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**Special Edition of the first four chapters of...**

*Sons of Avalon: Merlin's Prophecy.*

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The author, Dee Marie, thanks you for the interest in her novel. She encourages (and looks forward to) your feedback and input.

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# Sons of Avalon

## Merlin's Prophecy

Dee Marie

**This is a condensed version of the original book.** The story's content appears in its entirety, however the foreword has been removed, as has the front cover and back cover images, as well as the back cover blurb.

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## SONS OF AVALON: MERLIN'S PROPHECY

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Dedicated To  
Sir Stephen  
My Husband and Soul Mate  
For His Continued Support  
And Unconditional Love



# PROLOGUE

The earth rumbled as a lightning bolt flashed in the predawn sky splitting a giant oak at the meadow's edge. An eerie silence followed, broken by a hawk's cry.

Nestled within the womb of the shattered tree a baby squirmed, arms reaching upward. The hawk circled tilting her head from side to side and slowly descended. Cooing emerged from the tree trunk as the merlin gracefully perched upon the still smoldering bark. From her beak, she squeezed the juice of a large blackberry into the newborn's mouth. Eagerly the child drank his first meal.

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"Enid, are you alright?" The old man inquired of his wife as he did his best to steady the big bay mare pulling the applegart. The pungent odor of smoldering bark overwhelmed the scent of ripe apples from the nearby orchard.

His wife, sprawled in a tangle of empty baskets in the back, grabbed the side of the wagon. Slowly she raised herself just enough to peer into the nearby field. Trying to catch her breath she whispered, "Arden, what was that?"

"How in Hades should I know?"

Curiosity overruled fear as the old man helped his wife from the cart. As they approached the fallen oak its multi-hued leaves rustled, beckoning them to enter. With caution they stepped and stooped through the fallen debris. Squawking, the hawk flapped her wings wildly as they approached the still smoldering tree stump. The old man waved his arms with equal passion dislodging the bird from its perch. Reluctantly, the hawk circled overhead, not wishing to leave her charge.

As the old woman walked closer, her husband extended his arm blocking her passage. As always, Enid ignored his warnings. With a gentle touch, she moved his arm aside and peered into the charred remains of the giant oak's trunk.

"Leave whatever is in there be!" the old man growled.

"Arden, it's a baby—a human baby!" Her mind filled with questions as she viewed the miracle nestled within the scorched amber and russet leaves. Covered in a thin veil of mucus and soot, the baby appeared unharmed by the trauma of his birth. His dark golden hawk-like eyes gazed at her, bright and curious. A sudden warm breeze tousled his thick feathered hair; its mixture of gold, copper, and browns glimmering in the sun's first rays. Overcome by a mother's instinct, with trembling hands Enid reached for the baby.

"Are you mad?" The absurdity of the situation fell heavy upon the old man and he began to pace. Fallen limbs and crushed leaves crackled as he tramped about.

"Arden, we can't leave this newborn here to die." Ignoring her husband's wrath, she continued to count the baby's fingers and toes. Satisfied that all digits were present, she gave Arden a reassuring smile.

"If you don't put him back, *he* will be the death of *us*! There is evil about this place. No human child is born from the womb of Mother Earth, with a lightning bolt as a father." Gazing into the heavens for guidance, anxiety seized his soul as he spied the circling hawk.

Soaring downward on graceful wings the hawk came near once more. This time the farmer and his wife froze in mesmerized disbelief as the merlin hovered close to the baby. With a slow confident motion, the infant reached his long fingers to touch the hawk's talon. The hawk gently rubbed her beak upon the young one's fingers then took flight, chasing the moon from the morning.

"You may keep the child." Even an old knight knew when to concede defeat. He added with caution, "As long as no one hears of how we came upon him, especially Lionel. All we need is for King Bors' favorite son to be privy to this day's events. That boy never knows when to keep his mouth shut." Shaking his head in frustration, he turned and stomped away. "Do what you will, that is what you always do anyway," he sighed. "Let's just get the boy home for a proper first feeding."

The old woman nodded. Wrapping the newborn in her shawl she made her way back to the cart. "What shall we call you?" The child's dark golden eyes searched the old woman's faded blue ones. A smile formed on his lips as his fingers grasped at a fallen lock of her gray hair. "But of course, *Merlin* it shall be."

Arden looked back at the two as a sudden gust of cold air made his skin crawl. He couldn't get out of there fast enough.

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Not far from the destroyed tree, at the edge of the forest, golden-eyes peered, watching every movement the old couple made. Leaning against a tree, the brown hooded cape gave the petite figure an illusion of invisibility. Clutching her stomach, she slid down the tree's trunk into a pile of bloody leaves as the tears streamed. Closing her eyes tightly she sent a message skyward, "Watch over him!" Hearing the hawk's loud reassuring cry she knew the guardian would never be far from her child's side.

# 1

“Enid, come outside and sit with me awhile. With the Samhain celebration tonight our days of basking in the sun will be numbered.” Five-year old Merlin leaned in the doorway, inhaling the aroma of soul cakes cooling on the table inside.

Before Enid could answer, two riders came thundering down the road, stopping just short of the house. As Merlin ran toward them, one of the young men jumped from his horse. He picked Merlin up with a brotherly embrace and twirled him around.

“Sir Lionel, you came!”

Putting Merlin down, Lionel laughed. “In the past four years have I ever missed your birthday?”

“No,” Merlin smiled, “of course not.”

Seated upon a giant warhorse, a second rider watched in silence. Merlin walked closer looking upward. “Good day Sir. I do not think we have met?” Merlin just barely reached the underbelly of the magnificent black stallion, and although barefoot, he showed no fear of the horse’s massive hooves.

“Sir Lot, Prince of the Orkney Isles.” The voice was soft and deep; a mature voice with an accent unique to the North Country. Lot leaned forward in his saddle as he weighed, measured, and evaluated the child. Outwardly the boy looked like any young Celt. Perhaps a bit smaller than most, with features far too beautiful to be wasted on a male.

Merlin held his ground assessing the prince. The tanned high cheekbones sported a fresh battle scar just below his left eye. His shiny, long, black hair was pulled back with a strap of leather.

A handsome young man, dressed totally in black. He made a regal yet ominous figure. “Sir, you are the first man I have ever seen with eyes as black as sea-coal. Is that the normal coloring from the Northlands?”

“No more than hawk-eyes are of Wales.”

Merlin watched as Lot dismounted and stood next to Lionel. He pondered silently what an odd pair the two young men made. The redheaded, freckled-faced Lionel looked even younger than his fourteen years; short, lean, pubescent with an awkwardness that gave no hint to his royal parentage. In comparison, there was no mistaking Lot’s lineage, although he appeared to be only a year older; Lot looked, spoke, and emanated royalty.

Nodding to Merlin, Lot gave Lionel a questioning stare.

“It is general knowledge among the townspeople, that although Merlin has the outward appearance of a child, he possesses the mind of the ancients.” Lionel placed his hand near his mouth as he spoke, doing his best to conceal a grin. Although fully aware of Lot’s cocksure ego, Lionel could not help but delight in the fact that for once, *he* had information that Lot was unaware of.

Lot was about to ask Lionel to expound on the meaning of his statement when Enid emerged from the house. He observed with caution as the old woman welcomed Lionel with a huge smile and open arms. Quickly, Lot took several steps back toward his horse as Enid hugged Lionel tightly, causing his companion’s leathers to be covered with a dusting of flour from her apron.

“It is so good to see you. I hope you can stay awhile. Arden is out gathering the last of the apples from the orchard.” Enid did her best to brush off Lionel’s tunic, which only resulted in more flour being dispersed on his clothing.

Merlin took note of Lot’s retreat; greatly amused that the young prince was doing his best to avoid both the flour and the affection.

“My dear Lady Enid, of course we can wait.” Lionel kissed the old woman on the cheek. “We were just headed into the village for the celebration, but I wanted to give Merlin his birthday gift first. Oh, where are my manners? Lady Enid this is Sir Lot, one of King Vortigern’s youngest and most honored knights.”

Lot respectfully bowed his head in Enid’s direction.

At the sight of Lot and the mention of the High King, Enid suddenly felt weak and grabbed Lionel's arm. Merlin rushed to his foster mother's side, and with Lionel's help, guided her into the house.

Smirking, Lot slowly removed his gloves of the finest black leather, lingering a moment in the doorway before following them in. He surveyed the room as he entered, similar to a raptor searching the ground for its prey.

"What is this? Having a celebration without me?" Arden's coarse, strong voice startled the group as he entered on soft footsteps.

Merlin watched with amusement as even the composed Sir Lot flinched.

"Arden!" Lionel smiled broadly. "You have arrived just in time..." Lionel caught Enid's gaze, as she shook her head, no, ever so slightly. Understanding that she did not wish for him to reveal her weakened state to her husband, Lionel quickly changed course, "...I was about to give Merlin his gift." Lionel slapped Merlin on the back and both ran outside.

Lot melted in the shadows of the room, leaning casually on the wall, arms folded.

"Enid, are you ok?"

The old woman smiled weakly causing the lines around her eyes to deepen. Reassuringly, she patted her husband's hand. "I am fine." She grabbed hold of his arm, bringing his ear next to her trembling, withered lips. "Lionel brought someone with him," she whispered, unaware that Lot was standing nearby. "He is Sir Lot, one of Vortigern's men."

Through wisps of Enid's graying hair, Arden slowly peered at Lot. As their eyes locked, the same sick, sinking feeling he had felt the day of Merlin's birth passed within him.

"Arden, look what Sir Lionel brought me." Merlin was more dragging than carrying a magnificent sword. Standing before his foster father, he could barely contain his excitement. With great effort, Merlin righted the sword and managed to drive the blade into the dirt floor—the bejeweled hilt blocking his vision.

Frowning, Arden turned his anger and frustration on Lionel. "What is a mere babe going to do with a sword that is bigger than him?"

Lionel laughed, ignoring Arden's sudden temper. After all these years he was accustomed to the old man's moodiness, to the point of being disappointed when it did not come. Arden, after all, had once

been a great knight in the service of his father. From a very early age, everything that Lionel had learned about swordplay, about being a knight, about life, had come from Arden. Lionel remembered the day the old man left his father's castle in Brittany, and ventured across the sea to settle in the Welsh countryside. When Lionel had asked his father why Arden had turned his warhorse into a plow horse...the king wearily shook his head and said, 'Old knights often grow weary of battle and seek a more peaceful way of life.'

"Sir Arden..." Lionel began.

"Don't call me that." Arden gave a quick glance to Lot and back to Lionel.

Lionel smiled mischievously. "One day your Merlin will grow into his sword. When he does, I promise to be there to teach him everything about swordsmanship that you taught me."

"May the gods help us all when that day arrives." Arden plucked the sword from the dirt, feeling the weight and admiring the craftsmanship. He then leaned it casually near the door. After an uncomfortable pause, Arden looked to Lot and asked, "What brings you to our village?"

Before Lot could get a word in, Lionel spoke up, "We are headed to the celebration. To enjoy the bonfire, good ale, and if we are lucky, a lady's good company." Lionel winked in Lot's direction.

Showing no outward annoyance at Lionel's rude enthusiasm, Lot affirmed their plans with a single nod, but otherwise stood expressionless.

Arden grumbled under his breath, rolling his eyes at Lionel.

"May I have your permission to take Merlin with us? I promise to keep a close watch on him, and we can meet later by the bonfire..." he ruffled Merlin's hair, "...before the *real* fun of the evening begins."

Arden looked into Enid's frightened eyes, but he could not think of a logical reason to refuse Lionel's request. "Fine, leave the sword, take the boy, and swear to meet us before dusk at the bonfire."

Lionel picked Merlin up, tossed him over his shoulder and headed out the door. Lot bowed with reverence to the old couple. As he stood, once more Lot's eyes locked with Arden's. Abruptly, Lot turned and followed Lionel to the horses. Within moments they were no more than a dust cloud on the horizon.

“Oh, Arden, I wish you would not have let him go.” Tears slowly followed the crevices of Enid’s face.

“Have faith, Enid. The gods hold his fate tonight, and perhaps ours.” Searching the heavens for Merlin’s hawk, Arden viewed an empty sky.

## 2

“Sit still,” Lionel pleaded. The chestnut mare tossed back her head as Lionel jerked on the reins, while attempting to secure a better hold around Merlin’s waist. “Enid will have my hide if I accidentally drop you.”

It was mid-day, and the celebration had already begun as they rode unnoticed into the village. The excitement in the air assaulted Merlin’s senses. Restlessly, he sat wide-eyed in front of Lionel. The harvest had been exceptionally abundant over the past five years and the local farmers’ carts overflowed with a rich variety of fruits and vegetables. Make-shift peddlers’ booths, decorated with colorful ribbons, lined the dusty streets. From a nearby bakery the aroma of soul cakes whiffed through the open window, causing Merlin to inhale deeply and think of Enid.

Appearing out of nowhere, a masked man, dressed in bright costume, tugged at Merlin’s toes, and as quickly, retreated into the crowd. Merlin laughed, recognizing the man as one of the mummers and travelers who flocked to the village; each with their own band of entertainers. Dancing through the streets, they beckoned all to come to their particular display of theatrics. They playfully fought in mock competition to see who could outdo the other; each group knowing that this would be the last celebration, the last chance for income, until the winter solstice.

Vessels of mead and ale magically appeared everywhere, as the sweet sounds of Celtic music intermixed with the rowdy bellows of those who had started their celebration early. In the center of the village a giant mound of dried cornstalks, wood, and leaves, stood ready to brighten the night sky—offering the twilight’s portal to guide the dead from the Otherworld to dance among the living.

Above the village, on a grassy knoll; lambs, goats, and a giant bull were tethered ready for the evening's sacrifice. Near the livestock clustered a group of white-cloaked Druids, chanting softly under a giant oak tree. As their voices carried down the hillside the tiny hairs stood on the back of Merlin's neck. *Oh, yes, he thought, Samhain is indeed the best holiday of the year.*

Lionel noticed Merlin shivering. "Are you cold?"

"No, just excited."

Lot took the lead as they continued their ride to the far edge of town. Nearing the Dark Horse Inn, he turned in his saddle and gave Lionel a crooked smile. "I have some business to attend to. I'll take the horses from here. You and the boy can go back and start celebrating. I'll catch up with you later."

"Don't be too long, you'll miss all the fun," Lionel quipped with a mixture of concern and playfulness.

"It is the king's business, so it cannot wait. Go on. I'll be as quick as possible."

Merlin was puzzled by what business the High King could have in his tiny village, and was about to ask when Lionel swept him from the horse. Still perplexed and curious, Merlin reluctantly let Lionel drag him toward the food carts. Looking back Merlin noticed Lot talking to several young men, also dressed in black.

"Lionel, do you think we should see if we can help Sir Lot?" He tried to loosen his grip, which only made Lionel hold on tighter.

"No, let Lot do what he needs to. We are here to have fun. Now tell me, where do you want to go first?"

*Back to the inn,* Merlin thought, but he could see that was not an option. "Let's get something to eat and then find a bard. I am ready to listen to a good tale."

"A wonderful plan."

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Lot and his group of men disappeared behind the inn, away from the revelry. Lot was the youngest of the six, yet the oldest was just seventeen, only two years his senior. Although they appeared to stand casually grouped, Lot had no doubt that they were all *his* men, loyal beyond reason, devoted to a fault ...*his* men!

“Did you find what we came for?” The question was asked dispassionately, neither accusing nor inquisitive by the oldest member of the Young Royal Guard.

“Yes, Faustus, we move tonight.”

As Lot unsheathed his sword, his men circled closer. In the dirt he mapped out the interior of Merlin's home. Silently, he marked areas; pointing his sword to each man as he assigned specific tasks. He then looked to each and held their stare; reassuring that they *knew* their duties.

“Remember, drink little or none. If we do not keep our heads tonight, we could possibly lose them by morning. Best to mingle in the crowd for now, but do not do it as a group. We do not want to draw any suspicion. Especially stay away from Lionel and the boy. We'll meet at the inn just before they light the bonfire.” The group nodded in unison, and one by one vanished into the throngs of villagers.

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Lot easily found Lionel; with his tousled, red hair, he was not hard to locate even in a crowd. Quietly, he stood beside him. “So, where is the boy? Did you misplace him already?”

Startled, Lionel laughed. He was about to playfully punch Lot in the shoulder, but stopped short when he remembered how Lot hated to be touched. “You found *us*, and just in time to hear a story from one of the greatest bards.”

“I found *you*.” Lot answered flatly, becoming quickly annoyed with Lionel's way of skirting questions. *Long live King Bors and his eldest son*, he thought.

Lionel gave Lot a smug smile, “No, you found us both.”

As harp strings softly began to play, the villagers gathered together, hushing each other. A silence fell, broken only by the soft chanting of the Druids drifting down from the hillside. Then, a beautiful haunting young boy's voice rang out. He started with a ballad of the Roman invasion. Both women and men wept as Merlin sang of the death and destruction they brought with them. They cheered loudly as he sang of the Roman retreat and how the land once more belonged to its rightful owners.

“More! More!” the crowd urged Merlin on as he finished the last note.

Respectfully, Merlin handed the harp back to the old bard who sat at his side. “Thank you sir, for allowing me the pleasure of your time and the use of your instrument.”

“I can see you have been practicing on the harp I gave you last year. Are you sure you do not wish to give the people one last song?”

“No. I am very sure. It is your turn now—no one can weave musical magic like you, and magic is what the crowds have come for today.” Merlin bowed to the bard, then to the crowd, and made his way back to Lionel, surprised to see Lot.

Lionel gave Merlin an enthusiastic hug. “I could listen to you all day.”

Merlin felt his face burn from embarrassment. “Music, like so much of life, is a gift from the gods. It would be disrespectful to not appreciate what the gods deem important.”

Lot groaned loudly. He had taken about all that he could today and was overeager for night to fall.

“Do you not believe in the revenge of the gods, Sir Lot?”

“I believe in one thing—me.”

Merlin could tell from Lot’s tone that it was not a statement of pride, but merely of fact. Yet, he could not help but try to push some emotion out of him. “If you have no fear of the gods, who do you fear?”

“Fear is a useless emotion, and has no place within a knight.”

“So, you do not fear anything. Not even the High King?”

“Especially *not* the High King.”

“Hmmm...” Merlin quickly filed that statement away, “...not even death?”

“A knight going into battle cannot afford to fear death. Death is an honor.”

“Do you wish to die?”

Lot’s eyebrows narrowed, a slight twitch formed on his lips, and his breathing became ever so labored. For the first time Merlin saw that Lot could be provoked, could outwardly show emotion, he *was* vulnerable after all.

Lionel quickly put his hand over Merlin’s mouth. Reaching into his pocket with his free hand, he pulled out a coin. “Merlin, why don’t you go buy Lady Enid something nice from one of the peddlers.”

With a childlike grin, Merlin took the bribe and skipped off.

“Forgive him, Sir Lot. Even though he is wise beyond his years, he is after all, just a boy.”

Lot shrugged. Instantly regaining his composure, he thought of how much he was going to enjoy tonight’s adventure.

### 3

Lot peered at the lone hawk gliding in the dusky sky, engulfed in the splendor of the rising moon, the *Hunter's Moon*, full, bright, with a pale blood-red tint. *A good omen*, he thought.

“So, you do appreciate beauty,” Merlin shouted as he was pushed into Lot’s leg by a jubilant merrymaker. Instantly, he felt Lot tense, trying to move away, but trapped by the crowd, both boy and knight awkwardly pinned against each other.

“Not another game of questions?”

“No, no more questions.” Offering Lot a warm meat and veggie pasty he added, “I did bring you something.”

Lot was about to rebuff the gesture, but his growling stomach reminded him that he had not eaten all day. He accepted the pie, nodded and began eating.

The ever-vigilant Lionel stood behind Merlin and squeezed his shoulders. “I think I saw Enid and Arden. Shall we try to find them?”

Merlin looked up to Lionel with weary eyes and sighed. The celebration had been fun, but now that the sun was setting he was starting to feel the cold. He was tired, and his belly ached from just a little too much ale and a whole lot of food.

“When you’ve taken the boy to safekeeping, meet me at the inn,” Lot shouted over the crowd.

Picking up Merlin, Lionel shouted back, “I will not be long, save some ale for me.”

Lot tossed the remains of the pie on the ground. Wiping his hands together, he fought his way through the crowd to the inn. Instinctively, he knew that one-by-one his men would follow his lead.

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Enid and Arden were at the far outer edge of the still unlit bonfire. Lionel arrived with Merlin, handing him over to Enid, who was sitting on a tree stump. "I am afraid we wore him out today." Merlin cuddled into his foster mother's arms, glad to be out of the crowd.

"So, how much trouble did you boys get into?" Enid teased.

"A bundle, but nothing we couldn't get out of," Lionel joked back.

Merlin cringed as he watched Lionel reach over to once more ruffle his hair.

"You look tired Merlin, are you ready to go home?" Enid whispered in Merlin's ear. "We don't have to wait for the lighting of the fire?" she added louder as a question to her husband.

"If the boy has had enough fun for one day, we can go. I have seen enough bonfires to last me a lifetime."

Enid agreed, handing the sleepy boy over to Arden. "Let's go now."

"Do you want me to carry him to the cart for you?" Lionel asked.

"No, we can manage. Go enjoy yourself. I am not such an old man that I don't remember..." Arden's voice trailed off, lost in memory as he glanced lovingly to Enid.

"As you wish. I will see you in the morning on our way back." Lionel turned and eagerly swam through a sea of people to get to the inn.

The old couple made their way to their cart. Arden laid Merlin in the back on a bed of straw and helped his wife climb in next to the boy. Enid covered them both with her shawl. Contently, she smiled to her husband. "This reminds me of the day we brought him home."

Arden did not share his wife's joyous mood. Samhain had never been his favorite celebration. Evil forces were everywhere, and he felt eyes watching, waiting to steal his soul. Looking around he thought he saw silver-blue eyes glowing, but when he looked again he saw nothing and tried to brush off the feeling. Yet, the sudden cold chill would not leave. Even an old knight never forgets the feeling of being watched, and someone was out there, this he was certain.

The full moon rose, giving a pale pink tint to the early evening sky. Clicking loudly, Arden snapped the reins as they hurried down the dirt road. He was thankful when he saw the small hawk soaring in front of the mare, guiding them safely home.

Nearby, a lone figure dressed in black slinked in the shadows. When he was certain the wagon was well down the road he dashed back to meet the others, avoiding bumping into Lionel at the inn's door by mere footsteps.

Oblivious, Lionel entered the building and was not surprised to see a nearly empty room, as the majority of the villagers were gathering outside.

"Over here, Lionel, come join us." Lot motioned from the far corner. He was in an uncharacteristically jovial mood; surrounded by his men and several lovely serving wenches. Numerous half empty tankards, and pitchers overflowing with ale, covered the table.

Lionel could barely contain his excitement as he hurried over. He knew that tonight would be the turning point. Tonight, Lot had promised to transform him from a mere boy into a real man, and Lionel was more than ready.

"I hope you saved me some..." he looked over the ladies, "...of everything."

This brought a loud round of laughter from the table as he squeezed in between Dodinel and Nentres. Nicknamed the Boar and the Dove; as Dodinel's nature was as savage, as Nentres' was gentle. Dodinel was slow witted, yet powerful, while Nentres was quick of body and mind.

Lionel had spent the summer training for knighthood under Sir Lot at King Vortigern's new stronghold at Mount Erith. From an early age, Lot had shown an incredible fearless courage in battle. As a reward for Lot's grand deeds, he was given this small group of young knights, dubbed *The Young Royal Guard*, who were never far from Lot's side. Lionel was honored to be within such good company and friendly faces, and hoped one day to also be a member of the guard.

Directly across from Lionel sat Lot, and as usual on his left was Sir Faustus, a giant of a man and the eldest of the group. He was rumored to be Vortigern's bastard son by his own daughter. It had always baffled Lionel how Faustus treated Lot with respect instead of resentment, as it was very obvious who had the High King's favor.

On a nearby bench another of the High King's illegitimate sons, Sir Brydw, was in deep conversation with two serving girls. All the ladies loved Sir Brydw. Although he was ruggedly handsome, his rude and vulgar manner made him Lionel's least favorite.

“Where is Meleagant?” Lionel thought it very odd that the young prince was not at Lot’s right side. Lot was exceptionally fond of Meleagant, who was often referred to as Lot’s shadow. Their birthdays were separated by only a month, Meleagant being the older. Next to Lot, at only fifteen, he was the youngest of the Young Royal Guard, and by far the most inexperienced. Both young men, like Lionel, had been sent in their early teens to the High King’s court from distant lands to be schooled in the ways of battle. While others struggled in the foreign, formal, and often brutal environment, Lot was the only one who truly flourished.

“Meleagant will be back soon.” Lot gave Lionel a reassuring grin, and called out to one of the girls draped around Brydw’s neck, “Keep our good friend Lionel’s blackjack filled, he has a lot of drinking to catch up on.” As if under Lot’s command, the redheaded beauty quickly left Brydw and grabbed a full pitcher. Bending her ample breasted body near Lionel’s face, she filled a tall leather tankard with their strongest ale. Lionel could feel both his face and loins begin to warm.

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The last of Lot’s men lingered in the doorway. Meleagant’s silver-blue eyes fixed upon Lot’s ebony ones, and he gave Lot a quick nod. *The Plan* had commenced.

# 4

Enid sat up in bed half asleep as Merlin's screams shattered the night. Throwing the covers from her frail body, she swung her bare feet to meet the cool dirt floor. In the darkness she felt Arden's callused hand grab her arm.

"Leave the boy! You baby him too much. He will never grow to be strong if you keep running to his side whenever his dreams turn to nightmares."

She patted his hand, and he let her go, knowing there was nothing else he could do, nor say, to stop her. He rolled away, pulling the covers over his head and fell back into a deep sleep.

Sighing, she shuffled in the dark to Merlin's small bed at the far corner of the main room. Since he was born, he had woken this way; screaming out in the middle of the night, holding his head in agony.

She sat down, cradling the young boy tightly in her arms. His hair and bedclothes were drenched in sweat. "Wake up, my little bird. You are just having a bad dream." Merlin shivered in her arms with both hands pressed hard against his temples.

Kissing his forehead ever so softly, Enid began singing as she rocked him gently. Immediately, a peaceful calm set upon Merlin, and she could feel him relax, knowing it would only be moments before he fell back to sleep. Smiling she gazed out the nearby window watching the now familiar silhouette of the hawk dancing in the bright light of the pink full moon.

Merlin was nearly asleep in Enid's arms when five men crashed through the front door. The old woman shrieked as the child was torn from her arms. Without hesitation Brydwh, backhanded Enid across the

face, watching dispassionately as she clutched her chest and fell hard to the floor.

Merlin fought his captors like a wild animal—kicking, clawing, biting. It took both Brydw and Dodinel to hold him still, while Nentres securely cocooned the boy in a woolen cape. Even then, Merlin continued to squirm and bite.

“Quickly, bind the boy’s eyes, and get him to the horse!” A familiar voice shouted from just outside the door.

Nentres pulled a long thin piece of dark cloth from his pouch and wrapped it around the boy’s head, making sure his eyes were tightly covered.

Like a restrained bird of prey, Merlin instantly stopped struggling. Accepting his fate, he gave himself over to the gentle arms that held him. A gust of cold air hit his face as he was carried outside. A horse snorted, as Merlin felt himself being lifted upward into the arms of his new captor.

Arden awoke, still dazed from his slumber. Hearing the commotion in the other room, without hesitation he charged into the middle of the fray just as Dodinel and Nentres were leaving. In the darkness he searched the room, first for Enid and secondly for the boy. When in the moonlight he saw his wife’s bloody body on the floor and Merlin’s bed empty, he turned manic.

Brydw and Faustus came together to block the old knight from charging outside to rescue Merlin, pushing him back into the room. Arden managed a hard blow to Faustus’ face before Brydw was able to knock the old man to the floor, pinning his shoulders to the ground. Faustus wiped a trickle of blood from his mouth, and in a frenzy he repeatedly kicked Arden in the ribs.

“What now?” A quivering voice cried out in the shadows, his innocent eyes stared from one man to the next.

“You know *The Plan*,” barked Faustus.

The bystander stood frozen as Faustus pushed past him, retrieving Merlin’s sword leaning near the doorway, exactly where Lot had said it would be. Shoving the hilt into the reluctant young knight’s hand, Faustus hissed, “Keep to *The Plan*—we leave no witnesses.” Faustus returned to Arden and sat on the old man’s knees to help Brydw hold him down.

The young knight begrudgingly approached. Standing over Arden with tears in his silver-blue eyes, he hesitated.

Instinctively, Ardent knew those were the same eyes that had been watching him in the village.

“Forgive me,” Melegant whispered, as he drove the sword deeply into the old man’s heart.

“Cowards!” were Arden’s last words.

Covered in a splatter of blood, Melegant crumbled onto the floor. He had killed men in battle, but he never envisioned murdering an unarmed old man. He scrambled from the house like a rat, throwing himself on the ground, retching violently.

“To The Gods Be Dammed—Hurry!” Lot bellowed as his horse turned skittish.

Seeing that Merlin was secure in Lot’s arms, Dodinel and Nentres ran back into the house. At that moment Enid moaned, and all eyes went from her to the eldest of the group.

“Leave,” Faustus growled.

Upon hearing his command, Dodinel, Nentres, and Brydw, turned in unison, obeying willingly.

“Hurry!” Lot’s voice broke with exasperation.

In a state of hysteria a terrified Enid swallowed hard, choking on the blood that trickled into her mouth from her battered lips and broken nose. Her panic set in anew as she felt the lone invader nestle next to her body. She trembled uncontrollably as the stranger’s abrasive fingers gently brushed a wisp of hair from her face. Her tears streamed, as his sticky, wet lips kissed her cheek.

“I am sorry, but it is part of *The Plan*,” Faustus whispered in Enid’s ear, as his hands tightened around her neck. He could feel her pulse race, thumping rapidly. He counted the beats, until the rhythm stopped and he knew her life-blood would run no more. Huddled beside her for what seemed like an eternity, he was startled back from his nightmarish dream-world by Lot’s voice screaming through the darkness.

“*We Must Go Now!*” Lot’s patience was strained, and he realized that if he did not get the situation under control immediately, all could be lost. “Everyone to your horses. If you do not get mounted right now, I swear I will kill and bury each and every one of you myself.”

There was such an evil pitch to Lot's voice that each man knew he would make-good his words. Nentres helped Meleagant on his horse, as Faustus staggered from the house. Soon all knights were mounted and galloping down the path. Just out of sight, a lone observer sat in a nearby treetop. Yet, no one but Merlin heard his hawk's cry echoing in the darkness.

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Lionel woke at the first cock's crow, more by habit than by necessity. His head felt like a busy blacksmith had moved in. He was about to roll over and lose his stomach contents from the previous day, when he realized his right arm was trapped and painfully numb. "God, grant me the wisdom of hindsight. If this is what it takes to become a man I wish to stay a boy for a lifetime," he mumbled as he slowly opened his eyes to have his vision blocked by a mass of red curls.

Closing his eyes tightly, he tried to piece together what had happened last night, before falling into the abyss. His last clear memory was having a lovely girl, with hair of fire, sit on his lap, continually feeding him pitcher after pitcher of ale. *Yes, that was the good part of the evening.* In a cloud he vaguely remembered Nentres and Dodinel dragging him upstairs, stripping him of his clothes, and tossing him in the bed. Then, nothing.

He opened his eyes fully as he gave a quick tug, which released his arm from captive. Landing with a thud, naked on the floor, he shook his arm as painful imaginary needles grabbed each movement. He searched the room for his clothes. Finding them neatly folded on a nearby bench gave proof that Nentres had, without doubt, been there. The young girl did not move, and he worried that she may be dead, until he heard her moan softly in her sleep.

As quiet as possible, Lionel dressed and left to seek the others. Reaching the bottom of the stairs, he was disappointed to find the inn nearly empty. No sign of his companions, only the innkeeper's wife, and two maidens who were helping clean the clutter from the previous night's celebration.

Out of nowhere, a young boy tugged on his tunic. "You the one they call Lionel?"

"Yes." *It hurt to speak.*

"I have a message for you from Sir Lot."

"Can you talk a little softer?" *It hurt to listen.*

The young boy jumped on a nearby bench, standing on his tiptoes he whispered into Lionel's ear. "Sir Lot said that he was not able to wake you and that he had to return to Mount Erith immediately per the High King's urgent request."

"Was that the whole message?"

"No, there was something else."

"Which was?"

"Let me think. The man's voice was funny and I had a hard time understanding everything he said."

"Please think." Lionel urged the boy's memory with a toss of a coin.

"Oh yes, I remember now. He said for you not to hurry back to the fortress and that he hoped you enjoy the dawn of this new morning."

"And that was it?"

The young boy nodded and jumped off the bench.

*I have no idea how I am suppose to enjoy this day when every part of my body is in pain.* He walked over to the innkeeper's wife and asked if he owed her anything for the night's stay.

"A very handsome young man gave us more than enough to cover your room and board for the night. He also paid to have your horse ready at first dawn. You are indeed blessed to have such a good friend."

As Lionel walked outside he was thankful that he woke up early when the sun was still lingering low in the sky. With great difficulty he managed to mount his horse, and walked her at a slow pace down the dirt road back to the old couple's house. He was not sure if the lingering smell of Lady Enid's baking would settle his stomach, but he knew that it would be comforting to be within her company. He loved the old woman like a second mother, and he had faith that she could concoct a potion to cure what ailed him.

Halfway to his destination, the morning fog changed into a dreary drizzle, and then into a torrential downpour, turning the old dirt road into a muddy bog. The harder it rained, the more urgent he felt the need to find shelter, to get to the house. Looking skyward he shouted, "Enough already!"

"Finally," Lionel moaned as he reached the familiar path leading to the old couple's home. The door was swung open, and although he thought it a bit odd with the heavy rain, he eagerly dismounted and ran inside.

Mixed with the sweet scent of yesterday's baked goods, there was an odor that he could not at first place. He had flashes of hunting with his father, and it came to him that the other scent was that of a fresh kill.

Before his eyes could fully adjust to the darkness, he tripped over something on the floor. Reaching out to steady himself from falling, his hand came to grip with a jeweled sword hilt. He looked down into the dead eyes of his mentor, Sir Arden. He tried to scream, but nothing would come out. His feet slipped in blood and he lost his balance once more. With a sickening, sucking-pop, the sword freed itself from the old knight's body. Lionel found himself falling in slow motion with the sword in his hand.

Landing next to the once lovely Lady Enid, Lionel's gaze went to the bed above her body. Merlin's bed was empty. Again, Lionel tried to scream, tried to move, as Enid's empty eyes—demanding, questioning, accusing eyes—peered into his. Releasing his grip on the sword, it made a loud clang as it tumbled under the boy's bed hitting the stone wall. Finding his legs, Lionel scrambled backwards crablike out the door into the muck of the yard.

Pounding his fists into the mud, he began to weep uncontrollably with the heavens. Putting back his head he screamed Merlin's name, and he knew by the gods that both Merlin and his captors felt his vengeance.

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Far away, Lot smiled to himself, it had been a grueling ride but they were almost to the fortress. In the end *The Plan* had gone well, and his mission accomplished. He thought of Lionel, and knew that this day his boyhood would be robbed from him forever—Lot never went back on a promise.

## ABOUT AUTHOR

Dee Marie is an award-winning author, photographer and artist. She has a vast knowledge of Arthurian Legends, with a reference library that is overflowing with British, Celtic, and Druid history.

Research for her *Sons of Avalon* series also included a visit to Britain, where she was privileged to walk within the inner circle of Stonehenge, embracing the Dancing Stones on the Salisbury Plain. While in Cornwall, she explored the moors surrounding Bodmin, and ambled upon the ancient ruins of Tintagel.

Former Managing Editor, and later Editor-in-Chief, of an internationally published computer graphic magazine, when not writing novels, she supplements her time working as a freelance journalist. Dee Marie currently lives in Upstate New York, and is completing her second novel in the *Sons of Avalon* series.

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The author invites you to continue your journey—visit the *Sons of Avalon* website: [www.sonsofavalon.com](http://www.sonsofavalon.com)

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