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Pendragon

Book 4 of the Pendragon Cycle

Written by Stephen R. Lawhead

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PENDRAGON

book 4 of the PENDRAGON cycle

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prologue

What is there to say of Arthur after all these years?

His birth you know, and something of his end. You know his battles and his triumphs – those, at least, which the story-makers tell. And Aneirin's book is open to all who care to read it. Poor Aneirin, he laboured so hard at his black book. Yet even Aneirin caught but the slightest glimpse of the man he meant to honour. It brought him misery in the end.

Arthur's fame, his very presence, like bright sunlight on clear water, obscured more than it revealed. So, you hear tales and think you know the man. You hear a part and think you know the whole. You hear one of a thousand speculations spun out by dim and dreary dreamers and think you have grasped the truth.

But do you know the highest achievement of Arthur's life? Do you know his sorest trial, when he stood alone on the battle plain and all Britain hung in the balance? Do you know how he laboured to save the Kingdom of Summer from its deadliest foe? No?

Well, I am not surprised. In this ill-born age, much is forgotten that would best be remembered. Men always give over the best of their birthright for the small comfort of the moment; the treasures of the previous age are sold cheap, its wealth trampled underfoot. Alas, this is ever the way of things. And where Arthur is concerned much that should be known remains hidden. Because Arthur himself was hidden in those troubled early years.

But I, Myrddin Emrys, know all the lost and hidden tales, for I was with him from the beginning. And I stood beside him on his darkest day. A day unlike any other in the long history of our race – a day of deceit, and dread, and, oh, great glory. Yes! Great the glory. For on that day Arthur won the name he treasured above all others: Pendragon.

That is a tale worthy of its telling. Lost and forgotten it may be, but if you would hear such a tale, if you would learn the measure of

a man whose name will outlast this sorry age, listen then. Listen and remember. For I tell you the truth, you do not know Arthur until you know the Forgotten War.

ONE

They say Merlin is a magician, an enchanter, a druid of dark lore. If I were and if I were, I would conjure better men than rule this island now! I would bring back those whose very names are charms of power: Cai, Bedwyr, Pelleas, Gwalchavad, Llenlleawg, Gwalcmai, Bors, Rhys, Cador, and others: Gwenhwyvar, Charis, Ygerna. Men and women who made this sea-girt rock the Island of the Mighty.

I need no Seeing Bowl, no black oak water, or fiery embers by which to perceive them. They are ever with me. They are not dead – they only sleep. Hear me! I have but to speak their names aloud and they will awake and arise. Great Light, how long must I wait?

I climb the green hills of the Glass Isle alone, and I wear a different name. Oh, I have so many names: Myrddin Emrys among the Cymry, and Merlin Embries to those in the south; I am Merlinus Ambrosius to the Latin speakers: Merlin the Immortal. I am Ken-ti-Gern to the small, dark Hill Folk of the empty north. But the name I wear now is a name of my own choosing, a simple name, of no consequence to anyone. Thus I guard and protect my power. That is as it should be. One day those who sleep will awaken, and those who guard their slumbers will be revealed. And on that day, the Pendragon will reclaim his long-abandoned throne. So be it!

Oh, I am impatient! It is the curse of my kind. But time will not be hurried. I must content myself with the work given to me: keeping Arthur's sovereignty alive until he returns to take it up once more. Believe me, in this day of fools and thieves that is no easy task.

Not that it ever was. From the very beginning, it took my every skill to preserve the Sovereignty of Britain for the one whose hand was made to hold it. Indeed, in those early years it was no small chore to preserve that small *hand* as well. The petty kings would have roasted the lad alive and served him up on a platter if they had known.

Why? Well you may ask, for the thing has become muddled with time. Hear me then, if you would know: Arthur was Aurelius' son, and Uther's nephew; his mother, Ygerna, was queen to both men. And while Britain had not yet succumbed to the practice of passing kingship father-to-son, like the Saecsenkind, more and more men had begun to choose their lords from the kin of previous kings, be they sons or nephews – all the more if that lord were well liked, fortunate in his dealings, and favoured in battle. Thus, Aurelius and Uther, between them, had bestowed a prodigious legacy on the babe. For never was a sovereign better loved than Aurelius, and never one more battle-lucky than Uther.

So Arthur, yet a babe in arms, required protection from the power-mad dogs who would see in him a threat to their ambitions. I did not know Arthur would be Pendragon then. The way men tell it, I knew from the beginning. But no; I did not fully appreciate what had been given me. Men seldom do, I find. My own deeds and doings occupied me more than his small life, and that is the way of it.

Still, I recall the first faint glimmerings of the splendour that would be. Though it was a long time coming, when it finally broke, that glory blazed with a light so bright I believe it will shine forever.

Hear me now:

The nobles of Britain had been called to council in Londinium upon Uther Pendragon's death to decide who should be High King – and there were plenty who thought to take his place. When it became clear no agreement could be reached – and rather than see a hissing toad like Dunaut or a viper like Morcant seize the throne – I thrust the Sword of Britain into the keystone of the unfinished arch standing in the churchyard.

'You ask for a sign,' I shouted, my voice a roar of fury. 'Here it is: whosoever raises the sword from this stone shall be the trueborn king of all Britain. Until that day, the land will endure such strife as has never been known in the Island of the Mighty to this time, and Britain shall have no king.'

Then Pelleas and I fled the city in disgust. I could no longer abide the scheming duplicity of the small kings, so quit the council and rode

with all haste to find Arthur. There was an urgency to my purpose, certainly. But even then I did not fully comprehend what drove me. I did not think him the future king, only a babe requiring protection – all the more since the High Kingship remained unresolved. Even so, I felt an almost overpowering desire to see the child. The bard's *awen* was on me, and I could but follow where it led.

Later, yes. Understanding would come in its own good time. But when I bade faithful Pelleas saddle the horses that day, I simply said, 'Come, Pelleas, I want to see the child.'

And so we flew from Londinium as if pursued by all those angry lords we had left behind. It was somewhere on the road to Caer Myrddin that I began to wonder if there was more to our speed than a simple wish to see Arthur.

Indeed, something in me had changed. Perhaps it was the strain of contending with the small kings. Or perhaps it happened when I joined the Sword of Britain to the stone. However it was, this I know: the Merlin who had ridden into Londinium so full of hope and anticipation was not the same Merlin who rode out. I felt in my soul that the course of my life had taken an unexpected turn, and that I must now steel myself for a far more subtle warfare than any I had known.

Alia jacta est, said old Caesar, a man who knew a thing or two about prayer and its perversities. For good or ill, the die was cast. So be it!

Leaving Londinium and the yapping of the petty kings behind us, Pelleas and I rode directly to Caer Myrddin. We travelled amicably; the road was good to us, and the journey pleasant. It does not need saying that our arrival on that windswept, wintry morning was a surprise. Loyal Tewdrig, who had faithfully shielded the child at my bidding, was still at the Council of Kings, and we were not expected.

Upon reaching Caer Myrddin we were met by the spectacle of young Arthur and the spitting cats. I saw the child clutching those two half-grown cats, one in each fist, and it seemed to me a sign. 'Behold the Bear of Britain!' I declared, gazing at the chubby child. 'A wayward cub, look at him. Still, he must be taught like any young beast. Our work is before us, Pelleas.'

As we climbed down from our horses, Tewdrig's men came running to welcome us. Caer Myrddin – Maridunum in an elder time – seemed bursting with wealth, and I was pleased to see my old settlement so prosperous. Above the noise of our greeting, the clang of an iron hammer reached my ears and I remarked on it.

'Lord Tewdrig has found a smith,' explained one of the men taking the reins from my hand. 'And all day long we are kept running for him.'

'Better that than running from the Sea Wolves!' declared another.

With their words in my ears, I stared at the child Arthur and listened to the ring of new-made steel in the air. I peered with my golden eyes beyond the thin veil of this worlds-realm into the Otherworld and I saw the shape of a man there, straight and tall, a big man, born to walk the earth as a king. Truly, this was my first premonition of Arthur's future. Believe it!

Presently, I came back to myself, and turned to greet Llawr Eilerw, battlechief and adviser to Lord Tewdrig, who held the caer in his lord's absence.

'Welcome, Myrddin Emrys! Welcome, Pelleas!' Llawr gripped us by the arms in greeting. 'Ah, and good it is to see you both.'

Just then we heard a shriek and turned. A young woman had appeared and was standing over Arthur, scolding him. She slapped his hands to make him release the cats, and the child cried out – in anger, not in pain – and reluctantly let them go. The woman stooped and gathered up the child, saw us watching, blushed, and turned hurriedly away.

'She has the care of the child?' I inquired.

'She has, Lord Emrys.'

'What happened to Enid – the woman I brought?'

Llawr regarded me with a frankly puzzled look. 'That *is* Enid – the very same you brought here. There has been no one else.'

'Remarkable,' I confessed, much surprised. 'I would not have known her. She has changed, and much for the better.'

'I will summon her, if you wish.'

'Later, perhaps,' I replied. 'It is not necessary now.'

'Of course,' said Llawr, 'forgive me. You have ridden far today and you are thirsty. We will raise the welcome bowl between us.'

The beer was dark and frothy good. Tewdrig's hall was warm. The jar went around several times and we talked idly with Llawr and some of the men who had met us. Typically, no one would ask us outright why we had come; that was unthinkable. Although they knew we had attended the council, and must have been near to bursting with curiosity – *Who is the new High King? Who has been chosen? What has happened?*… Nevertheless, they respectfully allowed us to come to it in our own time.

'It has been quiet all year,' Llawr said. 'And now that winter is here, we need not worry. The snow will keep the Sea Wolves home.'

'Indeed!' replied the man sitting next to him. 'We have had more snow than last year. The cattle do not like it, though. It is not easy for them.'

'But favourable for the crops,' put in another.

'If this year's harvest is as plentiful as the last,' observed Llawr, 'we will have surplus grain to trade – even with our new storehouses.'

'I noticed those,' I remarked. 'Four new granaries. Why? Is the caer growing so big?'

'We are growing, it is true,' said one of the men, Ruel by name. 'But Lord Tewdrig wants to begin storing more grain. "The more we save now," says he, "the less we will want later." So he tells us.'

'And I agree with him,' said Llawr sharply. 'Times are uncertain enough. We can no longer live from one harvest to the next and be content. We must have a care for the future.'

'There is wisdom in it,' I told them. 'In these evil days only a fool would trust past benefits to continue.'

The men regarded me warily. Llawr forced a smile and attempted to lighten the mood. 'Evil days? Surely, Emrys, things are not so bad as that. The Saecsens are gone, and the Irish have not raided all year. We have peace and plenty enough – any more and we will become soft and lazy.' The others nodded agreement with their chief.

'Enjoy your peace and plenty, my friends. It is the last you will know in this life.'

The smile faded from Llawr's face. The others looked on aghast. I was to have this effect on men more and more as the years went by.

But it is not possible for the Cymry to remain downcast any great length of time. The mood quickly lightened once more, and I, too, brightened as the talk turned to other matters. When the beer was gone, the others took their leave and we were alone with Llawr.

'Were Lord Tewdrig here,' he said, 'no doubt he would command a feast for you. But' – he spread his hands helplessly – 'I do not know when he will return.'

This was Llawr Eilerw's attempt at guiding the conversation towards the reason for our visit. Now that we were alone, I was happy to oblige. 'I think your lord will not be far behind us,' I told him. 'As you have no doubt guessed, we left the council before the others.'

Llawr only nodded sympathetically – as if he knew all about the contrariness of kings, which no doubt he did.

'I might as well tell you,' I continued, 'since you will learn of it soon enough, and it is no secret in any event: there will be no new High King. The council was deadlocked. Agreement was impossible; no one was chosen.'

'I feared such,' sighed Llawr. 'Evil days, you said. Aye! You were right.' He considered this for a moment, and then asked, 'What will happen now?'

'That remains to be seen,' I replied.

Llawr might have asked, *And have you seen it?* But if the question was in his mind, he refrained. 'Well,' he said stolidly, 'we have lived this long and longer without a High King, we will go back to the way we were before.'

To this, I shook my head gently. 'Nothing,' I whispered, looking past Llawr and out through the doorway – as if into the very heart of the future itself – '*nothing* will be as it was before.'

That night we ate simply and went early to our beds. After breaking fast the next morning, I summoned Enid to me. We waited for her in Tewdrig's chamber, talking softly. 'It is good that we have come here,' I told Pelleas. 'This morning I am content, as I have not been for a long time.'

'I am glad to hear it,' Pelleas replied.

In a moment the young woman Enid appeared. She had brought Arthur with her and stood shyly on the threshold. She held the child close, as if afraid we would steal the infant away from her.

'Closer, Enid,' I coaxed her gently. 'Let me look at the two of you.'

Deer-like, she moved cautiously forward, but only a step or two. I smiled and beckoned her. I can be persuasive when I choose to be: am I not of the Fair Folk, after all? Enid returned my smile and I saw the line of her shoulders relax slightly.

'When I saw you yesterday, I did not recognize you. You are grown a very pretty young woman, Enid,' I told her. She inclined her head shyly. 'And I am pleased to see that you have cared well for the child.'

She nodded, but did not raise her eyes.

'What would you say if I told you he must go away?'

Enid's head snapped up and her eyes sparked fierce fire. 'No! You must not! He belongs here.' She held the child more tightly. Arthur struggled in her embrace. 'I am… this is his home. He would not be happy somewhere else.'

'You love the child so much then?'

'This is his home,' Enid pleaded – as if this were the thing closest to her heart. 'You must not take him away.'

'He has enemies, Enid,' I explained softly. 'Or he soon will have – when they remember him. And they will not now be slow in remembering. He will not be safe here any longer. The more cunning among them will look for me and hope to find him.'

Enid bent her head and said nothing. She held Arthur's cheek against her own. The child tangled a small hand in her soft brown hair.

'I did not bid you here to frighten you,' I said, rising. 'I only wanted to ask after the child.' I stepped close to her and the child reached out a hand to me, taking hold of the edge of my cloak. 'Sit, please; we will speak no more of leaving just now.'

We sat down together and Enid placed Arthur between her feet. The child toddled to Pelleas and stood gazing up at him. Pelleas smiled, reached down to take his hand, and, on a sudden inspiration, thought to test the child. Allowing Arthur to hold two fingers of each hand, Pelleas

slowly raised his hands, pulling Arthur off his feet to dangle above the floor. The infant liked this game and squealed to show his pleasure.

Holding him off the ground, Pelleas started to swing the boy gently from side to side – Arthur did not let go, but started to laugh. Pelleas swung him faster, and Arthur began to giggle. Faster and faster, and Arthur roared with delight. Deliberately, Pelleas pulled one of his hands free. The child held on the more tightly with his remaining hand and laughed the harder. Though we had seen him with the cats the day before, and should have been prepared, still the lad's grip surprised me. The strength in those pudgy little fingers was considerable.

At last, Pelleas lowered Arthur to the floor, to his loud protest: the babe wanted to play the game again! Kneeling before the child, I took one tiny hand in my own, opened it and looked into it as if I were gazing into a Seeing Bowl.

'That hand was made to hold a sword,' Pelleas murmured.

I gazed long into the child's wide, innocent face and merry blue eyes, then turned again to my talk with Enid.

That was all. The briefest of instants, but from that moment, Pelleas never again spoke of Arthur as 'the child', but used his proper name, or some form of it.

'I mean to discuss this with Tewdrig when he comes,' I continued, turning my attention once more to Enid. 'Meanwhile, do not worry over it. I may be mistaken. Who knows? As it is, there is no danger at present.' I offered a smile by way of reassurance. 'You may go now, Enid.'

The young woman rose, caught Arthur up, as he clung to her knees, and walked to the door. 'Enid,' I said, rising and taking a step towards her as she stood half-turned in the doorway, 'you have nothing to fear from me. I will not take Arthur from you. Nor will I allow any harm to come to either of you.'

Enid inclined her head in solemn assent, then turned and hurried away. 'I hope Tewdrig returns soon,' Pelleas said. 'I think he will have something to tell us.'

'You are curious to know what happened at the council after our departure,' I replied.

'In truth, I am,' he admitted with a grin. 'But my curiosity is more than idle, Emrys.'

'Did I suggest otherwise?'

We did not have long to wait. Tewdrig arrived the next day. He was pleased to find us waiting for him, and wasted not a moment summoning his counsellors to his chambers. 'I want my advisers and I want my cup. I have ridden from one end of this island to the other and I am thirsty.' He bade me attend him and went directly to his chamber at the far end of the hall.

Meurig, who had been in Londinium with his father, ordered beer to be brought. The young man muttered, 'You would have thought his hall was afire! We have been in the saddle since before sunrise, Myrddin. I have eaten nothing from that time to this.'

Just then Tewdrig's voice sounded from behind the curtain at the end of the hall. 'Meurig! I am waiting!'

The young man sighed again, and made to hurry away. 'Pelleas will see to the beer,' I told him, sending my companion away with a glance. 'Let us attend Lord Tewdrig.'

'I tell you, Myrddin, you have stuck a sharp stick into the hive this time,' Tewdrig said when he saw me. 'Coledac was so angry he could not speak. Dunaut's face went black with bile, and Morcant – well, I thought the old snake would swell up and burst.' He laughed mirthlessly. 'What I would have given to see that!'

'I have never seen such anger that did not find release in swordblows.' Meurig kneaded the back of his neck with his hand. 'But you had vanished, Myrddin Emrys. What could they do?'

'I tell you the truth,' said Tewdrig in solemn tones, 'had you not left when you did, you would be a dead man now. I swear on Dafyd's altar, your head would be hanging above the gates of Londinium. Dunaut would have insisted.'

'Do they know where I have gone?' I asked.

Tewdrig shook his head. 'I do not see how anyone could know: I did not.'

'Then we still have time,' I replied, mostly to myself, for Pelleas appeared just then with cups and jars.