

Chapter 1 - Guilt/Regret

A strong north wind rushed down the valley, scattering yellowed leaves blown down earlier. The smell of winter filled the air—crisp and sharp—with the promise of early rains and snow instead of the mild fall usually seen.

It also carried another scent on its breath—war. Throughout the spring and summer, conflict ripped through the north country. The conflict bringing death to many, and sending the ashes of villages, burnt to the ground instead of surrendering, south. A light dusting of ash powdered the castle parapets and floated down on the roofs turning them a grayish-white. The ash covered every level surface and nook, inside and out. On days like today, when the wind raced through, people tried to breathe shallow to avoid inhaling the acrid smoke from the north.

A slender young woman, chin on her hands, stared north, oblivious to the gusts whipping her brown hair, which escaped from the cowl of her dark green cloak. A nasty gale whipped the hood off her head, revealing the worry-lined face of a young princess—hollowed cheeks streaked with tears and dark circles smudged under her eyes. Just past fifteen years old, Guinevere would have been a queen were it not for the war raging throughout Britain. Instead of celebrating her marriage to the young Arthur Pendragon, legions of men rode north under his leadership to defeat the renegades refusing to fall in line behind King Arthur.

A sigh escaped her blood-spotted lips, cracked and sore from days of standing on this parapet while the wind destroyed the summer in her land. And all the time her best friend moved further from her reach and safety. Her lack of patience—exacerbated because of her guilt and frustration at not being able to help Cedwyn and the children—

caused her to be short with the others. Unless necessary, those left at the castle tried to avoid her, even though she was King Leodegrance's daughter, and Arthur's future queen. Now she stood on the battlements and waited each day for sight of her father, or Arthur coming home with the knights. Guinevere wished she could erase her decision and its aftermath, but it wasn't possible. She stared down at the castle gates where six days ago another woman, Brynwyn, Cedwyn's ma, had stood, afraid for Guinevere and Cedwyn, as they and others started on their dangerous journey.

Chapter 2 - Wizards' Stones

Eight days earlier

Cedwyn peeked out of the stable, brown eyes surveying the courtyard. His hair lightened in places to auburn blended in with the weathered wood. A couple of young'uns played tag near the kitchen. One mother stepped outside to check on them and then went back inside, probably getting the mid-day meal ready. To his right, Sauder the blacksmith, wearing his worn leather apron, disappeared out the back of the smithy, presumably to get more wood. Keeping the coals hot for the day's work required a constant feeding of wood and coal. He'd done that chore plenty of times. In all, Cadbury Castle ran on its own time with King Leodegrance and his knights, including his Cedwyn's pa, gone. They had joined King Arthur to try and stamp out the renegades still wreaking havoc on the villages and farmers of the north.

In the middle of the bailey courtyard stood the keep, a tall stone tower where the King and his daughter Guinevere lived on the third level. From the ground floor window, he heard his ma Brynwyn humming off key as she cleaned the throne room. He'd helped her straighten their rooms on the second level right after breakfast.

He looked up to the top window facing the stable, his forehead drawn tight as he squinted into the sun. He and Guinevere went separate ways after breakfast. He did his chores, while she finished her studies. They'd decided meeting at the stable would be safer than at the keep. His ma had a surprising ability to catch them in the act of doing precisely what they shouldn't be.

Taking another look around the bailey, Cedwyn left the shadow of the stable, stooped down, picked up a small pebble, and cocked his right arm to launch it through the window into Guinevere's room. The moment he let it fly, her head popped out.

Cedwyn ducked back into the shadows like a dog caught chewing on a stolen bone crouches into a corner, hoping not to be seen.

“Ow!”

Deciding to play innocent, Cedwyn moved out from the stable. Shading his eyes once more from the sun, he looked up at the window, unable to keep the grin off his face. Guinevere stood framed in the window like a picture, hand holding her forehead, eyes boring into him. He raised his arms above his head, signaling he had no idea why she was glaring at him. She shook her fist in the air and disappeared.

A few minutes later, the girl stormed out of the keep, making a beeline to the stable. She wore black trousers and a long sleeve tunic knotted at the waist with a jewel-encrusted leather belt. The sleeves of her green tunic sparkled in the sunlight with similar embroidered stones. She looked like every princess he'd ever known, except she was the only princess he knew.

His attire, while similar, showed more use than hers. The brown trousers were clean, but worn around the knees. The faded brown tunic, tucked into his trousers and held in place by a thick leather belt, boasted no stones, but neither did it have any holes. He knew better than to wear his decent clothes, as his ma called them, when going on an adventure with Guinevere. One never knew if they would run into a wild boar and have to scramble up trees, or be nearly trampled by a dragon. He bent down to touch the knife

secure in its sheath inside his leather boot. In his eleven years of friendship with Guinevere, he'd learned to come prepared for anything.

As Guinevere came to a stop in front of him, Cedwyn covered his mouth to hide a widening grin. In the center of her forehead, a bright red bulge bloomed, emphasized by the thick braid that pulled her hair back.

"Bull's eye," he said, and then ducked, but not soon enough. Guinevere's fist caught him on the left ear. His head jerked sideways, throwing a lock of his untrimmed hair over his eyes.

"Ow, Guin'ver. That hurt." His face bunched up in pain as he covered the ear. His other hand pushed the hair out of his eyes.

"You think this didn't?" Her finger jabbed the bulge on her forehead. She winced and muttered unprincess-like words.

He smothered his giggle. "You were supposed to be down here long ago. We're going to have to ride hard to be at the Wizards' Stones by noon."

"I know," she said, her sigh hinting at her frustration. "The last Latin translation Professor Rhymes gave me took more time than the others." She whipped around to scan the bailey, her braid almost connecting with Cedwyn's head. "Are the horses ready out back?"

"They've been ready. We're lucky Sauder's busy in the smithy."

In response, she playfully gave his arm a glancing blow. "Let's go."

They opened the back door of the stable hidden in the wooden wall. In the past it had been used as an escape for horses trapped by fire, but had seen more use by kings running from invaders. The only ones who used it now were Guinevere and Cedwyn. It

was their secret escape from the castle. Cedwyn waited while Guinevere closed the door; they listened for the catch of the latch on the other side.

“Will we still make it to the Stones in time?” he asked as he led the way down in a small gully where their horses waited.

Guinevere snorted in a very unprincess-like manner. “Of course. Merlyn said it was only a little over an hour from here. We should be there in plenty of time for the mid-day awakening.”

Cedwyn noticed her crossed fingers as she mounted *Seren Brenin*, the retired warhorse Arthur had given her. His eyes rolled as he mounted his dun gelding, also retired from battle. After checking that his bow and arrows were secure, he watched as she did the same. They hadn’t planned on doing any hunting, but with Guinevere, one never knew what might happen. They turned the horses away from the castle and walked until the rolling hills hid them from the castle’s view. Then they kicked their mounts into a canter toward the west and the Wizards’ Stones.

They slowed their approach on the hilly plain when the Stones appeared on the horizon. At first just bumps, the Wizards’ Stones grew taller as they rode closer to the crest of the hill.

“The sun’s almost straight up,” Guinevere said.

“The height of Alban Elfed, Merlyn calls it,” Cedwyn said. “I can’t wait to see the magic he’s talked so much about.”

“Maybe the Stones will foretell of the end of the battles.”

The last time Merlyn visited, he'd told tales about the magical happenings at the Wizards' Stones during Alban Eiler in the spring. How blue lightning shot from one stone to another as the sun cleared the horizon. How that energy penetrated the inner circle of the stones. The hair of those in close attendance floating up to the heavens like the mist rising from the moors at dawn. How the streaks in the grey stone ignited and burned a brilliant blue hue when the sunlight struck them. A hue that consumed the circle and blotted out all sounds, all feelings, all troubles, and left one's soul with an inner peace.

"It would have been stronger at dawn, but we're lucky we could leave when we did," Guinevere said.

"How many stones do you think there are?" Cedwyn squinted in hopes of seeing farther.

"When Father and I visited Arthur once, we saw a smaller stone circle with only the grey stones. This one looks much bigger."

Having reached the outer circle, they dismounted, leaving the horses at the start of a worn path and hurried down to the Stones.

"Merlyn said the outer circle was always made of grey stones," Cedwyn said. "Look, Guin'ver, only three of the top stones are still in place. Look how small we are compared to them."

Indeed, the grey stones dwarfed them. They walked around the circle—counting the stones as they went—until they stood under a top stone. Only seven stones remained standing. Large gaps between indicated where other stones were missing. Guinevere

stretched out her arms and tried to touch each of the two stones, but the gap between was too wide. Cedwyn tried and laughed when he barely made half of the distance.

The sun appeared to brighten, and the rays grew hotter. Guinevere and Cedwyn moved as one toward the inner circle of blue stones.

“Look at the streaks of blue in these stones,” Cedwyn said, tracing one from its starting point above his head down into the grass where the stone disappeared deep in the ground.

Guinevere traced the blue streaks in the next stone. Underneath her fingers, the streak appeared to flow upward. Of their own will, her fingers followed its path.

When the sun was at its zenith, a sudden fog settled down on the stones, masking everything. Guinevere drew in a sharp breath as a low humming started. She reached for her friend, hidden in the thick mist. Cedwyn gasped and struggled to maintain his balance.

“Guin’ver?”

“It’s the magic of Alban Elfed and the Stones, like Merlyn told.”

The humming grew louder. The stones began to vibrate. The fog touched the ground, Guinevere moved her arm wraith-like through the grey blanket. She blinked and could just make out Cedwyn’s figure beside her. She clamped her hands over her ears as the sound grew to a crescendo, blocking out thoughts and the ability to speak. Beside her, Cedwyn did the same. The stones reverberated, the rhythm thrumming through her body. At times, lightning bolts came out of the fog, shooting sparks into the center of the blue stones. Guinevere and Cedwyn tried to duck to avoid being hit, but the Stones held them tight as the glistening web holds its struggling spoils.

Then the humming ceased. The fog thickened. She lost sight of Cedwyn, and shivered, alone in the strange mist. Long since having given up struggling against whatever held her, she squinted in an attempt to see her friend. Abruptly, the force of the Stones ceased. Guinevere and Cedwyn slipped down the face of the monoliths into the grass.

A peace invaded Cedwyn's soul. Visions of snowy meadows danced in front of him. His body relaxed. His breathing slowed. A whirl of fog formed in the center of the circle. A faint outline of a woman, a fairy, a goddess, materialized. The apparition reached out and touched his mind. Guinevere's wide eyes told him she felt the touch also.

"You have come seeking the Awakening and whether the battles will end soon and peace will take their place. I cannot give you that assurance. Many trials await the two of you. Perhaps the hardest are the ones you will have to endure alone."

"You, Guinevere, will find yourself lost. You—who are destined to be a great queen—will have to traverse a journey of immense pain and self-doubt. You must let your inner feelings guide you. The journey will be hard and painful. You must summon courage from your soul to sustain you."

"You, Cedwyn, faithful friend of the princess, and the queen. Your journey may be the hardest of all. You will be sent far from those you serve and love. Your duty will demand that you see this most difficult journey to its end. Whether that will be death or life for you will depend upon many things. Your courage must also come from deep within your soul for one so young. Your love of family and friends must be great. But greater still must be your loyalty to the knight's duty. For your knight's vow comes soon. You must embrace it. You must defeat the temptations to turn aside for your own safety."

“Each of you will have to trust the other implicitly, without reservation, without doubt. To do otherwise will destroy both of you and this land.

“I give each of you my blessing. You must be ready to flee, for danger approaches.”

With a final whirl, the goddess disappeared into the air from whence she came. The fog lifted. The rays of the sun burned brighter and then dimmed. Guinevere and Cedwyn stared at each other.

“Did you hear that? Did you see her?” Cedwyn forced the words out. He stared into the center of the stones.

“Ye...yes,” Guinevere said, gasping as she tried to get that one word out. “Who was that?”

“A goddess, I think.”

“Merlyn never said anything about the appearance of goddesses.”

“Guin’ver, what do you think she meant about our...our journeys?”

“I don’t know. I wish Merlyn were at the castle. He would know.”

Just then, a rush of wind found the center of the blue stones. Fallen leaves caught in its grasp swirled round and round like a dervish, a devil’s whirlwind. Outside the Stones, *Seren* Brenin’s head jerked up, ears flattened. Cedwyn’s sorrel imitated his mate with teeth bared.

“The horses,” Cedwyn said, turning from the center.

“Quick, before they spook.”

Guinevere and Cedwyn ran for the animals and grabbed the reins. Cedwyn struggled to hold the sorrel. *Seren Brenin* planted his front legs wide, braced for battle, and tossed his head, nearly ripping the reins out of Guinevere's hands.

"The Danger..." Cedwyn started.

"Approaches..." Guinevere finished.

Keeping their horses in check, they struggled to mount as the animals spun around trying to locate the threat. Once mounted, Guinevere continued to battle for control of the horse. Her friend was faring no better.

A scream filled with pain riding on the wind from the east startled the beasts to a standstill.

"What was that?" Cedwyn asked.

"I don't know. Mayhap just the wind."

Even mounted, their view of the Stones was obscured by the small barrows scattered throughout the plain.

The skittish horses moved closer together. *Seren Brenin* threw his head down, grabbing at the bit. Guinevere's jaw clenched as she tugged the beast's head up again.

Then the scream came again and abruptly ended.

Chills ran through Cedwyn. "We need to ride, Guin'ver."

"We c...can't go b...back t...that way," she said.

"I know. Whatever that was, it stands between us and the castle."

"That sounded like a man," Guinevere said, her voice shaking.

The horses pawed frantically, turning into each other, almost bolting. Guinevere's arms ached from trying to hold him back.

“We must ride for the Abbey at the Tor,” she said.

Cedwyn jumped as her voice echoed in his ear. “You go first. I’ll follow.”

Guinevere tightened her reins and turned *Seren Brenin* around. Digging her heels in, her head down, horse and rider raced around the outer stones. Racing north toward the fighting and Glastonbury Abbey. Away from the sun’s warmth.

Cedwyn followed, but continued looking back under his arm. He feared the danger the goddess warned them about was after them. That scream, wherever and whatever it came from, echoed in his head, filling him with dread and fear.