow. "Will I ever see him again?" The prickle of needles at the base of her skull made her wince. She sucked in a steady breath, preparing herself.

Flavius' voice seared over her skull. "*He'll be back for the birth of your child.*"

"Child?" The word squeaked out. She swallowed and tried again. "A baby?"

"That's usually how they start, Nimue, yes."

She waited until Merlin disappeared around the curve of the ravine before she turned and began the long walk to the king's camp. Her hand slid over her flat belly, wanting to connect to the part of him now growing within her.

"Until then, Merlin."

And Nimue smiled.

About the Author

To learn more about Kim Knox, please visit www.kim-knox.co.uk.
Send an email to Kim at kim@kim-knox.co.uk or join her Yahoo! Group
to join in the fun with other readers as well as Kim!
http://groups.yahoo.com/group/daughters_of_circe.

Look for these titles by Kim Knox

Coming Soon:

To Summon a Demon
7% and Rising

Picking the wrong pocket can get a girl in trouble...

Steelflower

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First of the Steelflower Chronicles

Thief, assassin, sellsword—Kaia Steelflower is famous. Well, mostly famous, and mostly for the wrong reasons. She's made a good life for herself, despite being kicked out of her homeland for having no magic. She's saving up for her retirement, when she can settle down, run an inn, and leave the excitement for others.

Then she picks the wrong pocket, wakes up with a hangover, and gets far more than she bargained for. Now she has a huge, furry barbarian to look after, a princeling from her homeland to fend off, and an old debt to fulfill. And for some reason, the God-Emperor's assassins want to kill her.

It's never easy being an elvish sellsword, and this time it just might be fatal...

Enjoy the following excerpt for *Steelflower*:

“What is it, lass?” The barbarian broke his quiet, shifting his considerable weight. A stick cracked sharply under his feet.

I lifted my hand, asking for silence. Stood thinking.

The risk outweighed the benefit. But twas nice to know where the encampment lay. If we were cautious, they need never know we were about. “Bandits. That way.” I pointed. “We must go silently, and quick.”

“They have horses,” the G'mai said.

I suppressed my irritation, that his thoughts would follow mine. “Not one Redfist can ride. And I do not wish another battle right now, I wish to

reach the next freetown in one piece and without undue delay. I wish for a bath, and the barbarian could do with one too—”

The wind shifted, and I dropped to the ground without thought. Actually, I was *knocked* down after I had already shifted my weight to drop. Knee-high ferns rustled as bloodlust combed the air. I heard the whistle of the arrow and found myself pinned to earth by the G'mai, who rolled away as I shoved him. Redfist cursed. The arrow had come from the left, my fightbrain juggled sound, distance, trajectory—and returned a probable location.

Lucky twas not a crossbow bolt. Even the G'mai's speed would not have saved me from that. My shocked body suffered a brief flare of nausea, training shoved it away. I could not afford coney-fright, freezing into immobility by narrowly escaping death.

Running footsteps, light and almost impossibly quick. I rolled onto my belly and peered up from the grass to see Darik running.

Toward the arrow's birthplace.

I gained my feet and leapt after him. He had saved my life—and was about to commit suicide chasing down an *archer*. The fool.

I saw them, six men in the dappled shade. Four had straightswords, one had dropped a bow and now had a blade in his hand, and the last had a pike. Darik ran for them, and they returned the favor with long easy strides. Why the archer had not simply *shot* him as he ran I could not guess, unless the archer was indifferently trained and stupid as well.

Darik met them with a clash of steel, and I almost stopped in confusion. He had both swords out, and wasted no time. He killed two of them in the first pass, taking out one man's throat and carving the archer's right arm off with a solid speedstrike.

Mother's tits, he's fast.

He engaged the other four with a form I had never seen. Twas similar to the ones I had learned, but this was the double-*dotanii* style, a wonder to behold. He moved like a whirlwind through the bandits, metal clashing or tearing through flesh, and when he finished all six sprawled on the

ground. Even the archer, who had gone into shock as he lost his arm. He thrashed and gasped weakly, the song of a death approaching.

Darik flipped a dagger out and sent it blurring into the man's eye, easing his passage. The hilt glittered.

His blades flashed in a complicated pattern, blood shaken away, and were re-sheathed. He bent down, worked his dagger free, and straightened, wiping the blade on the archer's overshirt.

I had stopped short when he killed the last one, having no more need to run or unlimber my own bow. The barbarian was behind me, thundering to a standstill. My lungs burned. Not only had Darik reacted with G'mai speed, but he fought with a fury I had rarely seen.

I was lucky. He could have killed me during our nighttime duel.

Why had he refrained?

I took a deep breath as he glanced at me, a brief passage of his dark eyes from my boots to my hair. The words spilled free, a cascade of ire. "You thrice-damned *idiot*. What possessed you to run them down? They had an *archer*. You should have let Redfist and me return their arrows with interest instead of running yourself ragged like a bloodcrazed *fool!*"

He bowed his head, accepting the rebuke. It was a gesture I had seen from several *s'tarei*. For some reason, it only made me angrier.

"He dropped his bow. I was angry. Forgive me." He spoke in G'mai, and the term he used was a touch more than *angry*. It was the literal word for *battle-rage*.

My heart ceased its knocking in my throat. I could not take him to task—he was only a G'mai man unrelated to me, not my *s'tarei*. My breathing began to even out. Blood steamed, sinking into moss-laden earth. *Mother Moon, all three of us still alive. What luck.* "See if they carry anything of use. Redfist, are you hale?"

"Just sorry t' miss the fight, that's all," he grumbled. "He fights mun well, that Gernerh."

I am in no mood to hear you sing his praises. "Mun well indeed." They all had purses, no doubt full of stolen coin. I subtracted another flint and steel from the archer's limp body. Flies gathered, drawn immediately by

death. I wrinkled my nose; trees continued whispering in the soft breeze. The edges of the sawlike ferns were dewed and dripping with blood, Darik had shown no mercy. *Now I know his measure as an opponent. Tis worth something, is it not?* “Let us hope they were not an advance party.”

The barbarian began to say something, but a curious look crossed his face. “Aye, lass. Let us hope. If ye say so.”

I clicked my tongue. “Messy.” I emptied the four purses onto a larger piece of cotton cloth I found tucked into the pikeman’s belt. “Bandits with *pikes*. Mother Moon. What next?”

The purses yielded a fair bit of *kiyan* and plenty of square Hain copper sequins. I flipped the Hain currency off to the side—their copper sequins were mixed and of little value—and concentrated on the rest. *Kiyan*, a few sundogs, and several Shainakh coins, heavy dark russet gold. “Look at this. Shainakh red Rams. How nice.”

I divided the coin into three roughly equal piles, put one of the piles in my purse. “Here, you twain. Take your share, tis as even as I can make it. Any other usable gear?”

“Some smoked leather,” the barbarian said. “A few gold chains.”

“You keep those. G’mai?” It took an effort of will not to call him *s’tarei’sa*, the honorific for an adult male.

He stood next to me, his head up, scanning the forest. Standing guard, I realized. That sparked fresh irritation—I should have thought of it. “Nothing I need. Tis meant for your purse, Kaia’li.”

I shrugged. “If you wish it.” If he was to give me coin, I would not complain. I had lost all my gear leading Redfist out of Hain, and I had both of them to feed as well.

If I do not simply leave them both when I take ship. Why have I not slipped free of them? Twould be simple enough.

Redfist scraped up his part. “Ye be mun fair, lass. I did nae earn this.”

“Most people do not earn what they suffer. Tis only luck. We could lose it all tomorrow.” *Just like I lost all my gear in Hain.* I sniffed. The air

smelled clean of danger, and my nape had stopped its prickling. Still, I did not like the leaf-touched silence.

“We should go,” Darik said. Softly, but with an edge. Did he feel the same uneasiness?

Well enough. I stood. My thigh ached. I had not looked at the bruise since the bathhouse, and it had been rapidly darkening then. “Are there more?” My tone was just as quiet, and just as edged.

“Almost certainly.” He glanced down at me, smiling faintly. It looked like a grimace of pain, on him. “My apologies, Kaia’li.”

I took a deep breath of air tainted with death, wished for a wind from the sea. Wished to be on a ship, bound anywhere but here, wind in the sails and the rigging singing me to sleep. “For what?”

“Acting the fool. I am new to this.” His dark eyes were a little easier now, something flickering behind their screen of politeness.

I shrugged. “See if you like the feel of his bow. Have you practiced archery?”

“Of course.”

Ridiculous. Of course he had. Every *s’tarei* did. The mystery deepened. Where was his *adai*? Was he like me—without a twin? If so, why was he here? And what had the gaud of a necklace to do with him?

Cease your thrashing, Kaia. Worry later, move now. “Let us be gone. This way.”

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