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Taliesin

Book 1 of the Pendragon Cycle

Written by Stephen R. Lawhead

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TALIESIN

book₁ of the PENDRAGON cycle

STEPHEN R.
LAWHEAD



LION FICTION

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*Ten rings there are, and nine gold torcs
on the battlechiefs of old;
Eight princely virtues, and seven sins
for which a soul is sold;
Six is the sum of earth and sky,
of all things meek and bold;
Five is the number of ships that sailed
from Atlantis lost and cold;
Four kings of the Westerlands were saved,
three kingdoms now behold;
Two came together in love and fear,
in Llyonesse stronghold;
One world there is, one God, and one birth
the Druid stars foretold.*

SRL

ONE

I will weep no more for the lost, asleep in their water graves. I have no more tears for my youth in the temple of the brindled ox. Life is strong in me and I will not grieve for what was or might have been. Mine is a different path and I must follow where it leads.

But I look out from my high window onto fields of corn ripening to the scythe. I see them rippling like a golden sea, and in the rustling of the dry leaves I hear again the voices of my people calling to me across the years. I close my eyes and I see them now as they were from my earliest memories. They stand before me and I enter once more that glad time when we were young and the cataclysm had not come upon us – before Throm appeared with dire prophecies burning on his lips.

It was a time of peace in all Atlantis. The gods were content and the people prospered. We children played beneath Bel's golden disk and our limbs grew strong and brown; we sang our songs to fair Cybel, the ever-changing, to grant us dreams of joy; and we lived out our days in a land rich with every comfort, thinking it would always be that way.

The voices of the departed speak: 'Tell our story,' they say. 'It is worthy to be remembered.'

And so I take my pen and begin to write. Perhaps writing will ease the long months of my confinement. Perhaps my words will earn a measure of the peace that has been denied throughout my life.

In any case, I have little else to do; I am a captive, made prisoner in this house. So, I will write: for myself, for those who come after, and for the voices that cry out not to be forgotten.

Men called the royal palace the Isle of Apples for the groves that covered the slopes leading down to the city below. And indeed, in blossom time, King Avallach's palace seemed an island floating

above the earth on clouds of pink and white. Golden apples, sweeter than honey from the high meadow apiaries, grew in abundance in the orchards of the king. Apple trees lined the wide avenue that ran through the centre of Kellios to the sea.

On a high seaward terrace, Charis leaned against a column, gazing out across the rooftops of the city, watching the sunlight glimmer on beaten sheets of red-gold orichalcum and listening to the sighing hum of the aeolian harp in the random fingerings of the wind. Drowsy, and slightly drunk on the heady fragrance of apple blossoms, she yawned and turned her languid attention to the warm blue crescent of harbour.

Three ships, their green sails bulging in the breeze, slid slowly into Kellios harbour, trailing diamonds in their wakes. Charis watched them heel about, empty their sails and glide towards the wharf. The sturdy longboats of the harbour master were already making their way out to the ships to secure the lines and guide them to berth.

Kellios was a busy city; not over-large – not as big as great Ys, city of temples and shipyards in Coran, or even as big as the market city Gaeron, in Hespera – but blessed with a deep bay so that traders from every kingdom called frequently to provision themselves for longer journeys south and east across the great expanse of water that seamen called Oceanus.

Chariots and wains, the latter loaded with produce of the fields round about Kellios or with goods from other kingdoms, traversed the streets and avenues from early morning to dusk. The market stalls rang with the chatter of trade: value established, prices set, bargains struck.

From the temple mound in the centre of the city, rose the holy edifice – a replica in miniature of Mount Atlas, home of the gods. Sweet-scented smoke ascended eternally from the many altar fires of the temple as costly sacrifices were performed day and night by the Magi. And from the stables below the temple could be heard the bellow of the sacred bulls as they offered their voices to the god, as one day they would make an offering of their living blood and flesh.

Next to the temple stood the bull ring, a great oval arena joined to the temple stables by an underground tunnel. In a few hours the first bull would be led through that tunnel and ushered into the pit, and

the sacred dance would commence. For now, the arena stood silent and empty.

Charis sighed and turned away, retreating back into the cool, shadowed corridor, the patter of her sandalled feet echoing along the polished stone. She climbed the wide steps at the end of the corridor, and wandered out onto the rooftop garden.

A light breeze lifted the broad, notched leaves of the slender palms lining the rooftop, rank on rank, in their shining orichalcum basins. Blue parrots chattered and shrieked among the thick-clustered dates, while quetzals preened their iridescent plumage in the grape vines enshrouding ornamental columns. Nearby, two leopards slept in the shade, spotted heads resting on their paws. One of them opened lazy golden eyes as she walked past, then closed them again and rolled over. A fountain splashed in the centre of the garden, surrounded by tapering stone pillars carved with sun signs and charms.

The cool, clear water was afloat with fresh flowers and citrus fruit, and the elegant shapes of black swans gliding serenely around the pool, necks curled in graceful arcs. Charis approached and took a handful of meal from a nearby amphora. She sat on the wide rim of the fountain pool and scattered some meal as the swans paddled over to scoop it up, jostling one another, their long necks darting like snakes.

Charis chided the swans for their uncouth behaviour as they beat their wings and hissed at one another. She flung the rest of the meal to them and rinsed her hands in the pool. The water was inviting and she considered stripping off her pleated skirt and taking a swim, but contented herself with dangling her feet in the water and dabbing her cheeks with damp hands instead.

She snatched a floating tangerine from the pool and began peeling it, lifting the first golden section to her mouth and closing her eyes as the tartsweet juice tingled on her tongue. The days were long and so much the same, with little to set one day apart from another. This day, at least, there was the bull dance to look forward to and, at twilight, the sacrifice.

Those diversions sparked her life with momentary excitement. Without them, Charis felt she would be driven mad by the unrelenting sameness of life in the palace. Now and again she imagined that she

would like to run away, to disguise herself and travel the tumbled hills, to see life among the simple herdsmen and their families; or perhaps she would take a boat and sail the coasts, visiting tiny, sun-baked fishing villages and learning the rhythm of the sea.

Unfortunately, making good either of those plans would mean taking action, and the only thing more palpable than the boredom she endured was the inertia that enclosed her like a massive fist. The weighty impossibility of changing her life in any but the most insignificant detail ensured that she would not try.

She sighed again and returned to the corridor, pausing to pick a sunshade from a nearby bush, idly plucking the delicate yellow petals and dropping them one by one, like days, fluttering from her hand.

Upon entering the long gallery which connected the great hall with the royal apartments, she saw a tall, dignified figure ahead of her. ‘Annubi!’ she called, flinging the remains of the flower aside. ‘Annubi, wait!’

The man turned stiffly and regarded her, his solemn features pressed into a frown. Annubi was the king’s seer and advisor – as he had been to Avallach’s father, and Avallach’s father’s father. He was also Charis’ special friend and had been ever since Charis could remember; alone of all her father’s retainers, Annubi had always had time for a little girl and her curiosity.

On many a hot and sleepy afternoon, when Bel’s disk warmed the land and everyone else crept off to find a cool place to nap, little Charis had beckoned Annubi from his stuffy cell to stroll among the blue shadows of the columned portico where the seer would tell her stories of long-dead kings, and instruct her in intricacies of the seer’s art. ‘It is a useful skill for a princess,’ he would say, ‘practised discreetly, of course.’

But the little girl had grown, the curiosity had faded. Or, if not, it lay asleep in some hidden corner of her spirit.

‘Ah, Charis,’ he said, momentarily rearranging his frown. ‘It is you.’

‘You need not be so abrupt, Annubi,’ she said, sidling up to him. ‘I will not detain you from your oh-so-important errands. I only wanted to ask you who had come.’ She took his hand in a familiar gesture and they continued along the gallery.

‘Has something stirred you from your lethargy?’

‘Sarcasm is not a royal attribute.’ She mimicked his dour expression. Usually, it made him laugh. Today, however, Annubi scowled at her from under his overgrown eyebrows. ‘Have you been using the stone again without my guidance?’

She laughed. ‘I need no silly stone to see what is before my own eyes. I saw the ships enter the harbour. And the palace is like a tomb, it is so quiet.’

Annubi’s lips curled at the corners. ‘So, at long last you have mastered the first principle: the second sight is no substitute for a sharp eye.’

‘Do you mean,’ Charis asked as they began to walk along the gallery, ‘that the second sight would not have shown me more?’

‘No, child.’ The seer shook his head slowly. ‘But why bother to learn the second sight if you will not use the first?’

‘I thought the Lia Fail saw everything!’

Annubi stopped and turned to her. ‘Not everything, Charis. Only a very little.’ He raised a cautionary finger. ‘If you ever hope to be a good seer, you will never trust the stone to reveal what your own eyes should have seen.’ He paused and shook his head. ‘Why do I tell you these things? You have no real interest.’

‘Be that as it may, you have not answered my question.’

‘The ships are from your uncle. As for your next question – why they have come – can you not guess?’

‘Is Belyn here?’

‘I did not say that.’

‘You say little enough, it seems to me.’

‘Think! What year is this?’

‘What year?’ Charis looked mystified. ‘It is the Year of the Ox.’

‘What year?’

‘Why, 8,556 years since the world began.’

‘Bah!’ The seer made a face. ‘Leave me.’

‘Oh, Annubi!’ Charis tugged his sleeve. ‘Tell me! I do not know what answer you want.’

‘It is the seventh year –’

‘A council year!’

‘A council year, yes, but more precisely, a seventh council.’

The significance eluded Charis momentarily. She gazed at Annubi blankly.

‘Oh, leap into the sea and be done with it!’

‘The seventh seven.’ It came to her then. ‘The Great Council!’ she gasped.

‘Yes, the Great Council. Very astute, Princess,’ he mocked.

‘But why should my uncle come because of the Great Council?’ Charis wondered.

Annubi lifted his thin shoulders in a shrug. ‘Some things are better studied in private before airing in public, I suppose. Belyn and Avallach are close – as close as two brother kings may be. But kings they are, and who can fathom the heart of a king?’

‘Is there trouble between our people and Belyn’s?’

‘I have told you all I know.’

‘Oh, when did you ever part with more than the least little kernel from your vast store?’

The seer smiled wickedly. ‘A little uncertainty keeps everyone awake.’

They had reached the entrance to the great hall. Two palace ushers stood before the huge polished cedar doors. Upon Annubi’s approach, one of them snapped to attention and pulled on a braided cord; the door swung open soundlessly. The seer turned and said, ‘Enough kingcraft for today. Go back to your dreams, Charis.’ He entered the great hall; the door closed and Charis was left outside to wonder what was going on within.

She gazed at the doors for a few moments, then moved off. Annubi treats me like a child, she muttered to herself; everyone does. Nobody takes me seriously. Nobody ever tells me anything. Ah, but I know a way to find out. She turned and looked back at the closed doors and saw a challenge to her ingenuity. Should I? she wondered. By the time she had reached the end of the corridor, she had already made up her mind.

Flitting like a lithe shadow along the darkened mazework of lower rooms and corridors, Charis came at last to a narrow red door. Without

hesitation she put her hands on the door and pushed it open. The room within was lit by a single lamp, hanging from a chain by the door. With practised movements she drew a beeswax taper from a wicker basket, lit it from the flickering lamp, and made her way to the round table in the centre of the room.

On the table, resting on a base of chased gold, sat the Lia Fail, a stone of murky crystal the size and shape of an ostrich egg. Charis placed the taper in a holder, stretched her hands to the egg, and peered into its depths. The veins in the stone were dark, like blue smoke, and turgid, like the silted waters of the River Coran; it was, Annubi liked to say, the smoke of possibility and the fertile thickness of opportunity.

She composed her thoughts as she had been taught, closed her eyes and recited the incantation for seeing – once, and then twice more. Gradually, she felt the stone warm beneath her hands. She opened her eyes to see that the smoke-tinted veins had thinned, becoming transparent wisps that seemed to writhe and dance like a sea mist fading in the sun's first rays.

'Seeing stone,' she addressed it, 'I seek knowledge of what is to be. My spirit is restless. Show me something...' She paused, thinking how best to phrase the request. 'Yes, show me something of travelling.'

She remembered Annubi's injunction always to be discreetly imprecise when addressing the oracular stone. 'The seer comes to the stone to be instructed, not to dictate,' Annubi often said. 'Therefore, out of respect for fate's handmaidens, one makes vague the request so as not to seem presumptuous. Think! What is opportunity but possibility made flesh? Would you shun a bouquet because you sought a single flower? It is always better to allow the stone to be generous.'

The mists within the crystal egg swirled and coalesced into indistinct patterns. Charis studied the shadows, her brow puckered in a frown of concentration, and in a moment defined the shapes: a procession of horses and men making their way through a long, forested avenue; a royal procession it seemed, since it was led by three chariots, each pulled by double matched teams of black horses, each with a black plume on its head.

Hmph! thought Charis, a tedious parade. Not what I had in mind at all. I should have asked about the council.

The shadowy shapes dissolved then and Charis thought the stone would go dim. Instead, the shapes reformed and she saw a road and on the road, his sturdy legs stumping rhythmically, a man unlike any she had ever seen before: a man of frightful mien whose body was covered with fur. His craggy, beard-covered face was blistered from the sun and his filthy hair stood out wildly from his head. This terrible man carried a long staff, swinging it as he went, yellow fire blazing from its top.

This vision faded in its turn and the stone went cold once more. Charis retrieved her candle and carried it back to the door, blew it out and replaced it in the basket. She then pulled the enamelled door open, stepped out into the passageway and slipped quickly away.

King Avallach greeted his brother informally, while seneschals offered bowls of scented water and clean linen to wash away the fatigue of travel. Wine was served and the two took their cups and strolled together in one of the small gardens adjacent to the hall, leaving their envoys to exchange court gossip.

‘You were expected two days ago,’ said Avallach, sipping his wine.

‘I would have come sooner, but I wanted to be certain.’

‘Are you?’

‘I am.’

Avallach frowned and gazed at his younger brother. The two were almost mirror images of one another: both dark men who wore their black hair and beards long, oiled and curled in the traditional way. White teeth shone when they smiled, and their dark eyes flashed with quick wit and, when roused, quicker anger. ‘Then it has begun.’

‘But we may yet cut him off,’ Belyn said. ‘If we brought charges against him in council, before all the others, the High King would have to take action.’

Avallach considered this and said, ‘Forcing the High King to take action against one of his monarchs could bring the world crashing down around our ears.’