

# Southward

Part Two of The Compass Quartet

by

Peter Gray

# Visible Sound

Published by Visible Sound

2022

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978 0 9572997 1 9

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## Characters in the story

### *Letocetum (Wall):*

Sowena	thirteen-year-old girl from Tintagel
Arthur	one-year-old boy from Tintagel; son of Uther Pendragon and Ygraine
Marcan	a Setantii slave; now at Letocetum
Ector	ruler at Letocetum
Sefin	wife to Ector; from Aquae Arnemetiae
Caius	five-year-old son to Sefin and Ector
Aemilia	twelve-year-old girl of Letocetum
Saen	soldier; husband to Nuamh
Nuamh	woman of Letocetum
Riestor	soldier
Weaven	soldier – an older man
Etta	Riestor's grandmother; watches over the children of Letocetum
Lilless	keeps hens and geese
Borsarius	Ector's general
Theoran	woman with skills in healing; known to Merlin

### *Aquae Arnemetiae (Buxton):*

Coel	Lord of Aquae Arnemetiae; brother of Sefin
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### *Derbentio (Derby):*

Loric	master trader
Corin	potter; son of Saen and Nuamh
Moirá	works with Corin
Wulfric	Saxon traveller
Basor	boatman
Yann	boatman

### *Settlement on the Soar:*

Loria	cousin of Loric
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*Ratae (Leicester):*

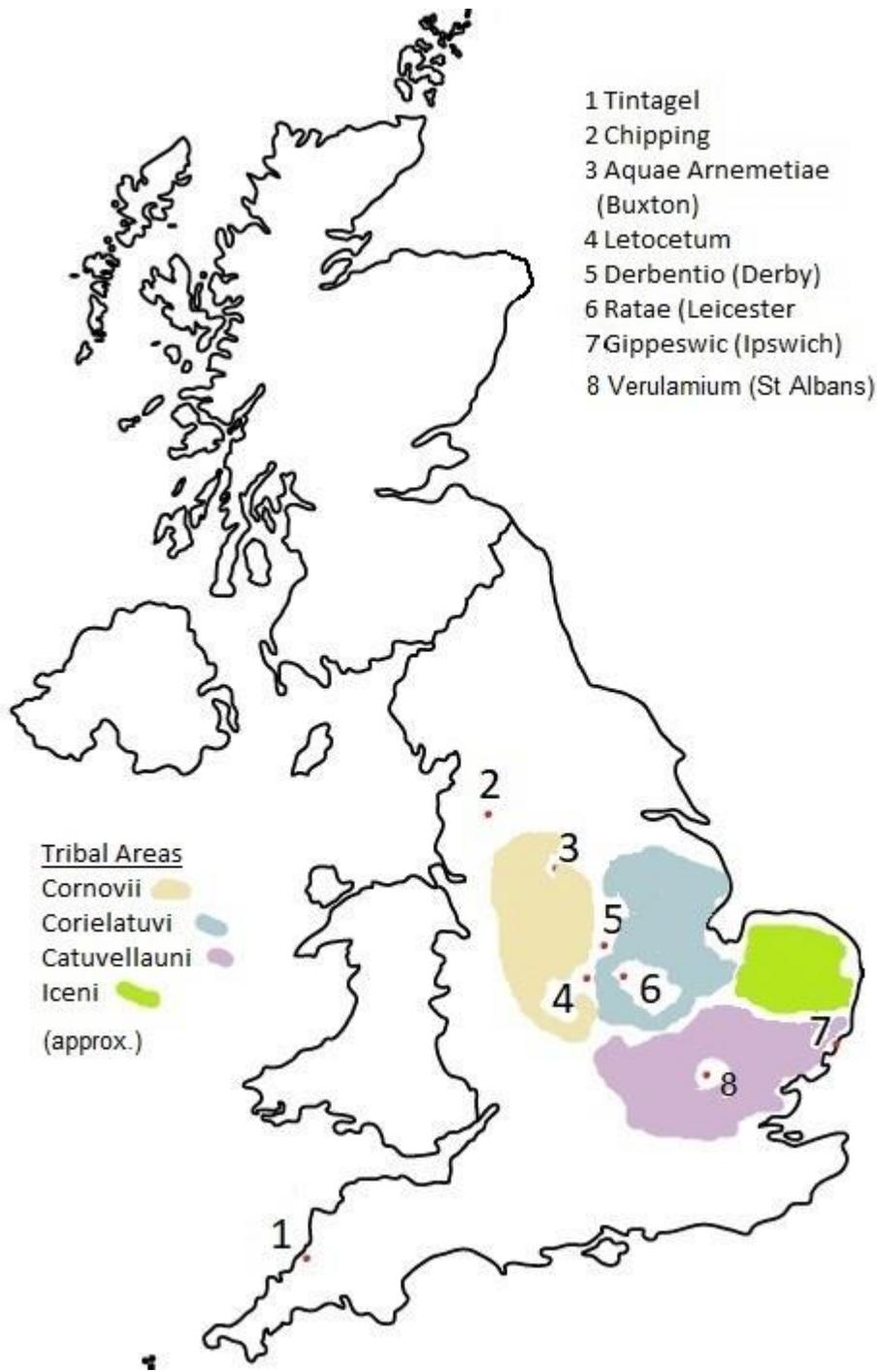
Lord Durstan	lord of Ratae
Aletia	wife to Durstan
Volisio	his son
Batreus	a servant

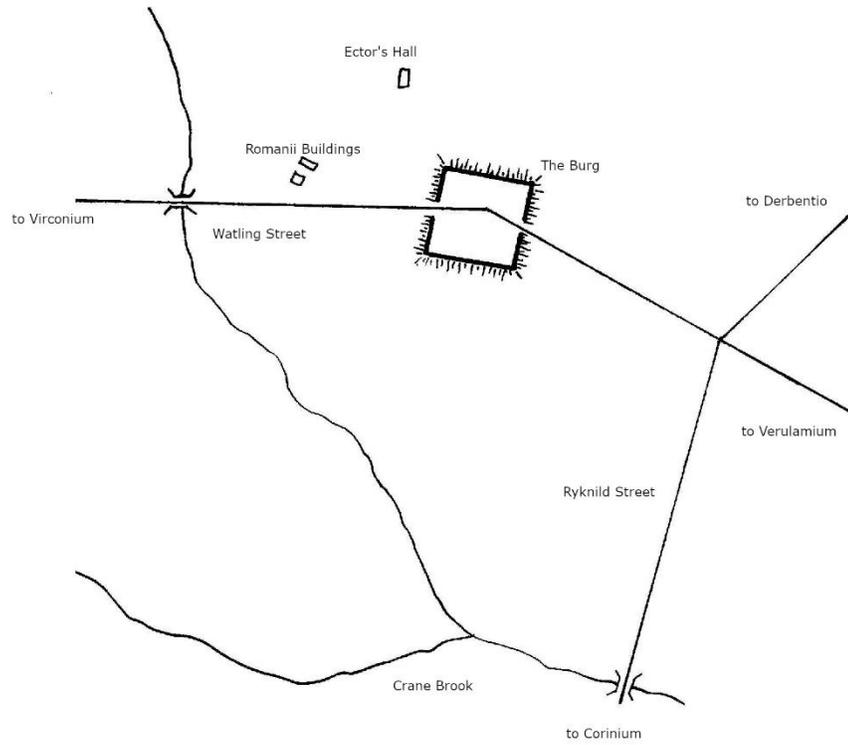
*Viroconium (Wroxter):*

Roxian	lord of Virconium
Leria & Treanda	traders from Virconium

*Tintagel:*

Ygraine	Arthur's mother; Queen of Pendragon
Jowan	father to Sowena
Owen	commander of the guard
Kenan	page to Ygraine
Kensa	maid to Ygraine





The area around Wall, also known as Letocetum.

*Arise, sun in the west  
Rise from a dragon  
Threads pull together  
Until there is peace*

## 1 Letocetum

Sowena woke to the cold light of another cold day. It was the fifth day of January and today she was thirteen years old. All around her she could hear the sounds of the household awakening. The first meal of the day would soon be served, and she knew she really should be there.

Last year on Sowena's birthday her father had served honey cakes, dried berries and soft cheese. He'd also presented her with a warm fur wrap to keep her warm in bed through the rest of the winter. Her mother had died seven years before, and so, in the afternoon of that bright day, they had walked to the field where her mother's ashes had been buried and in her memory they had scattered dried flowers on the ground.

"Wake up, Sowena," called Aemilia. "The food is ready."

I *am* awake, thought Sowena. But it's my birthday.

"There's something special today," continued Aemilia. "Come on!"

Aemilia was twelve years old and lived in the hall at Letocetum. She had been warm and friendly and had helped Sowena settle into this strange new home.

Sowena was intrigued, so she slipped from under the blankets. She dressed quickly in her warmest clothes and padded along the passageway to the main hall.

Surprisingly for a winter morning, the hall blazed with light. Many lamps had been lit and the hall was full of people. Sowena gaped in astonishment.

Ector rose from his place at the head table and lifted his drinking bowl in salute. "Greetings and welcome, Sowena," he called out.

Everyone else rose from their places and echoed Ector's cry. Sefin, his wife, came forward to Sowena and led her to her place at the table. "This is a special day for you, Sowena; thirteen years since you were born and one hundred days since we first met you. Come and take your place with us."

Sowena shook her head in bemusement, trying to make sense of what was happening.

Ector was still standing. "I greet you this morning, Sowena, and welcome you to our family. From this day forth you shall be a daughter of ours. We will love, protect, and care for you in our home. Happy birthday to you, my daughter."

*It was towards the end of September and the weather had turned cold. The horses ambled gently along under trees whose leaves were turning from green to the colours of autumn.*

*Sowena looked around, brushing her pale hair from her face. Despite the relaxed pace of their travelling, she felt a tension in the air - a sense of anticipation. For most of the group this was a journey back home. Ector and his wife Sefin were leading their entourage south to Ector's stronghold.*

*Sowena's home was much further away than that. She had been born in Tintagel, in the land of the Noble House of Pendragon. Only a few days ago she had been sailing her father's boat across the sunny waters below the castle. Now she was carrying Arthur, only ten months old, son of Uther Pendragon and Ygraine, to a new home.*

*"I think you'll like Letocetum," said Ector. He had urged his tall dark horse alongside hers. "We have many fine buildings that will be warm in the winter. The land around is rich and the ash woods nearby are full of game."*

*Ector's words were meant kindly and Sowena knew that. Still, it did not stop her yearning for home, her father and the sea. If anything, what Ector said made the feeling worse and she blurted out "But is it near the sea? Will I be able to sail?" She hung her head, regretting she had spoken in such a way to Ector.*

*The image of the sea re-awoke in her mind memories of her journey from Tintagel. She had been snatched away by Merlin to help him carry the young Arthur to safety - safe from the plague that was sweeping into the lands of Pendragon. It had claimed the life of Uther. Sowena thought fiercely but sadly of Jowan, her own father. Was he still alive? Had the plague taken him, or had he suffered at the hands of Ygraine in punishment for Sowena's flight?*

*There was noise from up ahead. A group of Ector's riders came out of the woods to the left. They were carrying two deer between them. Sowena could make out the figure of Marcan amongst them. He was laughing and Sowena guessed that he had proved his hunting skills again.*

*Marcan galloped up alongside Sowena and Ector. "We have food. Many animals near here."*

*Ector nodded. "Thank you, Marcan. We need to stop soon for our midday break. I'll give the order." Ector spurred his horse and rode up to where Borsarius, Ector's general, was inspecting the returning hunters.*

*"You like deer? I killed it."*

*Marcan's phrases were stilted. He's learning his fourth language, marvelled Sowena. Taken as a young child, he'd had to learn the tongue of his captors. On their journey north, Merlin and Sowena had stopped to obtain provisions at the coastal village where Marcan was enslaved. A sudden attack caused them to flee and Marcan had escaped with them. In the boat sailing north Sowena had begun to teach him her language. Now he was picking up the speech of Ector's people.*

*"Yes, I do," said Sowena. "Well done."*

*Marcan tossed his head proudly. "We stop now."*

*"I think we will. I wonder how much further it is to Ector's lands."*

*Marcan shrugged in reply. Marcan is already at home with these people, thought Sowena, and she watched as, at a call from one of the hunters, he returned to the other men.*

*Sowena wished she had found it as easy as Marcan had to accept this change in her life. She turned her own horse towards the rear of the party and sought out Sefin. I can talk to her, she thought.*

*However, Sefin was talking to one of the other riders when Sowena found her and so there was nothing to do but fall in behind them and wait. Then the order to halt came and even in the bustle of the midday meal she found herself alone.*

*Alone apart from Arthur, of course. Slung comfortably across her chest and lulled by the gentle movement of the horse, Arthur was sleeping peacefully. It seemed accepted by all that he was her responsibility. Sowena knew that these were kind people, but they had their own lives to lead. She and Marcan had been taken with them at Merlin's bidding. Merlin was too ill to travel.*

*So Sowena had left Merlin at Chipping, taken Arthur, and gone with Ector. The thought of the Dragon Pendant which she carried always close to her reminded her that she had a further responsibility. This boy, whom she had nursed through so many dangers, was to be a king; and, according to Merlin, not just a king of Pendragon, but king of Britannia.*

*At this moment Sowena felt very strongly this was a responsibility that a twelve-year-old should not have to bear.*

*The meal over, the party remounted and resumed their journey. As the riders got underway, however, Sefin offered to carry Arthur. Sowena*

*accepted gladly and passed Arthur up to her. He had fed well and gurgled happily as Sefin's strong arms encircled him. With relief Sowena managed to stay by Sefin's side as they set off.*

*"Sefin, where do you and Ector live?" she asked.*

*Sefin turned and smiled at her. "It is called Letocetum, in the lands of the Corieltauvi. I don't suppose you have heard of it before."*

*"No, I haven't. Is it a big place?" went on Sowena.*

*"It's not a large realm," replied Sefin. "But it's good land. Crops grow well and there are forests in which to hunt. This year, however, the harvest has not been as good as usual, but I hope we will have enough. Two of the Romani roads that cross Britannia meet at Ector's stronghold. Many people come to the crossroads on Ector's land to trade with others."*

*"How long will it take us to get there?"*

*"It is five or six days' ride. But we will take longer because we go to my family's home first. It is called Aquae Arnemetiae, and it is on the way. We will rest some time there."*

*"You mean you left home to live with Ector. You left your family?" Sowena warmed even more to the tall woman and felt a link between them.*

*"Yes," said Sefin. "The marriage was arranged between Ector and my father. I thought I would never get used to the idea, but Ector is a good man, and we live well."*

*Sowena was about to speak but Sefin continued, "Yes, I do miss my family - my brother most of all. But I have made a new home at Letocetum. I hope you will do so as well." Leaving Sowena to ponder these words Sefin trotted forward to catch up with Ector.*

The noise of everyone cheering bewildered Sowena and brought her back to the present. Daughter? I'm not *your* daughter, she thought. Jowan is my father, and he always will be.

Then further thoughts crowded into Sowena's head. I don't even know if he is still alive. I can't go home. Perhaps I should accept that this is where I live now.

In her confusion she turned to look for Aemilia and there she was. Sowena moved towards her, but Sefin was in front of her again and took her hand. The voices subsided and Sefin pressed something small and cold into Sowena's hands. "Ector wishes you to have this present on your birthday."

Sowena looked down and saw a small, enamelled brooch in the shape of a bird. It had blue wings, and its back was a deep red. The bird was a duck with a smoothly curved bill. It was cunningly made and Sowena could not help smiling. It was not obviously beautiful to look at, but it had a charm about it that appealed to her.

She bowed carefully to Ector who was watching her intently. Then, without ceremony, she sat down at her place. The emotion of the occasion overwhelmed her, and she wished more than anything to be out of everyone's sight for a moment.

The meal continued around Sowena and here was Aemilia slipping into a seat beside her. "Are you happy?" she asked.

Sowena looked blankly at her and then smiled. "Oh, I'm glad you're here, Aemilia."

"Happy birthday. Let me have a look at that brooch."

Sowena passed it to Aemilia and said, "It's charming, isn't it?"

"Yes. I like the gold edging to its wings. And its funny turned-up beak!"

Sowena nodded.

Aemilia chatted on, "And Ector and Sefin have adopted you as their daughter. Isn't that kind of them? You must be happy."

#### 4

*The September afternoon wore into evening, and it became colder. Sowena was glad of the cloak she had been given by Sefin. It was adult-sized and although it hung awkwardly from her narrow shoulders it kept her warm. There are no other young girls in the party, she thought, so I can't share any clothes with them. I'm wearing all the clothes I own. In fact, everything I own is with me on this horse.*

*The party stopped for the night. They had halted on the outskirts of a settlement with ruined walls around it. Ector, Borsarius and a few others had ridden inside the walls while everybody else set about making camp.*

*A river nearby provided water and Sowena gazed longingly at the boats tied up along the shore. She guessed that downstream the river would lead to the sea that she and Merlin had crossed. She knew that they had sailed*

*almost due north for the whole of their journey. But even with that knowledge she could not plan a route back to Tintagel. And even if she could, how was she to obtain a boat? She also wondered what would happen to her if she did return home. What kind of reception would she receive from Ygraine, even if she did bring Arthur back to his mother?*

*Strangely, these thoughts helped Sowena to feel stronger about her circumstances. She clearly had no hope of changing her fortune at present and she was now under the protection of a family that was obviously important and powerful. Merlin must have known what he was doing to send her away with Ector and Sefin.*

*Sowena knew she could work hard to earn her keep. No matter how rich and powerful her protectors, Sowena knew that she could not expect an easy life and she would have to pay her way. Work did not worry Sowena. She had helped her father for as long as she could remember and there was no harder life than that of a fisherman. But Sowena did wonder what she would have to do - it was all so different. She would have to see what happened.*

*In the morning they rode on again - this time turning towards the eastern hills that had marched south with them ever since they left Chipping. The fresh day brought new hope to Sowena, and she looked out across the land rising ahead of them.*

5

“Yes, I am happy,” replied Sowena, in answer to Aemilia’s question. “It’s just that all this is rather overwhelming.”

“Ector’s adopted you, Sowena. You’re part of his family now,” said Aemilia. She helped herself to some bread and pushed the basket towards Sowena.

“Both Ector and Sefin have been very kind to me,” Sowena went on. “And to Arthur as well. He’s only a year old and I guess he will never remember his mother and father.”

Aemilia took a sip from her beaker. “Perhaps Ector will adopt Arthur as well. Although...” she paused “...he does already have a son.”

Sowena stared.

“Yes. That means Caius is your brother,” said Aemilia with wide eyes. “Your brother!”

“I suppose he is,” replied Sowena thoughtfully. “I’ve never had a brother. Well, he’s only six. So that means I’m the eldest. He’ll have to do what I say.”

After they had finished their meal Sowena and Aemilia went out to the courtyard. The cold day had brightened a little but there was still mist covering the river valley to the south. They made their way towards a group of women who were carding flax fibres ready for spinning. Sefin was with them.

“Good morning, Aemilia,” said Sefin. “Sowena, as it is your birthday you need not work today. Why don’t you take Aemilia down to the burg and see what Marcan is doing?”

“Thank you, Sefin,” replied Sowena gratefully. “I didn’t see him at the meal, and I wondered where he was.”

Carding the flax was hard work. Using the toothed combs to straighten out the flax so it could be spun evenly had strengthened Sowena’s wrists but nevertheless she was glad to be excused. With Aemilia at her side, she set off through the buildings that surrounded Ector’s hall, down the hill to the burg.

“What do you think Marcan will be doing?” asked Aemilia.

“Well, I suppose he could be hunting. It’s what he loves to do most.”

“I hope they catch something today,” Aemilia went on. “We don’t have much meat left at all.”

They passed the last house and looked down the hill to the burg. It was a large area surrounded by earthen walls which were faced with stone. The Romanii road ran straight through the burg and on either side of the road were many buildings. Sowena knew that they were mostly for storage and that they were mostly empty. She pulled her blue robe closer and hoped that Marcan would be lucky in the hunt.

## 6

*As they left the riverside settlement behind them the ground rose and soon rain began to fall. It rained on and off all day. The group spent a wet night only partially sheltered by some low-growing trees. Even though they were only a day’s journey from Aquae Arnemetiae, as usual guards were posted throughout the dark hours.*

*No one was dry as, on the next day, they pushed deeper into the hills, but Sefin, riding beside Sowena, seemed cheerful. “We will reach my family’s settlement before nightfall,” she said.*

*As the day wore on the company took a track that ran up the side of a long hill and then dipped down into a new valley. The rain let up and Sowena saw buildings ahead. By the last of the sunlight failing in the west they came to a large stone hall. A cluster of other buildings surrounded the hall but*

*none of them approached it in size. There was an upper floor and a large, paved area at the front.*

*Light spilled from the doorway, well wrapped figures led their horses to shelter, and all the travellers were ushered inside.*

*A huge, bearded man came forward and embraced Sefin. "Welcome, sister," he cried. "We had word of your coming."*

*"I'm glad to see you again, Coel," said Sefin joyfully. "You look well."*

*Coel bowed to Ector. "It is good to see you again, Ector. I look forward to hearing the news from the Chipe."*

*Ector nodded and would have spoken but Coel continued, "Come, dry yourselves and then we will eat. Talking can wait."*

*Sefin took Sowena upstairs and found for her some of the clothes she had worn when she was a child. It was a relief for Sowena to change out of the clothes she had been wearing for so many days. The blue robe was soft and warm. Sowena thanked Sefin.*

*"I'm surprised to find them here after all these years," said Sefin. "My sister usually had all the things that I grew out of."*

*"Is your sister here?" asked Sowena.*

*"No. She married a man from a tribe in the east. I saw her a few times after that, but she died ten years ago. My brother Coel still lives here, and it was he who welcomed us."*

*Soon they were all seated at tables in the main hall, with food and drink in front of them. As no-one was paying her any attention, Sowena was able to look around.*

*She was close enough to Ector and Sefin to hear what they were saying. "The Chipe made many decisions, Coel," said Ector. "We sent a force to destroy a Setantii camp."*

*"Was the attack a success?"*

*"Some of our soldiers were killed, but the village was burned, and their warriors were scattered into the marshes. And we found something, or rather, someone very special while we were there." Ector turned and indicated Sowena.*

*Coel nodded slowly to Sowena as Ector went on. "Sowena is from the south and she was accompanied by Merlin."*

*"Merlin?" Coel's eyebrows were raised. "Where is he now?"*

*"He was wounded on our journey," said Sowena, "and is too ill to travel. But I hope he will follow us soon."*

*"Indeed, he had guided this child, and two others. But he was very weak by the time we found them," said Ector, looking straight at Sowena. She wondered if she should have spoken without being invited to join the conversation, but Ector's face was not stern and so she went on.*

*"Do you know Merlin?" she asked Coel directly.*

*"I met him once when he came to the sanctuary here, perhaps twenty, maybe thirty years ago. I remember it was from him I heard the news that the Romanii would leave Britannia." Coel smiled as he went on, "They did not leave us. We threw them out."*

*Ector grunted. "Well, there was too much trouble in their homelands for them to stay. Their soldiers are missed, and Britannia is weaker for their going."*

*"We are stronger because we now know we must stand on our own feet," countered Coel. "That is, we will be stronger if we stand together. There are still divisions between people and tribes that will be our downfall. We need someone to lead us all."*

*"Hmm. The Chipe did not make any decisions on that matter."*

*Sowena let the discussion continue while she pondered what she had heard. Merlin was obviously even more important than she had ever realised. Had he travelled the whole kingdom? Coel wanted a leader for Britannia, and sitting not far from him, on the knee of one of his own serving women, was a child that Merlin believed would be that leader. Had Merlin said anything to Ector? And what did Coel mean when he mentioned a sanctuary?*

*Sowena found out the answer to her last question the next morning. At the heart of Aquae Arnemetiae was a spring where water gushed from the earth. Amidst a grove of ash trees was a curved rock face and from a long crack water bubbled down into a large carved basin.*

*Many of Ector's party had gathered around. There was an air of solemnity about them. Some stood with heads bowed while others were kneeling.*

*Occasionally one would rise and walk towards the water. One man bent forward and dropped a small coin into the depths. Another dipped a shell into the waters and drank. This must be the sanctuary that Coel had mentioned.*

*“This spring is special,” said Sefin. “It has never failed. It was here before the Romanii came. People travel from all around this area and make offerings to the goddess of the grove.”*

*“What do they make offerings for?” asked Sowena.*

*“Because the spring here is so constant, people hope that the goddess will be a constant support for them,” replied Sefin. “They ask for a good harvest, or for health, or maybe for the safe return of a traveller.”*

*Sefin looked around. She realised that most of Ector’s soldiers were there. Ector himself, however, stood apart, and Sowena wondered what he might be thinking. He must be hoping for a swift return to his home, she thought. This place is Sefin’s home, but Ector’s lands are still far to the south.*

7

Despite the cold of the morning there was a great bustle of activity in the burg. It appeared that a delivery of pottery had come up from Manduessedum. The thick, dark earthen pots were being taken from the large ox-drawn wagons and loaded onto smaller carts which had come down from the north and west.

Ector was there amidst a crowd of loudly arguing traders and Sowena could see that several of the pots were broken.

“Look at all those broken pots,” said Aemilia. “They will have broken because the road is so bad. It needs repairing.”

“Yes, but who would want to work in this weather?” said Sowena.

“Someone will have to pay for those pots. If they can’t make a trade there’s no point bringing them all this way. And if people don’t come here to trade, what will happen to us? I hope Ector can sort out the dispute and get a good fee from them.”

Sowena looked sideways at Aemilia. She was not one of Ector’s family, but she lived in his household. Her parents were both dead. Aemilia’s mother had died several years ago but her father had been a soldier in Ector’s guard. He had been killed in the attack on the Setantii camp in September.

On his return Ector had taken the newly orphaned Aemilia into his household. It had been a kind act by Ector and Sowena had found comfort in Aemilia's company as she tried to settle into this new home.

Initially Sowena and Aemilia had helped to look after the group of young children who were part of Ector's household. That group included Caius and several others. Arthur was happy to have other children around him. He'd begun to walk a little and Aemilia seemed to be a favourite of his. Sowena dealt with the inevitable questions by saying, simply, that he was not her child, nor was he related to her. She tried to imply that she and Arthur had been rescued by Merlin from the plague and that she did not expect ever to go home.

To Aemilia, Sowena had said that Merlin asked her to help him get Arthur to safety and she tried to give the impression that their flight was one of panic. She had mentioned her father, but, because Aemilia had just lost hers, Sowena had not been forced to divulge too much of her background.

Looking after the young children had been comforting and Sowena had been glad of this. As the months had passed and Sowena had become more settled, she and Aemilia had been given other household work to do. That meant that she saw less of Arthur, but she knew he was safe and well cared for.

Within the walls of the Burg were several buildings used to store food and goods that were to be traded. There were also workshops where metal and even glass were produced.

The burg was also the garrison for Ector's soldiers, and, in an open space nearby, Sowena saw that Borsarius, Ector's general, was putting some of the men through their paces. There was no sign of Marcan.

Suddenly Sowena felt a hand on her shoulder, and she turned round quickly. Marcan smiled at her.

"Happy birthday, Sowena," he said.

"Thank you, Marcan. What have you been doing? I didn't see you in the hall this morning."

"We were out early. Hunting in the woods to the north." Marcan's smile had gone.

"Did you catch anything?" asked Aemilia.

"No, we caught nothing. There's nothing there."

Sowena sighed. If a hunter as good as Marcan had failed it meant that there probably wasn't any game to be had.

"Marcan," said Aemilia. "Did you hear what Ector has done for Sowena?"

"Yes. I heard when I returned this morning. Ector thinks well of you, Sowena."

Sowena did not reply. She was unsure about Ector's decision to adopt her. He'd done it without even asking her. She knew that it was unlikely that she would ever see her home in Tintagel again, but Ector's action just seemed to make the knowledge harder to bear.

"Ector took me into his household when my father was killed," Aemilia went on. "But, Marcan, you have to live with the soldiers here in the burg. Why wouldn't Ector take you in?"

Marcan shrugged and Sowena, unsettled by her thoughts of home, said "Marcan has always been moving homes."

"What do you mean?" asked Aemilia. "I thought he came from Chipping with you."

"But he came *to* Chipping when I sailed Merlin and Arthur there. Neither of us comes from Chipping," said Sowena. "I was sailing Merlin and Arthur and Marcan joined us on our journey north. We stopped at a village to pick up supplies."

"I was a slave boy in that village, and I escaped with Sowena and Merlin. Before that I was taken from my home in a raid."

"So where is your real home then? Where is your family?" wondered Aemilia.

"I am a Setantii," said Marcan simply.

"A Setantii!" Aemilia's face was pale. "The Setantii killed my father!"

"Marcan was only a small child when he was captured," said Sowena quickly. "And during the battle in the camp he saved my life."

Sowena looked to Marcan for him to say something, but he stood there silent. There was a look of puzzlement in his eyes.

Aemilia ignored Sowena. "You come from the Setantii tribe," she said to Marcan. "Now I know why Ector will not have you in his household. And I'm glad!"

Aemilia wheeled away from Marcan. "Stay away from me!" she yelled and began running back up the hill.

"Aemilia, come back!" Sowena took two steps after her and then halted. "He was only a child..."

Aemilia did not stop. Sowena turned on Marcan. "Why did you say that?"

"I know where I came from," he said. "And I know where I am now." There was no justice in Aemilia's outburst, but Marcan seemed to be unaffected by it. "I hope people will accept me here. I do not fear what people say."

"Nor do I!" shouted Sowena, angry despite herself. "But at least my father *might* be alive. Aemilia knows she will *never* see her father again."

"I cannot even remember my father, or my mother."

“I know, I know,” stammered Sowena. “But I thought... Maybe... Haven’t you got used to that? Aemilia’s father died only last year.”

Marcan made no answer. He turned and walked away, leaving Sowena alone.

“Marcan, I’m sorry. We’re friends, aren’t we? All three of us. And we all miss our families.”

Sowena felt her birthday was ruined. She couldn’t choose between Marcan and Aemilia. She needed them both.

Knowing she had been unkind to speak of Marcan’s family like that, and angry with herself for not having told Aemilia about Marcan before, Sowena walked out of the far gate of the burg and on along the road.

Even though it had been clear on the hillside there was mist in the valley below the burg. Sowena stopped when she reached the crossroads and looked around. In the autumn she had come here with Aemilia and there had sometimes been traders hoping for business from those using the roads. In the winter it was quiet and today there was not even any activity around the small buildings of the metal workers. To the south, where the mist lay thicker, a thin column of smoke rose up through the still air.

With the argument still running in her head, Sowena took the road south and wandered past fields and clumps of leafless trees. Eventually she came to where the road crossed a small brook.

On a whim, she turned off the road to walk upstream.

There was a faint path on the north bank of the brook and after a while this became fringed with tall reeds. The reeds reminded her of when she and Marcan had crept towards the Setantii camp, hoping to recover the Pendragon Pendant. On that day a wind had stirred the reeds into a soft whispering. Today all was still and not even a bird called. Sowena had been told that in the summer great birds called cranes lived in the valley. Now it was the heart of winter and the misty valley seemed lifeless. The only movement was the slow flowing water beside her.

Then, from ahead, she heard a murmur of voices. Pushing along the path she came to an open area. A low wooden platform, supported by stakes, had been built out into a wide pool. A score of people were standing and talking quietly while on the platform a man was placing a sword into the water.

Sowena was immediately reminded of the gathering she had witnessed at the sanctuary in Aquae Arnemetiae. She felt that at the heart of this ceremony was an act of offering. She recognised the man putting the sword into the water as Weaven, one of Ector’s soldiers. Around the open space were men and women from Letocetum. Some turned to face Sowena, and as they did a woman called Lillless came towards her.

“Hello, Sowena. Happy birthday,” she said. “What brings you here?” Lillless lived near the hall, keeping hens and geese, and working in the fields.

"I... I'm just walking," said Sowena. She understood the solemnity of what she was witnessing and was anxious that her presence might be unwelcome. How would they react to her being there? Was this ceremony supposed to be secret?

Lilless' voice was calm and unthreatening. "You're not intruding. We are asking for help to survive the winter. Weaven fought at the Setantii camp and survived. He has offered a sword so that his family and friends might survive as well."

Sowena thought back to the time her mother had died. With Jowan she had laid dried flowers at the grave and hoped that together they would be able to manage. This must be a similar ceremony.

"Many of us living in Letocetum are of the Cornovii tribe," said Lilless. "All the lands to the west of here are filled with our people. Even though the Romani ruled Britannia for hundreds of years we kept to our own ways. And now, in difficult times, we ask for help."

Sowena thought of Marcan's fruitless attempt to hunt. "I know the hunters found no game this morning," said Sowena.

"This winter is very hard and when things go wrong some people look around to see who is to blame."

"How can anyone be blamed for a hard winter?"

"Well, there are dangers all around, Sowena."

Lilless lifted her head and Sowena, too, heard a clinking sound. The people in the clearing all looked back towards the path as a grey-haired man led his horse forward. It was Ector. All voices stopped and Sowena felt the silence fill the valley.

Although Sowena had spent some months at Letocetum a thought suddenly struck her. We are not all the same here.

"Sowena, I'm glad to find you. Marcan said you had walked south, and I wanted to make sure you had not gone astray. Shall we go back to the hall?"

Sowena would have liked to spend more time with Lilless and the others here. It was peaceful and it seemed as though they were doing something which might help the whole settlement. She wanted to think about how she could bring Marcan and Aemilia back together after what had happened earlier. Now Ector was asking her to come straight home, and she felt she was being forced to make a decision – one for which she was not ready. "Yes, Ector, I will come with you."

As they walked back along the stream to the road Ector said "You need to be careful, Sowena. Although you are not far from the hall there may be danger here. Wild animals sometimes come from the forests and the road itself can bring strangers."

"Back there I was with people I know," said Sowena. "I didn't feel afraid."

"Yes, Sowena, but the people who make offerings there follow a very old tradition. That tradition is not one to which my family holds."

The feeling that she had been told off, and by this man who had adopted her without asking, made Sowena resentful. She asked, "How do *you* think we will get through this hard winter?"

"It *is* a hard winter, Sowena, and I have seen many winters in my time. This is one of the worst, but I think it is harder here than perhaps you were used to in your southern land."

"I don't remember being as cold as this for so long," admitted Sowena. "What will happen?"

"We have some stores and wealth that we have not yet used, and the burg is a place the traders still use. We need the fees we can charge when people sell their goods at Letocetum and when they store their goods with us. Since the Romanii left it has become more difficult to maintain the trading on which we depend."

Sowena thought of all the buildings within the burg. Even during winter, it was a busy place.

"Letocetum is at a crossroads, Sowena. The roads run north, south, east and west and we are at the centre of the realm. Now the Romanii no longer rule this land, things are changing rapidly." He looked intently at Sowena. "These are weighty matters for us to consider. They affect our family's future."

He breathed deeply and went on slowly, as though the hardest subject was still to be raised. "As well as their organisation, the Romanii brought to this land a belief in one god who would save everyone. I share that belief and would not have it threatened."

Now Sowena realised that Ector's talk was going into very deep waters. "I'm telling you these things because they affect the future of our family. You are part of our family, Sowena. You are our eldest child."

Sowena was silent. She had not expected to hear Ector speak this way. She had already learned how important trade was to Letocetum but what struck her most was that Ector seemed almost antagonistic towards the people she had just seen. She remembered Sefin talking about the sanctuary at Aquae Arnemetiae. Sefin seemed to think that the offerings made there might not be in vain.

From what he had just said, thought Sowena, Ector did not share that view.

Ector and Sowena had reached the crossroads and were turning towards the burg when they heard the shouting. Two men were running from the walled enclosure, down towards them.

"Dogs! Wolves!" shouted one of them as they stumbled to a halt. Ector was already up on his horse.

“Stay with these two, Sowena!” He raced away.

Sowena turned urgently to the men. “What happened?”

“They just came out of the woods. Lots of wild dogs and wolves. A huge pack!”

Ignoring Ector’s order, Sowena turned to run back towards Letocetum. No wonder the hunters had not had any luck this morning. The hard winter must be pushing wild animals made desperate by hunger south into these lands.

She passed two carts that had been abandoned along the road. The centre of the burg should have been busy at this time of day but now it was eerily quiet. Every door was shut. The shouting was coming from uphill, near the hall. She ran on.

Soon she met a small group of soldiers. With drawn weapons they were searching through the bushes near the hall. Sowena recognised two of the men – soldiers from Ector’s personal guard.

“Is everyone all right?” panted Sowena.

“Hello, Sowena,” said Riestor. “It’s good to see you safe. Yes, the dogs have been driven off. And no one was hurt.”

Sowena’s heart began to slow down.

“They took several geese,” Riestor went on. “And hens.”

“They must have been desperate,” added Saen. “There’s hardly any eating on those birds.”

“I don’t know why we’re looking here,” Riestor grumbled. “The dogs will have long gone. Someone should go and tell the people in the burg.”

As if in response to his comment, a horseman came trotting past, down the hill.

Sowena thanked the two men and headed up to the hall. I must find Arthur, she thought. In front of the main doors, she found Ector and Sefin. In Sefin’s hand was a bloodied sword.

“Sowena,” called Ector. “I’m sorry I had to leave you in a hurry. You can see I was not actually needed here.” He laughed and pointed to Sefin’s sword. He seemed at ease, but Sowena remembered the panic of a few minutes earlier.

“Where is Arthur?” Sowena asked Sefin.

“He’s inside, with Caius and the other children. They were frightened but not hurt.”

Sowena entered the hall and found the children huddled round the door to the kitchen, where they were being given some warm bread. Arthur was at the back of the crowd,

and he turned to her as she called. He toddled a few steps towards her, and she caught him up as he stumbled over the floor.

“Artu! You’re safe!” She hugged him close. Arthur was her one link with home.

Arthur struggled free of her embrace. “Dogs, ‘Wena. Dogs bark.”

“I know, Arthur. I heard them.” Well, I heard the shouting, she thought. She wanted to know more about what had happened. “Caius, were you there?”

Caius, Arthur, and the other young children of the burg were watched over by Riestor’s grandmother Etta – the oldest woman in Letocetum – as they played together in and around the hall. As usual Caius was ruling the others just like his father. Caius strode over to Sowena at the head of his troops. “We heard the geese and the hens. They were really honking. Then Sefin came and said, “Go inside.” So, we did. I looked through the window. I saw her kill a dog. She’s my mother!”

“She’s very brave,” agreed Sowena.

“I could have killed one too,” said Caius. “I’m brave. And strong.”

“I know you are,” said Sowena. “Thank you for telling me what happened. And now, Arthur, we ought to tell Aemilia all about it. I wonder where she is?”

Arthur was old enough that he might know, and might be able to indicate, where she would find Aemilia. Caius would definitely know. Sowena hoped he might assume the question was for him and give her an answer.

“Don’t know where Aemilia is,” said Caius. “She wasn’t around.”

A flutter of fear stirred. Aemilia had stormed off after she had found out that Marcan was a Setantii, and Sowena thought “I don’t know where she went”.

“Caius, can you make sure Arthur has some food? I need to find Ector.”

“Come on, Artu. I’ll get you something to eat,” said Caius, knowing that Arthur would follow him anywhere.

Ector was no longer outside the hall, but Marcan was there with Riestor and Saen.

“Sowena, you’re all right?” Marcan called. “Where did you go?”

“I’ll tell you later,” she said quickly. “Have you seen Aemilia since..., since this morning?” It was hard to think of Marcan and Aemilia not being friends.

“No. I’ve not seen her.”

“She could be anywhere! We’ve got to find her.”

“But where?”

“She could have gone up to the alder trees on the hill. We’ve been there a couple of times when the weather has been kind.”

“Let’s go see,” said Marcan.

Sowena turned to the two soldiers. “Will you tell Ector where we’ve gone? It’s not far up to the alders on the top of the hill.”

“Yes, Sowena,” said Riestor. “I think he’s checking around the settlement now.”

Marcan and Sowena set off at a quick pace away from the hall, north to where the woods began. They pushed through the undergrowth and, to their horror, heard a scream from up ahead.

“Aemilia,” shouted Marcan as he hefted his spear. Sowena cast around and grabbed a fallen branch. The wood was cold under her fingers.

Sowena could see the tall alder trees ahead and half clinging to the trunk of one, half hanging from a branch was Aemilia. Snapping at her heels were three dogs.

Marcan let out a huge roar and leapt forward, stabbing with his spear into the flank of a lanky grey hound. The spear went in deeply and stayed there.

Sowena yelled and swung her branch. The nearest dog, a stocky black beast, turned towards her, snarling. She swung again and the dog backed out of range. She thrust her branch forward at it and watched strong jaws seize the end of the piece of wood. Through her wrists she felt the strength of the animal.

Desperately Sowena twisted the branch round and the dog let go. She was aware of Aemilia slipping, falling away from the tree as the third dog, a grizzled brown monster, tugged at the girl’s foot. Using her branch like a lance Sowena lunged at the black dog in front of her. The wood connected with its muzzle, but her feet slipped with the effort, and she pitched forward, falling alongside her enemy.

She curled, trying to protect her face with her stick and rolling away as best as she could amongst the fallen twigs and dry leaves. The bite never came, and she glanced up to see Marcan wrestling with the creature. He’d grabbed the black dog’s hind legs and was flailing at its chest with his knife.

Lying on her side, Aemilia was kicking wildly at her attacker as it continued to tear at her legs. Sowena reared up and with another yell landed a swingeing blow on the animal’s brown back. It staggered away and without waiting to change her grip Sowena smashed the branch down on the dog’s head.

She dropped her weapon and sank to her knees, coughing and rasping with exhaustion. There was no other sound.

Dazed, Sowena lifted her head. Aemilia was lying quite still, sprawled backwards over the roots of the tree. Sowena crawled over and cradled her head in one arm. She brushed Aemilia’s hair from her face and the girl stirred and moaned.

“Stay there,” commanded Sowena, needlessly. She turned and was able to stand and walk over to Marcan.

Scratched and bleeding he was stumbling to his feet. He leant against the rough tree trunk. He smiled thinly at Sowena, but his left arm was running with blood. Then he sank slowly to sit still at the base of the tree.

Sowena gazed around. The bodies of the three dogs that they’d killed lay sprawled across the leaf-strewn ground. Where was the rest of the pack? Sowena wondered. Had these three stayed in the area because they’d failed to find any food at the hall? Perhaps the other dogs were somewhere nearby? She tugged at Marcan’s spear but had no strength to pull it free from the grey hound. His knife was nowhere to be seen.

Then she heard voices. People were calling her name. Her first reply died in her throat but at the second attempt she called back, “Over here.”

Soon soldiers from the hall were around her. They were helping Aemilia onto a pony and binding up Marcan’s arm. One of them steered Sowena to the flank of his horse and, leaning heavily against its warmth, she stumbled with them back to safety.