**The Boy Merlin**

**Vortigern**

The priest rises from a bow so low it’s let his long, discoloured beard sweep the floor of the tent. His dirty robes waft the stench of unwashed old man into Vortigern’s nostrils. “Milord King,” he whines. “I’m afraid to report the walls of your fortress have fallen down… again.” He clasps his age-spotted hands and retreats a few shuffled steps to rejoin the wise men, eyes fixed on the floor as though he doesn’t dare raise them.

Vortigern glowers at him from beneath jutting iron-grey brows. What kind of an architect is this man? His own five-year-old son could do better with his wooden bricks. Not one of these wise men has any more idea than a Pict from beyond the Wall, and everyone knows *they* live in caves and fight naked.

His wife, Ronweina the Saxon princess, leans towards him, long blonde braids swinging, and whispers in his ear. “Perhaps a sacrifice, husband?” Her guttural accent and soft murmur, as well as the warmth of her breath, stir his loins and he fidgets. If he can get these fools back to work, he can close the tent flaps and take his wife to bed. Something he never tires of, despite his age.

He turns back to his wise men. Ha – what a misnomer. Never has he met a group less worthy of that title. “What must we do? What sacrifice will please the gods?”

The priest rubs bony hands, raising watery eyes. “Milord, we’ve sacrificed a young bull and mixed the stones with his blood, to no avail. We build the walls. But the next morning, half of what we’ve built has fallen.”

Exasperated, Vortigern leans forward on his throne, resisting the urge to leap up and hit the man. “Then sacrifice something better,” he growls. “Clearly the gods are unhappy with a mere bullock.”

The priest’s eyes narrow. “Milord. For your walls to stand, a *human* sacrifice is called for...”

A slow smile of satisfaction spreads over Ronweina’s face, all loveliness gone. Her tongue darts out to lick her lips.

Vortigern scowls. “Then make one. And make it fast. I want those walls up.” He glances at Ronweina, a frown furrowing his brow. “We need this fortress to protect us from my wife’s people.”

The irony is not lost on the row of wise men. They exchange glances and shift nervously. The Queen is not the only Saxon amongst their lord’s retinue, and Vortigern is well aware of their thinly veiled hostility.

Vortigern grinds his teeth. Bloody Saxons. The only good one’s a dead one. Why did he think inviting them to his court a good idea? They’ve been a problem ever since. For the last thirty years, in fact. Too late now. Too many to fight with too strong a hold on the lands he’s handed to them in a fit of unusual generosity. He can blame Ronweina for that.

And now, with no more payment forthcoming, they’ve had the cheek to turn against him. It’s crossed his mind more than once to send Ronweina back to her father in small pieces, but the hold she has over him is too great.

So here he is, stuck in this valley nearly in bloody Gwynnedd, while peasants labour to construct a fortress the Saxons won’t be able to get into. Probably won’t even be able to find, this place is so godforsaken.

What a mistake. The work began well, but once the walls rose more than a few courses, they fell down overnight. Not just once, but many times. Every single bloody night, in fact.

Vortigern grinds his teeth some more. With every delay the breath of Ronweinas father, Hengest, grows hotter on the back of his neck. And as for that scheming whelp Ambrosius, the man he thought his friend – now he has *him* to contend with as well. He should have known better than to trust the son of the man he himself deposed all those years ago. When he had the chance, he should have had the whole family poisoned, not just the father. Would’ve saved a lot of trouble.

Why is he so bad at choosing allies?

A smile slides over the priest’s wrinkled face. A sly smile Vortigern doesn’t like or trust. “We need a boy,” the old man says, licking his lips as though he fancies eating that boy for dinner. “A boy with no human father. Only then will the gods allow your fort to rise.”

A shiver runs through Vortigern. Didn’t the priests eat the bull after it was sacrificed? Ate its heart, anyway. Will eating a boy’s heart be any worse? Probably better. Stronger magic. What does he care, so long as his walls are built and stay built?

“Then find yourselves a boy,” he grunts. “Get out and find one. Now. And don’t come back until you’ve got one.”

**Emrys**

Emrys’s feet hurt from walking. He sits down on a rock at the side of the road, peering up at the looming, mist-shrouded mountains, and pulls off his boots. They fit him well at the start of the summer, but now his toes are rubbing against the tips, curling up uncomfortably.

Maybe in this next village he can swap them for a bigger pair, especially if their show goes down well with the locals. For now, he’ll walk barefoot like the rest of the troupe and carry his boots.

Teithi the Dog Boy, younger and smaller than Emrys, sits on the rock by his side and the boys watch the pack ponies, loaded with the troupe’s tents and props, plod past. Herne the Giant, leader of the players, holds the ponies’ ropes in one enormous paw, and the small hand of his albino wife, the Angel, in the other, as she scuttles to take two steps to his every one.

Emrys squints up at the mountain peaks to either side of the road, stretching away into a beyond he can’t even begin to imagine. Not unless he finds a quiet spot where he can close his eyes and let his mind soar. Then he’ll be up in that misty sky, staring down at the valley through which they’re trudging. He’ll fly ahead and find the village they’ve made their goal, soar over the thatched rooftops and find what it is that’s drawn him there. But not now. Not with people watching.

Not for the first time today, a feeling of foreboding washes over him, prickling the hairs on his body upright. The thought that wherever they’re going, it isn’t new boots he’s going to find there, shoulders its way to the front of his mind.

He presses his lips together, determined not to think about it. What good will it do? He has nowhere else to go. Herne’s troupe has been his family for eight years now, ever since they found him, half-starved and hiding in a ditch, on the run from the monastery where his mother abandoned him as a baby. And he can’t let them down: he’s their star.

Emrys glances down at Teithi’s bare feet. They’re covered in long, gingery hair, like the rest of his body. Teithi’s hairy from head to toe and was the star attraction before Emrys came along – ‘*come and see the little Dog Boy’* was Herne’s shout as they entered every village.

Emrys wasn’t sure whether Teithi minded losing his top billing, until one night he’d whispered, “They do prod and poke me like they think I’m not a real boy. An’ ole Herne, he jest wants me ter act like a dog. Tells me ter growl and gnash me teeth.” Teithi sighed. “I jest wants ter be a real boy, like you.”

Not that Emrys sees himself as a real boy at all. How can he be, cursed he as he is?

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In the stuffy, candle-lit tent, sweat beads on Emrys’s forehead, his shirt sticks to his back under the thick tunic they always make him wear, and he needs a drink. He has a yearning for a beaker of cool sweet cider. But no, he has to sit here telling the fortune of customer after customer. Emrys, the boy Seer.

He sighs, staring at the callused palm before him. Reading someone’s palm is easy. In fact, that isn’t what he’s doing. He only has to touch their hands, or any part of their body, and visions come to him, telling him their fate. But he pretends their hands tell him what they want to know.

He long ago learnt to hide the truth. Instead, he only tells them what they want to hear: about long lives, a good wife or husband, many sons, riches arriving soon. All anyone in poor villages wants – reassurance that something good will come to alleviate their daily grind. It doesn’t matter that none of it’s true.

“Well, what d’ye see?” The owner of the palm leans forward on his rough stool, breath reeking of onions and bloodshot eyes eager for the death Emrys sees coming on a wind of darkness.

Emrys smiles, turning the man’s hand as though studying it. He quells the itch to tell him that tumbling rocks will bury him alive in the mine, and men he thought his friends will abandon him to die. “I see wealth from copper coming.” A lie. “I see sons to carry on your name.” Not a lie. “A long life for you and your wife and for your sons after you.”

Many years have passed since Emrys last felt guilty for his lies. People want optimism, not the terrifying truth.

The man gets to his feet, beaming. “Thank ’ee, young man. My wife’ll be well pleased. She do worry ’bout me down that mine.”

*So she should. You don’t have long.*

The tent door flaps, and he’s gone.

Outside, the wind rises, and raindrops patter on the tent roof, loud in the silence. Emrys shifted his aching back and rubs his tired eyes. He needs that beaker of cider and his bed in the dry under the wagon.

But no. The tent flap snaps open. Outside, darkness has fallen and the shape in the doorway has no features. “You the boy Emrys?” a gruff voice demands.

Fear’s cold finger runs silently up Emrys’s spine. “I am.”

“Then the king demands your presence.”

**Vortigern**

“*This* is the boy you claim has no human father?” Vortigern’s voice rises as he stares at the skinny lad his priest has dragged into his tent; just a barefoot, grubby peasant like any village brat. A tawdry tunic hides his rags. Large, brown eyes stare from a thin face, and dark, shaggy hair reaches his narrow shoulders.

Vortigern wrinkles his nose. Underfed and dirty, and most likely verminous. Will so unprepossessing a sacrifice as this appease the angry gods and see his walls stay upright? It better had, before his treacherous father-in-law discovers where he'd fled to.

The priest nods, rubbing his hands together. “This is the one all right, Milord. He’s the son of a demon, so the Master of Players was boasting. He’s supposed to be their ‘boy seer’. The gods have had a hand in this.”

The boy stares back out of cold, knowing eyes. A bruise shadows his left cheek and blood has crusted around his nostrils. Did he resist the guards? Foolish boy. His fate was already sealed the moment his master bragged he possessed a boy with a demon for a father.

“Well, boy, what do you have to say for yourself?” Vortigern asks, purposely deepening his voice to instil the fear the boy appears to be lacking.

The boy meets his gaze, curiosity in those cold eyes. He blinks a few times, and tilts his head to one side and then the other, looking around the tent. The silence stretches out.

The priest gives the boy a poke with his staff. “Answer the king when he speaks to you, peasant.”

The boy shoots him a sharp-eyed frown that holds annoyance rather than fear, then turns his gaze to Vortigern. “How can I answer, when I don’t know why I’m here?”

He speaks in Latin, the language of the educated ruling class. Where has a peasant boy learned that? A nub of discomfort forms in Vortigern’s mind, swiftly dismissed. The boy might have a smattering of Latin, but he could have learned it anywhere. His clothes show what he is: a nobody.

Vortigern grunts. “Tell me. Who is your father, boy?”

The boy’s chin tilts upwards as though proud. “I have no father. My mother lay with a demon, and I was born. Ask my master.”

“Just as I said,” the priest hisses. “The very boy we need. Let us take him to the fortress walls and spill his blood without delay. Then tomorrow, they will still be standing, and you will have your new fortress.”

The boy’s eyes widen, but he shows no fear.

Vortigern frowns, unsure why that nub of unease is stalking up his back on clawed feet. “The gods have indeed smiled on us.” But have they? Might the boy’s demon father object to their sacrificing his child? He shivers and makes the sign against the evil eye. Just in case.

The thought that the gods might be playing some sort of spiteful joke on him looms large. Something about this boy feels wrong. He’s too calm, for a start, on hearing he’s to be a sacrifice, and too knowing, as though he knows something they don’t.

No, he’s the king – the High King at that, whatever that means now he’d incarcerated himself here in the mountains. Vortigern ignores the feeling that something larger is afoot. Let his priests spill this boy’s blood on the stones. If it doesn’t work, they’ll find another boy. If it takes the blood of a hundred boys, he’ll get his fortress built.

**Emrys**

The man they call the king steps onto the flat rock near the tumbled stones of his wall. He nods to the priest with the knife, and the old man steps towards Emrys, eyes hot with blood lust.

This is not the day of Emrys’s death. He lifts his chin. Not to receive the killing blow. To speak. “I am Emrys the Seer,” he says, his voice steady, even with the knife so close, and looking the king in the eye. “I, not these old men, have the power to help you. If you kill me, your walls will *never* stand.”

The priest halts, uncertain, annoyance written across his face. Smoke curls about his head in wispy, stinky tendrils. Emrys smiles. Death waits for this man, impatient to seize him in its cold embrace.

The king nods. “Let him speak.”

“He’s just a peasant boy,” the priest spits. “Don’t listen to him. Let me kill him. I swear his blood will build your walls.”

“No.” The king steps off the plinth. “Not yet.”

Emrys fights to keep his smile in check. Oh, what fun this is, to let his power speak at last. Held silent for so long, now it begs for freedom, and he can let it run.

The king leans in close to peer into Emrys’s face, his breath rancid as his priest’s, his hair shot through with the stink of smoke and burning flesh. “What do you claim to know that my wise men don’t? Speak, Emrys, before I tire of this and let my priest make his sacrifice.”

“Your walls fall because beneath this mountain lies a cavern. Dig down, and you will find it.”

The priests cackle with laughter, but the king waves his hand at his watching men. “Dig. If we find the cavern, then we’ll listen to this boy.”

The men set to with picks and shovels. Earth piles up, and rocks with it.

Emrys waits as the pile of rubble grows ever higher.

The wise men pull their long beards, and the priest runs his hands over and over the ceremonial knife, testing the blade’s sharpness, the lust for blood back in his pale eyes.

Twilight brings a shout of excitement. “We’ve found it!”

Emrys smiles.

“Fetch torches.”

“Fetch the boy.”

The entrance to a cavern lies exposed, black as Arawn’s night, opening into the side of the mountain.

Emrys draws a deep breath, a mixture of relief and pride. That it was there to be found, he had no doubt. Their skill as searchers was his worry.

All eyes fix on Emrys.

“Inside the cavern you will find a pool.” He takes a step back. He’s done his bit. For now. He needs to conserve his strength for what’s still to come.

The king turns to the priest. “What can this mean?”

The priest, his jowls sagging in defeat, shakes his head. “I don’t know, Milord.” The smoke about him eddies, wrapping him close, wanting him for its own. It will have him soon.

The king speaks. “Well, boy? What is the significance of this cavern pool?”

The power of the mountain surges through Emrys. “I will show you. Follow me.” He nods to the priest and wise men. “They, also, should come.”

The entrance skims the top of Emrys’s head, but the king and his men have to duck. Their torchlight casts leaping shadows up the walls of the cavern as it widens to reveal a black pool.

Footsteps echo in the underworld silence. Only Emrys’s bare feet make no sound. The priests mutter, their words bouncing away into oft-repeated nothingness.

Emrys halts. Beyond the torchlight, darkness presses in on all sides, heavy and menacing. Is that whispering, out where the light doesn’t reach? Emrys smiles a small, secret smile, and the whispers draw nearer.

“What are those voices? This has to be some trick,” the priest mutters. “There can be nothing down here.” His voice echoes and the whispers steal his words, bandying them about between them, hissing in the ears of the king and his men.

Emrys raises his hand. The muttering of the wise men dies.

Silence, but for the distant drip of water on stone.

He needs to concentrate. *Make* them see. The whispers fade to nothing. He needs all his strength to conjure them a vision.

*Believe.*

Ripples skim the surface of the pool.

Emrys’s eyes fix on those ripples as they grow. Little waves splash on the stony floor by his feet.

*Believe.*

In the pool’s centre, the water boils, as *something* stirs in the deep.

A gasp hisses from every throat but his. The torches waver as fear seizes their holders.

*Believe.*

A corpse-pale dragon rises from the dark water. Leathery wings unfurl, and its long neck and horned head rear up, stretching towards the light.

Feet scrabble as men step back. The buzz of terror fills the chill air.

The water boils afresh. A second dragon’s head and neck rise from the pool, red as blood, steam hissing from flaring nostrils. Emrys holds his ground. They’re his creation.

“Jupiter’s teeth!” The king’s voice rises high with fear. *He* believes. They *all* do.

“Watch,” is all Emrys says. “Watch them fight, and learn your fate.”

The dragons fight.

First, the white dominates, tearing at the red as it holds him down. Then the red tosses the white aside, clawing its pale scales until they blacken with blood. Waves crash onto the pool’s rocky shores. The mountain vibrates with the dragons’ roars.

*Believe.*

The white, defeated, spreads massive wings and, like a giant swan, runs until they lift it clear of the water. It soars over the heads of the cowering men and out into the darkness of the night. Gone.

On the surface of the pool, the red dragon settles victorious. The now quiet water rises, reclaiming him. The ripples die. The pool lies mirror flat.

Silence.

The king pushes away from the cavern wall, where he’s been leaning for support. “Dragons? We saw *dragons*?” He staggers to Emrys’s side. “Tell me what they mean, boy. Tell me.”

Emrys turns to face him. The torchlight flickers over the king’s face. Wide eyes, hair awry, sunken cheeks and sagging jowls. A sad old man. “The white dragon is the Saxon horde,” Emrys says. “The red dragon is the British. First, the Saxons will seem to win, but then, a great leader will emerge.”

He holds the king’s gaze. Conviction vibrates up from the ground beneath his feet. He shakes his head, the smell of smoke ever stronger. “You, Vortigern, will get your fortress built. Enjoy it while you can. You have little time left. You will die in fire an old man remembered only for your folly.” He encompasses the priest and the wisemen. “With your fools around you.”

The king’s mouth flaps open. Words force their way out. “Who *are* you?”

Emrys lifts his chin. “My name is Merlin Emrys,” he says. “And I am a Seer.”

Silence falls.