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The Killing Way

Written by Anthony Hays

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The Killing Way

ANTHONY HAYS



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This book is dedicated to the memory
of my brother,
Ronald Douglas Hays
(1949–1990),
who would have written a novel himself had
fortune not treated him so cruelly.

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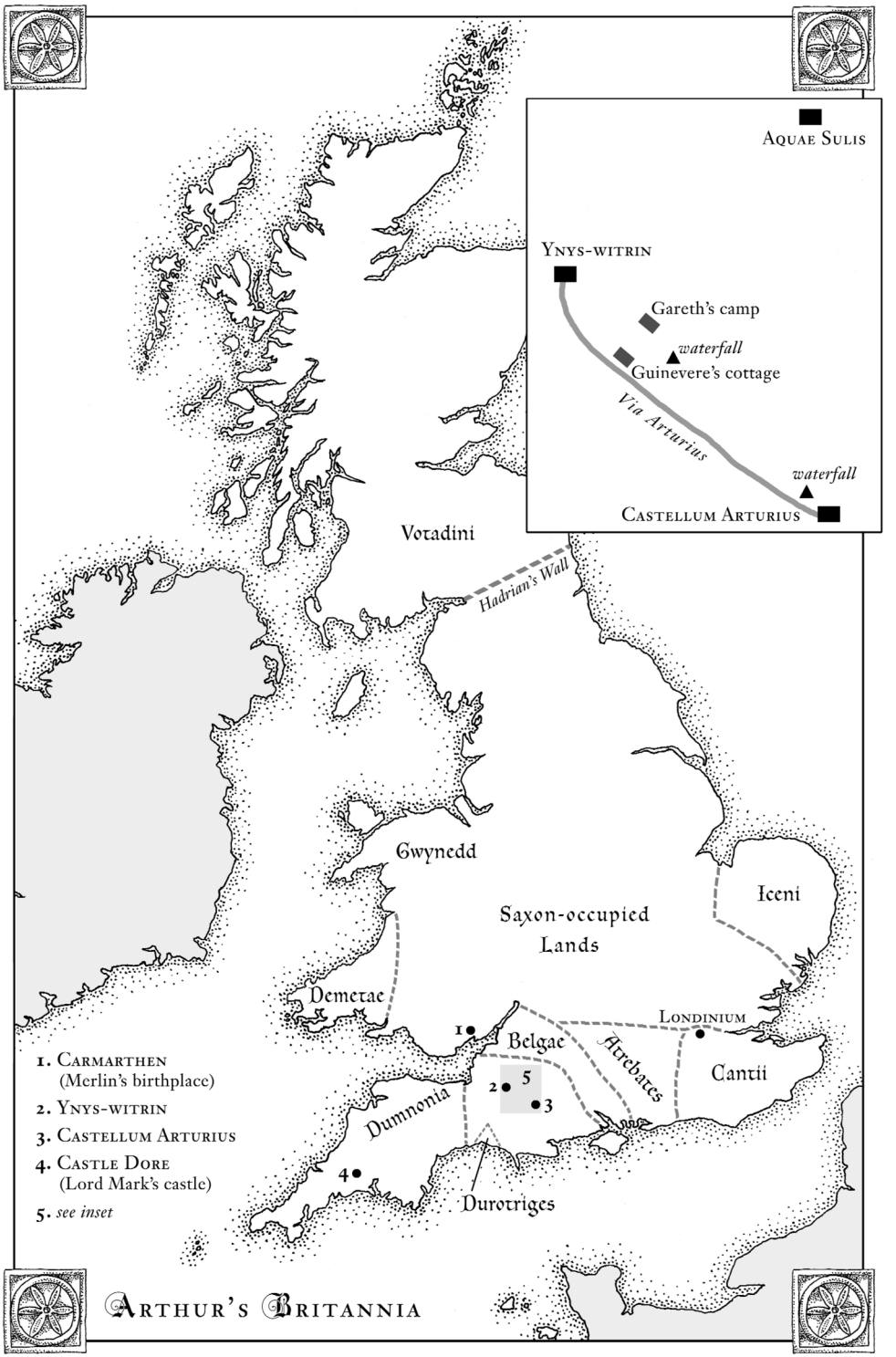
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Tony Hays
Savannah, Tennessee

The Killing Way


Aquae Sulis
Ynys-witrin
Gareth's camp
waterfall
Guinevere's cottage
Via Arturius
waterfall
Castellum Arturius
Votadini
Hadrian's Wall
Gwynedd
Saxon-occupied Lands
Iceni
Demetae
Londinium
Belgae
Atrebates
Cantii
Dumnonia
Durotriges
1. Carmarthen (Merlin's birthplace)
2. Ynys-witrin
3. Castellum Arturius
4. Castle Dore (Lord Mark's castle)
5. see inset
Arthur's Britannia

Glastonbury

In the eightieth year from the Adventus Saxonum

I am in my ninetieth winter, the oldest man in the western lands. My eyes and my one hand have not yet deserted me, so I think it meet that I put down in writing some of what I have lived through. And there has been much, from my farming days near the lands of the river Cam to the battles against the Saxons to my days at Arthur's castle. I have witnessed death, devastation, and treachery. But I have also seen goodness in commoner, and king, and in these days that is exceptional and worthy of note.

My days are spent in contemplation and remembrance near the brothers at Glastonbury, that place we used to call Ynys-witrin before the Saxons spread their vile language like a plague across our land. I am not a brother, and I do not live with them, rather in a small house near the abbey. But I take my meals at the abbot's table, and I read the brothers' manuscripts, copy an occasional one if they have need of me and my hand is not too pained. They leave me to myself much of the time, unless the abbot needs advice on treating with the ubiquitous Saxons. He respects my word; no one else in our lands has as much experience dealing with them.

Each person's life brings unexpected events, trials, burdens, each of which tests his soul and his nerve. Such has been my life. As a young man, I thought to be no more than a simple farmer. Now I look back at the different paths I have followed, and I count among them farmer, soldier, scribe, councillor to a king, and now simply a penitent soul looking for reason in all that has passed. Though I could have wished to remain that simple farmer, I cannot count my life as a bad one. I believe that I have done much good with the years God has given me. And I owe that satisfaction to one man.

I never intended to write these words. These memories were saved in the farthest reaches of my mind, back where no one, not the Saxons or anyone, could take them from me. But not a fortnight ago, I argued with Gildas, that fat monk who wrote a tome called De Excidio, *and though it pretends to tell something of the history of this land, Gildas ignores the most important parts. He ignores my Lord Arthur, who gave his life to keep the hateful Saxons at bay, who championed the Christ and ruled these lands accordingly. He ignores the sacrifices of the many for the good of our* patria.

When I pointed out these omissions, he grumbled that they were not important. To him Arthur was just another self-serving tyrant, concerned only with the women he could bed and the food he could steal from poor folk. When I spoke of Gereint, Gawain, and Gaheris, aye, even Guinevere, he laughed at the blood they had spilt on this very land. At that, I could take no more. I tried to strangle him, and though my bones have weathered ninety seasons, it took three of the monks to drag me away from him and back to my house.

No, I cannot leave the field to such as the fat Gildas. He never really knew Arthur, and what he knew of Arthur he did not like. Besides, all Gildas knows how to do is complain. The others who could have written the truth—Bedevere, my old friend Kay, the old abbot Coroticus—are gone.

The tale is not an easy one, filled as it is with betrayal and death, nor does it please me to recall. But though it takes my last breath to finish, it is a task that must be done, for all of them. It is a debt of honor, and one no man can stop me from paying. So, I take a quill in my one hand, misshapen by age, to record what really happened.

Chapter One



Pleasure myself with a one-armed man?" the wench had whined. "'Tisn't likely." But half a chilly night and a full skin of wine later, she chanted a different tune. And I was forgetting that I was half a man.

Until someone grabbed me about the neck and lifted me from between her legs.

Until someone flung me across the hut, and I crumpled against the stone and stick wall.

My attacker first appeared as a fuzzy shape, and anger welled up in me as I shook my head to clear it and the figure became better defined. Then he spoke, and the anger filled my throat and threatened to choke off my breath. "It does not surprise me," the tall, bearded man said with a frown, "to find you wasting yourself with a drunken wench."

Not only had I been savagely torn from a night of drink and pleasure, but the culprit was none other than my Lord Arthur, a man who had saved my life—and the man whom I hated with all my heart.

"I have need of you," Arthur said in his deep, rumbling voice. He tossed a woolen wrap at the girl and motioned

sharply at the door. Silly wench was blubbering by then, scared witless of Arthur, and she scampered out of the hut and into the foul night.

"I have no need of you," I answered, groping for the goatskin. But he snatched it from my grasp and poured the wine onto the ground.

"You wound me, my lord."

"You wound me, Malgwyn. Quit sniveling and come with me." His voice changed, perhaps unnoticeable to others, but I had warred with him through too many battles and knew that it portended trouble. "There has been a death," he said, dropping his chin to his chest.



I am called Malgwyn ap Cuneglas. The only thing gentle about my birth was the kiss that my mother laid on my newborn brow. I was born to a farmer near the river Yeo, a man from the west country named Cuneglas. He died when I was but ten years old and my mother when I was seventeen, the year I took to wife Gwyneth, the daughter of my neighbor. She was fifteen and the loveliest lass in our lands. For five years life was as good as I could ask. We farmed and lived and loved. For a while.

Arthur was not king then, but rather the "Dux Bellorum," the general of generals, for Ambrosius Aurelianus and a handful of lesser kings scattered throughout the land. The kings had made an uneasy alliance with the Saxons to fight the Picts, and then the treacherous dogs betrayed us. To Arthur the kings turned; I knew him then only as a whisper on the wind, a story made larger in the telling, of a great warrior who laid a hundred Saxons low with a single sweep of his sword. And, truly, I paid him no mind.

Troop levies had not been made in our region. The Saxons were many leagues away from our lands, and the people found no fear of them; they had once been our allies.

Until.

Until they turned on us, one cool morn while the men of our village were off to market to sell our produce. Until our return brought us death and destruction. As we rounded the road to our village, instead of finding our families eagerly awaiting our return, we discovered our huts destroyed, smoking, burning. We found our women raped and our babies killed. Searching the rubble that had been my home, I found Gwyneth, her legs aspraddle and her throat slit. Our girl, Mariam, still in her first year, had hidden in a storage pit. For a wonder, they had not found the child. I suspected that Gwyneth hid her there when she heard the Saxons come. I took her from the cold pit and cried giant tears, until her wrap was moist with my grief.

The next day I took her to my brother's home in Castellum Arturius—the town was too large for a simple raiding party—and left her with him. With other men of my village, we mounted our horses and rode to find Arthur, to join him.

I did not cry again.

I smiled at each Saxon throat I cut. I smiled at each rotting Saxon body we left on the battlefield. My fellows thought it odd that I smiled so much at death and devastation, and after a while they called me "Smiling Malgwyn." They did not understand that the smile ate at me like a disease.

Arthur saw something in me though. Before one battle, I sat on my horse on a ridge and studied the land before us. Another horse rode up alongside, and I took it for one of my fellows. "If Arthur is smart," I said, "he will place forces in hiding there, there, and there." My finger pointed out low hills. "When

the Saxons ride to face our main force, they will be trapped with their backs to the river."

"I agree," a deep voice said. Arthur. "You are Malgwyn ap Cuneglas."

"Yes, my lord," I said, turning quickly and giving the salute, surprised almost as much by his sudden appearance as by the fact that he knew me.

He nodded, smiled faintly, turned his horse and left. Within minutes, the troop dispositions were made as I had suggested. When the Saxons made their charge, the course of battle ran just as I predicted. We crushed a large Saxon force, shoving the last survivors into the river to drown. I was given my own troop of horse to command and a place in the war councils.

Had I known then what that brief encounter portended, I would have killed him there. It would have saved me a great deal of pain and misery.



Arthur's odd pronouncement cleared my eyes, and I began to focus. I yearned to return to the wine and the wench, but the set of his jaw made me want to know more.

"Death is a constant of this life, my lord," I observed. "It is all around us. Why is this one different?"

Arthur lowered himself onto a stool that I had lashed together out of an armload of trimmed branches and scraps of leather. He was dressed as a common man, in a woolen tunic hanging down nearly to his knees and tied at the waist with a leather belt, and *braccae*. His huge feet were covered with leather shoes laced across the top in the Celtic manner. He liked to go abroad in peasant's garb, without the fine linen *camisia* his wealth and station afforded him. A dagger protruded from his belt,

and I suspected that one or more of his men lingered in the darkness outside my hovel.

"A servant girl from my hall was found dead an hour ago in the lane. She was lying outside Merlin's home."

"Ravaged?" I gathered my own braccae and slid them on. In front of any other man, I would have been humbled, but we had shared too many campfires to worry about such niceties.

"That is not for me to say, but the poor child was gutted like a deer, slit from throat to belly."

"Odd. But why does the death of a serving girl disturb the great Lord Arthur?"

"There was a knife lying by her body, covered in blood. It belongs to Merlin."

And that explained it all. Merlin, though some called him Myrddin hereabouts, was a harmless old man, a councillor to Ambrosius Aurelianus and Arthur's old teacher at Dinas Emrys, where Arthur was schooled. He came from a town in the far north, Moridunum in Roman days, Carmarthen now. Some said that he was of a long line of prophets, whose deeds gave rise to the town's name, which meant "inspiration" in our tongue.

Once he had given good counsel, but the years had played tricks on his mind, and he thought himself a sorcerer now and sold potions made of valerian root to the gullible. When he was in his right mind, he could cut through the thickets choking a problem and strike at the root of the matter. And, Arthur loved the old cantankerous fool.

The wine's magic was beginning to fade and a pain grew in the back of my head as I, now dressed, rested on my haunches. "So, your much touted devotion to justice is now about to betray you? What of it? You are Lord Arthur. You are as good as crowned as the Rigotamos. Do as you please. No one will argue."