

# hypnagogic

#three



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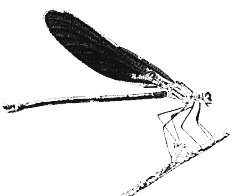
September, 2025

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# The Veil



Serena Salamandra

*Merlin*

It was taking me an enormous amount of effort to stabilize the multi-dimensional portal in front of me. “Damn you, Arthur,” I mumbled under my breath as sweat started to pour down my brow. “You always ask for too much.” Arthur was off at war; these days he was always away on some campaign or other. But that didn’t stop me from sending a slew of curses his way.

Nothing he couldn’t take, of course. The twenty-year-old lad was a heartless, thoughtless puppy, but he was still the King of Britannia, and I was his forty-year-old counselor and court wizard. I would never do anything to seriously threaten the King, but I did send over just enough curses to make him suffer an acute headache or two, and perhaps some diarrhea.

Because this was just too much.

Too. Fucking. Much.

The swirling vortex of colors and rushing sounds towered in front of me, and I could clearly tell from the lightning bolts that were striking

randomly around the chamber that the portal was on the verge of a precipitous collapse. If it imploded, it was sure to take me out with it. Hell, it was already a miracle that none of the lightning bolts had struck me dead.

I could tell from the way my hands were becoming translucent in front of me that my body was quickly being drained of all its magical power, and that I was becoming dangerously weak. No, I couldn’t do this. Not today. Something was off, and I didn’t know what, but I couldn’t open the portal all the way through, which was what I needed in order to stabilize it. So, I had to close it instead.

I inched my nearly transparent hands closer together, grunting as I pushed against the pressure between my palms. The portal started to shake, the stones of the chamber’s walls and floors rumbling and quaking with it. I hitched my breath. The vortex was resisting my supra-human efforts to close it, almost as if it had a life of its own.

I frowned and doubled down on my efforts, concentrating all my strength on clasp my hands together. The moment my palms finally touched I heard a noise-deafening crack, and then a ringing in my ears. After that, the portal shrunk as if being sucked through the other side, and then it vanished.

I let out a breath and slumped to the ground, closing my eyes to tame the dizziness. I thought I would faint. I could not tell how much time passed until I finally recovered, but eventually

my head stopped spinning and my hands regained their corporeality. I opened my eyes, looking around at my beaten-up chamber. The wooden chairs and desk were smoking from where the lightning had struck.

I bit down on the inside part of my cheek, a bad habit that came to the fore whenever I had to deliberate on a difficult choice. But the more I thought it through, the clearer things got. King Arthur was simply insane. Piercing the veil between the visible and invisible worlds, building a bridge between humanity and the Kingdom of Heaven to save humankind from death and decay was like something taken out of a madman's fever dream.

But that's what the King of Britannia wanted.

And it was just too fucking much.

It was only when I was finally back to normal that I allowed myself to feel the full force of my ire against Arthur. He was asking for the impossible, and I couldn't deliver it. I was not a god. At this point I didn't even want to try this again. I barely scraped by with my life this time, but who knew if I would be so lucky next time I tried.

Arthur told me not to reach out to him while he was on campaign. He was too busy being a general and fighting for the glory of Camelot's Court. But it didn't matter to me anymore that he had asked me not to bother him. He would have to hear from me, even if he didn't want to. *Especially* if he didn't want to.

*Sod this*, I thought to myself as I stood up, my ire growing in crescendo. I stumbled over my feet, still not quite recovered from the onslaught of magical might I had been forced to withstand. Then I closed my eyes, took two deep breaths, and snapped my fingers.

In just a moment, I teleported straight into the forest of the Pict Queendom, where Arthur was currently at. My plan was to say everything I thought to his face, and then quit his goddammed service for good.

*Arthur*

I felt him before I saw him coming, and even before that, I knew Merlin was pissed. It didn't escape my notice that an hour or so ago the wizard had tried to send a few curses my way. He was probably trying to encumber me with some minor inconvenience just to get a sliver of revenge over my supposed transgressions against him, as per the usual.

I had been in the middle of battle, and actually had to retreat for a moment to set up a magical shield around me to protect myself from this mischief. But I didn't hold this against him, not in the least. Wizards were notoriously hot-tempered, and Merlin was not the exception. It wasn't the first time I had to use my own meager magic to protect myself against one of his annoying spells, and I bet it wouldn't be the last.

Merlin had seemingly appeared out of thin air in-between the trees a couple of yards away from

where I was resting, but before he did, I had felt his presence materialize in the ether around us, like I did every time he used his spectacular powers of teletransportation.

“Hello, friend,” I said tentatively as he walked up to me, his countenance dark and broody. He didn’t answer me immediately, but the air around us immediately became charged with a sort of electricity, which I knew was Merlin’s doing. Yeah, he was pissed, all right.

And that pissed me off in turn. “Whatever gripes you have, it will have to wait, wizard,” I snapped. “We are mourning our dead here.” Our army had just finished fighting the Picts, and it had been brutal, but we had won. We had managed to take this outside part of the forest, this territory, in the name of Britannia. It had cost us, though. Lots of casualties, lots of death. After all this, I just wasn’t in the mood for Merlin’s shit.

Merlin didn’t answer, he just stood in front of me, crossed his arms, and glared. The soldiers at rest around us shuffled out of our way, none of them wanting to become collateral damage. I sighed. “All right, I’m all ears. But I’m not standing up to face you, I’m too tired,” I said. “Whatever you want to say to me, you’ll have to say it as I continue to sit.” To my surprise, he sat down too, so we were face to face. I blinked. “You’re so difficult, Merlin, sometimes I forget you even have manners.”

“Cut the shit,” he whispered, even though whispering wasn’t necessary at this point. Everyone around us had given us a wide berth of

space for us to have our private conversation. “Respectfully, my liege.” He added sardonically, giving me a dark little smile that clearly showed he didn’t really consider me his superior, at all.

Nor should he, really. The man was twice my age, had ten times more magical power than I did, and knew more of the worlds seen and unseen than I could possibly hope to learn in one lifetime. I stared at him, unamused. “Merlin,” I said in the softest tone I could muster, so as to not set him off. “I’m waiting for you to say whatever was so urgent you had to teleport here to give me a piece of your clearly agitated mind.”

“I’m done,” he answered immediately. “It’s over, I’m not working for you anymore.”

I blinked at him, not understanding. “Why?”

His dark eyes became even more tempestuous. “Because you may be the prophesied King tasked with the mission to unite the world under one banner and one throne, but you’re not God,” he said. “And you shouldn’t play at it.”

“Ah,” I said, understanding dawning on me. “This is about the piercing of the veil.” My ultimate, most ambitious goal, which I had delegated to my most powerful ally. But that ally was cracking, and now he had just quit. I had to think fast and decide how to manage this. “All right,” I said, masking my true thoughts and feelings. “I accept your resignation.”

He said nothing, and his eyes were unreadable. Of course, I couldn’t let him quit, that wasn’t even an option. But I had to make Merlin believe

it was an option in order to keep him right where he was. I had to act like I didn't care, when in fact, I cared a great deal. I sighed, feigning nonchalance as I looked around me, thinking of how to change the topic.

"Have you ever been surrounded by so much forest? So much green and brown?" I asked. "Breathing in the great verdant forces of this atmosphere, it really allows me to just *be*." I slyly looked at him from the corner of my eye. Merlin still looked very much confused, as if he wasn't sure what to do next. He was biting the inside part of his cheek, his eyes scanning over the trees.

That was when I knew he was bluffing. Whether he would ever admit it or not, Merlin was just as ambitious as I was. I knew that deep inside him was the fervent wish to harness enough power and pierce the veil between the worlds to see the face of God. That's why he had accepted the task in the first place.

He was just scared, that's all. And that was all right. I had to manage him, because a King had to know how to manage his most precious assets. So, I wouldn't push him. Instead, I'd let this sit. "Merlin, I've got to rest now," I said, feeling the soreness all over my body. "I'm beat, man." But he wasn't listening to me anymore. He was looking intently at the largest tree nearest us, the one covered in cork from the years, perhaps even centuries of existence on the face of this earth.

Merlin's face had gone white, his eyes wide. "Wait a minute," He said, waving a hand to brush me off before standing up and walking over to

the tree. "This old tree..." His back was to me as he hesitantly extended a hand to touch the cork of the tree. "There's a sort of magnetic correspondence here with the latitudes of the invisible world. Some kind of break, or... or cut. It's leaking so much heavenly power..."

I felt a rush of excitement through my veins. "Will opening a portal here help pierce the veil more easily?" I asked urgently, before standing up to try to see what he was seeing. But before I could get there, a blast of magical power exploded through the air, sending me flying to the ground as bits of cork flew all around.

I covered my face as a cacophony of voices and songs and screams enveloped me, until there was silence, followed by the worried cries of soldiers rushing towards me. When I looked at the tree, Merlin was gone. I lay on the ground, breathing and recovering my wits. Then I quickly got up, dusted myself, and went to the tree, which was now charred, as if it had been burned. But when I touched the bark, it was surprisingly cool. "Merlin, did you do it?" I asked the air around me, but there was no answer to be found. "Safe travels, friend," I sighed. "Hope to see you back here soon."

# The Sugar Kingdoms



Sean Gois

*This is an inadequate telling of a true story. Much of it is abridged or missing entirely, and any errors, of which there are sure to be many, are mine alone. My hope is that enough of the truth has shined through.*

## The Favor of Heaven

The castle sparkled in the sunlight. It stood for countless generations, a monument to the success of the longest reigning king of the Hobs, a little people no taller than a grasshopper. Sugar Castle wasn't merely a clever name; the castle was made entirely of the sweet crystals. Altogether it amounted to an unimaginable wealth, and yet the Hobs wouldn't dream of breaking off even a crumb. It was built long ago, at the base of an ancient and beautiful Hawthorn Tree. The castle was sacred, as was the tree that seemed to offer it a mystical protection, never losing its leaves, even in winter.

No living Hob could imagine how such a castle was ever built. Acquiring such a wealth of sugar was impressive, to say nothing of constructing it into such a magnificent castle. Only the king knew how it was done, as he was the only one alive when it was built. His life spanned many generations, far longer than any other Hob. The people believed the king built the castle himself, for they knew their king had the favor of Heaven and could accomplish any deed for his people, but he never spoke about it.

He loved his people and served them well, with a firm hand and tender mercy, and though he seemed to them immortal, the king knew that the time for him to meet his creator was fast approaching.

## The King's Farewell

One day the king called forth every Hob to gather around the castle, where he would give a farewell address. Not a Hob was missing from this grand and sorrowful occasion.

The great king spoke to them at length. He delivered a message of hope, but he also warned them of the dangers that would beset them if they lost their virtue. Then he spoke of who should replace him. He had two sons, but one died tragically while the other left the realm on a quest. The king shared with them a vision he had, of a Hob bearing a mark of a star on his chest. This Hob, he told them, would usher in the greatest age that the Hobs had ever known,

making his own reign dim by comparison. He would be known not only by his mark, but by the miracles he would perform, five in total.

The people were surprised to hear such a strange thing and wondered what they should do in the meantime. As if reading their thoughts, the king bellowed down to them:

"I have shepherded you, my people, for a long time. But I have grown weary. My rest is calling me."

The king paused for a breath, looking over the concerned faces of all the little people whom he loved and dedicated his long life to. "You must find yourselves a new king. I had hoped my son would return from his quest to take this crown from my tired head, but he has not been seen nor heard from in many long years. I can wait no longer. I am asking each house to send to me their best man. I will announce my choice for successor tomorrow at sunrise, from this very tower."

Not a Hob was missing from the castle grounds that early morning. The air was thick with anticipation. When the sun first peeked above the horizon, the sea of Hobs turned to hushed whispers. When the sun climbed clear above the horizon, the crowd grew restless.

It was not like the king to keep them waiting. But wait they did, until an unexpected figure appeared at the top of the tallest tower of that glittering castle of sugar.

"Ladies and gentlemen," called the voice of one of the king's advisors, "I am devastated to announce that our king has died in his sleep."

### **The Next King**

The people did not take the news well. There was sobbing and confusion. Their worries quickly overshadowed their grief. Who would lead them?

The great houses met to settle who would be the next king, but no settlement was reached. Discussions soon turned to arguments, which quickly escalated into war.

The details of this war could themselves fill many thousands of pages, but I will skip to the bitter end, when the house bearing a wild hog on their banner took charge of the castle. Peace was made with those houses who remained, and a new king was ready to begin his reign.

"A new era of peace!" he proclaimed in his first speech.

The Hobs were tired of fighting and desperate for rest, and the speech filled their little hearts with hope. Things were looking better for the first time since the old king died.

### **So Much Wealth**

In the halls of the sugar castle, the new king was pleased and taken aback by the beauty and splendor of the great castle.



"We earned this!" he said to his family and close allies. "This castle will be our home for many generations!"

He was enamored by the sparkling halls and stairs. *So much wealth.*

It was during a drought when he first secretly broke off a small piece of the castle for himself. Such sweetness he had never tasted. His legs became weak. Surely this was the purest sugar in the realm.

He swore he wouldn't take any more, but whenever the stresses of the kingdom grew too great, he found himself breaking off another little piece.

*It's a massive castle,* he told himself.

But as massive as the castle was, his appetite was growing too.

Soon he could not go a day without eating a piece. Then it was almost nonstop. His appetite for sugar continued to grow. Some of his advisors brought up the decay of the castle, and the king had them executed. Some family mentioned it to him, and he had dungeons built to house them.

Soon, everyone who remained in the castle knew to keep quiet as the castle continued to decay. And as the castle crumbled slowly within, it didn't take long for his advisors to start breaking off pieces for themselves.

The decay accelerated.

The people began noticing holes in the castle and sent a messenger with a formal request for answers.

The messenger was not seen again.

The people raised an army to challenge the king, but they were crushed.

The walls cracked and fell. Repairs were done shoddily, if at all. But one day, a small army breached the castle through a broken wall, captured the mad king, and executed all who lived within.

They saved the king for last and made a public display of it.

### **Washed Away**

Some wanted to restore the castle. Others wanted to share the wealth. In the end, they broke the sugar down into manageable pieces to distribute as they saw fit.

The wealth was unimaginable, and yet most never even got a taste. The army guarded it, jealously.

Then the great Hawthorn Tree began losing its leaves. The next rain wiped out all the sugar that remained. The army scattered. The Hobs were in ruins.

### **The Star-Marked Boy**

Many dark decades passed before the downtrodden Hob spirit began to recover, but slowly, they did. Villages began to grow healthy again, and the Sugar Castle became legend.

Until one day, a boy was born with a mark on his chest that resembled a star. His parents kept it hidden, knowing the legend, and the attention it would bring. The boy was different from the others. He played in the wild and spoke to insects and flowers. The other Hobs considered him strange. He spent his days in the trees, and there he discovered that he could hear their whispers. It was from listening to them that he began to understand.

He spent more and more time climbing the now withered Hawthorn Tree until he found a small opening. Inside he discovered a labyrinth of tunnels. He descended deep within and was not seen again for many months.

When he returned, other Hobs were startled to see him. His clothes were torn, he had scars on his face and hands, and a seed was held tightly in his arms. Through his ripped tunic, some Hobs noticed the star shaped mark on his chest. Word spread. Fast.

### **The Prophecy**

He carried the seed all the way to the river. A few lucky Hobs followed him there, and I say 'lucky' because it's not every day you get to witness a miracle, and that's what they saw when the Star-Marked Boy walked across the river.

They continued to watch as he dug a hole and buried the seed on the river bank. Finally he lay on the ground and slept.

When he awoke, a crowd had gathered across the fast-flowing river. They were ready to make him king, but they had no way of getting to him. They begged him to come back, but he was not interested. Instead he chose to sing to the buried seed, a strange melody that was unfamiliar to them. *Where did he learn it?* they wondered.

The next morning the Hawthorn Tree had grown to be full size, adorned with all of its leaves. This was considered the Star-Marked Boy's second miracle, though he would have given the Earth most of the credit.

The next day the tree flowered. Even more gathered to admire it—they had never seen anything so beautiful—when the Star Marked Boy appeared with a magnificent wooden staff.

With it he tapped the base of the tree like a drum.

*BOOM — BOOM — BOP — BOOM!*

*BOOM — BOOM — BOP — BOOM!*

The tree started creaking and groaning and soon beautiful white sugar crystals began falling from the flowers, like snow. It went on for days, the third miracle.

What happened next was the fourth. The Star Marked Boy sang a beautiful melody that seemed to harmonize with the wind, when thousands of never-before-seen insects crawled out of the tree

and started gathering the sugar. He seemed to conduct them with his staff as they built the sugar into a magnificent structure. Another castle was coming together in before their eyes. This went on for many moons before the castle was complete. Its glory far surpassed the first Sugar Castle.

The crowd by then had grown massive, all desperate for a Hob revival. The new castle filled their hearts with hope. They eagerly awaited the fifth miracle, which they assumed to be some magic bridge so that they could cross to join him. But that is not what happened. The Star-Marked Boy instead spoke to them from the bank.

"Do you trust me?" he asked the crowd, and eagerly they all declared that they did. "Then walk across the river, as I did."

The crowd erupted in protest. "We'll drown! We're not like you! Please save us!" they cried, with many other pleas shouted at the one they believed could save them.

"If you trust me, then I ask you now to walk across the river, as I have done."

### **The Final Miracle**

Some approached and tried, but faltered at the first step, if they were brave enough to take it. No Hob could swim, especially not in such rapid waters, so this went against their deepest instincts. The great crowd grew impatient. Had they not demonstrated their faith enough by

living on the bank for so long, believing in and praising him? How could he ask more of them? Did he not know they were just simple Hobs?

But the Star-Marked Boy turned and walked into the castle, closing the door behind him. As the days passed, more and more Hobs began to leave. The once massive crowd shrunk until it disappeared. It was about forty days later when the first Hob returned. Awakened by a mysterious dream, she rose and headed towards the river where she closed her eyes, and stepped forward. Her faith was rewarded and soon she crossed.

One by one, others came, and one by one they crossed and joined the growing Hob camp that surrounded the castle. Eventually there was a sizable group, about a third of the original gathering, living and waiting for the boy to come out of the castle.

### **The King's Return**

But the boy never did come. They tried knocking on the door, but it never opened. They tried to open the front door themselves but it was locked. They were beginning to lose hope when the strange traveller appeared. He looked old yet remarkably strong, and there was a depth to his eyes not seen in any Hob for some time. He walked through the crowd, up to the castle door, and with his walking stick he knocked it like a drum.

*BOOM — BOOM — BOP — BOOM*

*BOOM — BOOM — BOP — BOOM*

Then he sat and waited, drawing in the dirt with his finger. A few minutes later the door creaked open and the Star-Marked Boy appeared. He took the man's hand and lifted him to his feet, then he held up his hand, pointing to his finger. The Hobs began to notice the ring on his finger bearing the emblem of the Great King of long ago, the one who ruled greatly in the first Sugar Castle.

"The king's son has finally returned from his quest," the Star Marked Boy said to the crowd. "Ladies and gentleman, boys and girls. Here is your king!" And with that he bowed, handing him the keys to the castle, which he drew from his pocket. The king thanked him and then walked among his people, explaining what he could. He was ready to rule for many generations, as his father did before him. It was after the celebrations that the Hobs noticed the absence of the Star-Marked Boy. He never returned to them, but some said they caught glimpses of him up in the canopy of trees.

In the Old Lands, on the other side of the river, the Hobs there transformed into wild creatures, dangerous and uncivilized. They became known by another, more horrible name, which I will not mention, and the two sides were never to be united again. In the New Kingdom, the king took his throne and the Heavens shined down upon his people once again. That began the longest era of peace and prosperity in their long history.

# a short prehistory of the carrot



Laeth

There was a time on this earth, as everyone knows, when men and women lived for hundreds of years. And in those times, processes that in our own age take many generations to unfold, father begetting son becoming father begetting son, and so on and so forth, could instead be accomplished by one man alone, regardless of how many sons he had, or even daughters, and sometimes because of them. This story is about one such man, the man who invented the carrot, and why he did it.

The invention happened in the far west, but the man had been born in the far east. Back then both of those lands had different names that would mean nothing to us, so there is no point in revealing them, unless we translate them to our speech, in which his native land would be called the land of morning, and his adopted one the end of the earth. What is more important to know is that the man was sent to the western edge of the world by the lord of heaven without knowing why, but who would refuse such a

calling. He did not refuse, but did inquire, My lord, for what purpose shall I go west, to which the lord replied, with his customary smirk, You'll see. And so he went, and his wife along with him. He was one hundred when he arrived, and had yet no sons.

Back home the man was an eye doctor. He helped people to see. Yet it's important for us to underline, given our audience, that back then such an occupation was not the same as it is now, as our own medicine deals only with the flesh, and back then such a narrow view would be untenable, sometimes a person cannot see because the eyes are ill, other times it's the soul. Yet, just like today, to open people's eyes after they had been shut, in whatever way such a condition should manifest, literal or figurative being the ends of a very large spectrum, was a noble job, and he was good at it, and thus his compatriots were sad to see him go, The lord of heaven wishes to punish us, that was their conclusion, but it was a wrong one, and their bad fortune was simply an unavoidable ill in a larger story, not everyone can be a main character.

The man had a name that can be translated as sight master, though we, descendants of the natives of europe, would probably call him a wizard, if we were to speak as people did back then, that is, correctly. With that, we may begin to understand what his occupation was, not only because the word means one who sees, but more importantly for the story we are telling, because the breeding of vegetables aided by nothing but the senses and time is a form of sorcery, and we

use that word just as carefully, and it requires wisdom, another careful word.

Of course, as he settled on the cliff he would call a home with his wife, he had no idea that was his fate, to invent a new vegetable, and a root one at that. In fact, as all wizards before him, he was rather more interested and fond of herbs, in leaves rather than roots, as was everyone those days, this was before the secrets of roots were taught by the gods, so that even the poor looked upon roots only as brute sustenance, and never as medicine. The truth is, even today, things under the earth are always treated with more suspicion than things above it, and this seems to us quite unwarranted, what is beneath the earth may simply be shy, rather than scheming.

It may also be strange to some, given how long people lived back then, that the development of the human body was just as quick, and time also, only the human resistance to it was greater, or perhaps, seen from another perspective, smaller, as one who understands that it would tire him less to let the waves take him to shore rather than struggle against them and drown quickly.

A year into his settlement in the west, and still unsure of what he was doing there, the man had just as good a reputation as an eye doctor as he had back home. Things progressed very naturally, there is no reason to suppose that human interaction has changed that much in this regard. The natives might have seen the couple and asked, You're not from around here, and the wizard would say, That's right, we're not, Where

do you come from, The far east, Oh boy, that's far indeed, so what brings you to these parts, The lord sent me on a quest, Yes, yes, I see, it's been happening a lot from what I hear, How interesting, the same is true where I come from, Well, I suppose there are just times like this, when the gods never take a rest from keeping us busy, That is quite true, my friend. And just like that, friendship. Then soon his occupation would come into the conversation, and from there into the life of the village, and people would be glad, The lord has favored us with a great wizard, but once again, they would be wrong, and none of it had much to do with them.

You may ask how they understood each other, but this is easily explained, as although they spoke different languages, those languages were not as different back then as their descendants are now, they were closer to the source, and thus, with some effort, the speeches of the far east and the far west could be mutually understood, perhaps as easily as between two modern romance languages, to give a rather crude and unacceptable comparison. And though one could ask how come these two men from opposite sides of the world could worship the same lord, despite the different names they had for him, that would indeed be a stupid question. And as for how and why their difference in appearance did not cause more of an initial stir so as not figuring in the initial exchange, the truth is people back then did not look as different as they do now. It might seem obvious, but we should remember a lot can happen in just a few thousand years.

Scaling back our scope, from thousands to one, the crowning of the first year was not the successful settlement and integration in the new land, but the birth of his first daughter. Others in that age would have been disappointed that their firstborn was a female, but after so many years of barrenness both mother and father had nothing but love and happiness, and they named her what we would translate as lovely turtle, because she was slow in coming, and also because she was lovely.

It was not immediately apparent, for her eyes were bright, but the girl was blind from birth. This seemed like a cruel joke, but the course of action for the father was obvious, to put himself to work. Yet soon he found that none of his concoctions, nor any of his prayers, nor even spells and incantations, were of any help. The sight master had been bested. This caused him and his wife much grief, but what else could be done, except to care for her, and have more children, this was his wife's opinion. Yet as each son and each daughter was born and grew, the blindness of the first only became starker, and the wizard became ever more sorrowful, both because of his little girl's blindness, and because he could do nothing to cure it despite his wisdom.

One day, long after he had stopped trying and hoping, the child was hanging around her mother's legs as she prepared dinner, a soup. She always asked to handle the vegetables, as she liked the feel of them in her hands, and the smell that was released through it. Now the mother was cutting up herbs, the last ingredient, and

handed the little girl one of the plants. The leaves were supported by a rather long but fully straight taproot, golden in color, and very, very thin. I want to eat it, the child said, You'll eat it in the soup, Even the root, No, the root we give to the chickens, Can I eat it, You can, but it's very bitter, I want to try. And so she tried. She bit into the small golden taproot and it tasted awful, so much so that it brought tears to her blinded eyes, and when she could stop wiping them and opened them again, they were no longer blind.

Not completely, not even mostly. It was only the faintest suggestion of light, and she wasn't sure. She tried to focus on it before saying anything, but it was hard, and then she felt a strain behind her eyes, something never felt before, and then said tentatively, I think I can see.

After examining the child, and once she had taken him step by step through what had happened, the wizard was sure there was only one thing that could have caused it, the herb, or rather, the root. And also the little girl had gone blind again. They had no more of the plant at home, and it was already dark, but the wizard went out in search of it. He knew it grew abundant in glades just up ahead in the forest, and the full moon would make it possible to find them in the darkness.

In the glade the naked moonlight was cold, but it did immediately show him where the herb was growing, and soon he was pulling absentmindedly, in search of quantity, but then he saw there was a turtle sleeping in the midst of

the greenery, and he stopped, it could only be a sign given his daughter's name, but what could it mean. He sat down beside the patch of miraculous herbs, and after a while he started to dig around the base of the leaves, trying to find which plants had larger tap roots, these ones he kept, and the rest he pulled out. He took these last ones home, cut them up into circles, and though they were very small in diameter, each circle resembled a human eye. Then he threw these into a bowl, and sprinkled them with honey, and let it sit. The next day he gave it to his daughter to eat, and for the first time since she was born, she saw.

The parents cried, and so did she, and cry again they did when the blindness returned the next morning. But the father kept picking the smaller taproots and feeding them with honey to his daughter so she could see, if only for a little while. This way she learned to read, and to write, and to see the beauty that before she could only smell, and touch and taste and listen to. The larger ones kept growing in the glades all over the forest, and when fall came they had gone to seed, and the wizard harvested these to plant.

This was repeated over and over, for years and years, the daughter married and had daughters of her own and then grand daughters and beyond that, because remember people lived very long back then, so the years turned to centuries, and with each century the daughter saw more and better, as roots grew larger, and taller, well on their way to becoming the modern carrot. And while it might seem strange for the story to end

here, we must refer back to an earlier comment we made about stories, and who the main characters in them are, and in this one it's not the daughter, or her father the wizard, but rather the carrot, as the title suggests.



# The King with Nine Wives



Sympractical

Many ages ago, when men lived longer and the night was darker, there lived a king who was the wisest in all the world. He was anointed king at birth, as his father died while his mother was pregnant. The queen raised him to know all manner of hidden knowledge, and to rule with justice and righteousness. As he came into manhood, his wealth surpassed that of all the kings in all the lands put together, and his wives far exceeded the women of the known world. Three wives came from the east, and they had great knowledge of healing, medicine, and cooking. Another three came from the north, and they each bore a large and hearty son who became a great warrior. The last three came from the west, and they knew all kinds of weaving and ornamentation and how to bring out the beauty of any man or woman. And the king was pleased with his nine wives, and ruled his kingdom in peace.

In the eightieth year of his reign, a great queen arose from the south. She ruled a land hidden

deep in the earth, and her riches rivaled those of the great king. The king knew legends of a witch from the depths of the earth, whose powers were not to be tried. He was wary when he saw the woman draw near to his land and the black cat walking beside her. She had heard of his fame and wealth and wives, and had come to test him.

“If it is true that you are learned in the ancient secrets, you have heard of me. I am she who dwells in the light of the depths, whose magic no man has seen and lived, whose beauty surpasses all on earth, whose years cannot be counted, and whose power rivals even yours, O king.”

And the king saw that she told the truth.

“This is my challenge to you. Which of your wives is most fit to be queen? You have one year’s time to choose the finest. Should you fail in this task, I will place a curse on you for the rest of your days. You may be wise in the ways of your kingdom, but you are blind to the ways of woman.”

Then she vanished, leaving her cat behind. The cat walked silently, as cats do, and curled up at the side of the throne where it immediately fell asleep. The king was stunned and hardly moved for the length of a week, not knowing what he would do.

All this came about just as the buds appeared on the trees and color returned to the world. But the king grew ill because of his dread. For three moons he was sick and could hardly eat or drink. Each month, one of his wives would tend to him.

The first of the eastern wives had mastered potions, so she gave him mixtures to calm his nerves. The second of the eastern wives knew movements that led to healing, so she guided the king to restore the strength of his body. In the last month, the king began to regain his appetite, and the third wife from the east prepared hearty meals that warmed his soul to its proper state. So the king was filled with gratitude towards the three women. He remembered the witch's question and thought surely he would choose the last of these faithful women, who brought health not only to his body but to his soul.

As he was preparing to leave in search of the southern queen to tell her of his choice, an army came out of the north. There had been a dispute amongst the northern families, and the princes by the wives of the north had entered into battle. War delayed the king's departure. It was a summer of violence, and good men were lost on both sides. Conflict lasted three more moons, with each moon being dominated by one of the three warrior sons. The eldest, in the first month, held back the enemy by marksmanship. But the hordes were so large and the men so tough that the stock of arrows dwindled to nought. Seeing an opening, the enemy advanced on the kingdom. They were met by the middle son and his band of swordsmen, who felled men like trees. But the enemy men were equally skilled. By the end of the second month, the numbers on both sides were so low that they were forced to make peace. The rest from bloodshed lasted the entirety of the third month, and on the night of the new

moon, a messenger came from the enemy camp. He came to the king offering bread and wine as a sign of peace. But the youngest son had been watching for three months, and he saw how the enemy camp had waited for the moonseed to ripen under the heat of the sun. So he ripped the cup from the messenger's hands and dashed it against the floor. "Father, they think us to be fools!" He made the messenger drink the false wine off the floor, showing the wine to be poison. Filled with rage, the three sons together took off into the night. They prowled like lions through the tall grass. One by one, they took down every last northerner in utter silence. When they returned in the morning, the king was overjoyed. He said to his wives, "Each of you makes a fine mother. You brought up our sons well in the way of the bow, the sword, and the cup. But the cup is the highest." And the king remembered the witch's question, thinking he would make the mother of his youngest to be his queen.

Once again, the king attempted to seek out the witch to answer her question, and once again his plan was set aside. His wives from the west reminded him that no victory should go without celebration. And they threw a great party. Larger than anyone had seen before. The party lasted three months, and in each month one of the king's wives gave him a gift which they had crafted. The first clothed him in a purple robe with golden trim, made of finest cloth. The second made him a ring of gold for his finger. But the third made for him a crown topped with 7 stones, one of each color. And the crown

exceeded the other gifts in glory, so the king decided at last that his ninth wife would be his queen.

Finally, he began his journey to find the witch, although he knew not where to find her. All this time the black cat had remained in his court, hiding in the shadows. And at last it brought itself into the light. Knowing no better way, the king set out from his land towards the south, following the black cat to its home. He took with him the rainbow crown as a sign to remember the lady of his choice. And the king walked for the final three months of the year. For the first month he followed the cat and walked by day on paths through the trees. On the last night of that month the cat left him. At the edge of the forests, a mountain range rose dramatically from the earth as if it were a wall. The king, having no other option, continued into the range. On the first night of the second month, the king woke up at the base of a rocky crag to the sound of an owl. The owl served as his second guide and led him through the high peaks by the light of the moon. When the second month had passed, and he had descended into the southern valley, the owl left him as well. After finding shelter in a cave, he woke up to a snake wrapped around his foot. The snake was his third guide. For the third month he traveled by day or by night not knowing the difference, and the snake led him ever deeper into the pit. The only light was that of his torch, which required him to tear up his clothes to keep it lit. And finally, at the end of the third and twelfth month, the king arrived in

the land of the witch. He was stripped of his clothes, had lost his ring and carried only the crown.

But the exit to the cave did not rise up. It opened downwards, the light of a sun shining up through an opening below. Exiting the cave, the king found that he stood on what could only be the inside of the earth. But there was sun and cloud, grass and trees, and birds flying through the air. The only difference was that the ends of the earth could be seen folding up in the horizon, forming a large dome that contained a sun and a moon. When he looked down he saw the snake, the owl, and the cat converging on him. As they met in front of him, they transformed, and the witch stood before him.

“One year ago, I came to test you, and you have found your way to me. Who will you choose to make your queen?”

The king had thought over his choice many times in the three months that he searched for the witch. In all that time he had only changed his mind, rather than making it up. Not knowing what to say and fearing the curse of the witch, he said,

“In these 12 months I have seen all manner of womanly glory in health, war, and celebration. I have been alone, with nothing but the animals to keep me company. At first, I chose the third, the healer of soul. Then I chose the sixth, the mother with knowledge of the cup. Then I chose the ninth, the maker of the crown. In the caves, I

thought I might choose no one and bear your curse.”

As he said all this, the king looked at the witch. He was shocked to see that under her cloak she wore a purple robe and on her hand was a golden ring. He saw his son's eyes. His soul grew warm. At last he knew who he would make his queen.

“Now that I stand here in front of you, at the end of the year, I finally see. You are my queen, as you always have been, and I your king.”

With that, he gave the crown to her and she threw off her cloak. At once, he saw in her all nine of his wives. She was more beautiful and more fearful than anything he had ever seen.

“You have chosen wisely, my king. My blessing and my curse are one, so I bless you, that we will live the rest of our days in unity.”

And truly they did. Returning to the kingdom above ground, they ruled together over the whole earth and all that was in it.

# St. Merlin of the Borders: A Reply to a Simple Request



HermetiCat

*The following is the reply I received, by succession of a vast number of passenger pigeons to my study room window, from my local bishop regarding a request for canonization I had sent earlier in the year. Things are looking good. We have a good bishop here in Avalon. Stay tuned, folks!*

Dear faithful one in Christ, Mr. HermetiCat.

I have received numerous requests for consideration of canonization over my many years as Bishop of Avalon. None quite as strange as the one you have presented. At first, I assumed it to be a joke and had quickly dismissed it without even paying thought to an official reply. Something I cannot give name to, though as one given the call from God, perhaps I *can* give name to it and simply refuse to out of fear of the

repercussions, something gave me pause and had me run my eye over your quaint and somewhat poorly written request.

I must admit I was fascinated. I had not heard of this great ascetic and prophet, aside from the depictions in film over the years, all of which I thought naught but fanciful nonsense typical to that industry and surely, they are. The man you have spoken of is not that man I have realized and from the moment of my having glanced an eye over the letter no sooner did I go back and read it in full detail. Then, upon re-reading it a couple more times, I decided to do my own research on this gentleman to see if your words held any weight.

Not just weight but *gravitas*, I say!

Of his ascetic qualities first let us speak. As you wrote, many years did this man spend in the wilderness, a wild fool for God, away from the world and its temptations. At this time he seems to have been gifted the charism of a kind of proto-Franciscan, or even more accurately of such that we read about in the lives of many of his kinsmen of the early saints of this land. Animals were friend to him. Of particular note, a close friendship with an ageing wolf who, in his twilight years and sensing death upon him, as if a rival alpha male, seeks out our holy man as the sick and afflicted sought out our Lord.

An accounting of his life tells of it in his own words:

*You, O wolf, dear companion, accustomed to roam with me through the secluded paths of the woods and meadows, now can scarcely get across the fields; hard hunger has weakened both you and me. You lived in these woods before I did and age has whitened your hairs first.*

And further he drives before him wild animals as if sheep to a shepherd. A vision of a woodland Christ:

*So he spoke and went about all the woods and groves and collected a herd of stags in a single line, and the deer and she-goats likewise, and he himself mounted a stag. And when day dawned he came quickly, driving the line before him ... smiling and marvelling that the man was riding on the stag and that it obeyed him, and that he could get together so large a number of animals and drive them before him just as a shepherd does the sheep that he is in the habit of driving to the pastures.*

Surely a man who speaks the good news to all of creation as commanded by our Lord in the Gospel of St. Mark.

Not only his animal friends but it would seem the Blessed Virgin herself may have come to this fellow under the title of Our Lady of the Lake, also calling herself “*Shining*” or “*Radiant*” or “*Full of Life*”. He develops a special devotion to Our Lady even to the point of ecstatic fervour, some might say. It could even be speculated that, contained in the stories of him, such was his love and devotion to Our Lady, she is referred to as his wife who goes by the name *Guendoloena* or *Gwendolen* as it is more

popularly known. This name, Welsh in origin, gives us the cause for speculation as it comprises two words *Gwen*, meaning “*fair*,” “*white*,” or “*blessed*” and *Dolen*, meaning “*ring*” or even “*circle*.” Now, there are some etymologies that would have it that the word “*Church*” is from the same root as “*Circle*” given the importance for faithful believers, the world over, not only Christian, of gathering together in a circle, if not a literal one, then certainly a symbolic one, for it gives the impression of union, brotherhood, and eternity. Therefore, it can be said in a manner of speaking that this great man was betrothed to the pure, fair, blessed, that is to say, Holy Church. A moniker, easily recognized by we Catholics, given for the Holy Mother. In one accounting our man hears a heavenly music with accompanying words, that, though sung about this “*Gwendolen*,” we shall see that what they say can only be in regards the Blessed Virgin:

*She surpassed in fairness the goddesses, and the petals of the privet, the blossoming roses and the fragrant lilies of the field. The glory of spring shone in her alone, and she had the splendour of stars in her two eyes, and splendid hair shining with the gleam of gold.*

Who else but Our Lady Full of Viriditas has the glory of spring shine in her alone? Our Lord is the spring of a renewed creation that fills the Virgin’s womb and bursts into life for the salvation of a cosmos trapped in winter!

All this, indeed, is to speak of a man with an unmatched devotion to Holy Maria-Sophia.

As is often the case concerning appearances of the Blessed Virgin there is association of a holy and healing spring surrounding our potential saint. He is found atop a mountain sitting near a spring which apparently heals him of his initial madness, for a madness even one that is holy, does not allow one to impart their gifts upon their fellow man, and so coming out of his stupor he is able to return briefly to the world of men and bless them with his God-given wisdom. It is not long, however, before our man can no longer endure the presence of crowds of people, mirroring again Our Lord Jesus who would often slip away from the crowds into solitude with His Father in prayer. Also does he undergo the temptations of a prince of this world offering all manner of worldly goods as did Jesus when taken into the desert to face the devil, the high prince of this world.

Away from the crowds once more he finds himself back in the wilderness, but not before leaving the courts of the king with a prophecy. Three times a youth is brought before our would-be saint, each time in a different guise, even that the last time he be made to look like a girl in aspect, in attempt to prove him a fool. And a fool they thought they had proved him, for upon seeing the youth each time in a different guise, presumably addressing three separate people, he gave three separate and different prophecies of the youth's death. A fool and a madman they declared him and let him go, back to the woods where he longed to be.

*"he shall die, when a man, by falling from a high rock."*

*"when he grows up he shall, while out of his mind, meet with a violent death in a tree."*

*"girl or not she shall die in the river."*

These are the three predictions of death given, clearly different circumstances for each youth who, as we have said, was the same youth. Some years later the youth does indeed die. Let us see how:

*A young man falls over a precipice; one of his feet is caught in a tree; he drowns while hanging upside down with his body partly submerged.*

His prophecy perfectly fulfilled. Astonishing! But I don't have to tell you that. I am preaching to the choir, am I not? Nevertheless, I feel compelled to continue with my findings, please bear with me. Many other prophecies there are but I will not burden you with things most probably already of your knowing. Only will I copy in full an apocalyptic vision of this blessed fellow, a vision of Johannine scope.

*(88) Root and branch shall change places, and the newness of the thing shall pass as a miracle. The brightness of the Sun shall fade at the amber of Mercury, and horror shall seize the beholders. Stilbon of Arcadia shall change his shield; the Helmut of Mars shall call Venus.*

*(89) The Helmut of Mars shall make a shadow: and the rage of Mercury shall exceed its orbit. Iron Orion shall unsheathe his sword; the marine Phoebus shall*

*torment the clouds. Jupiter shall go out of his lawful paths; and Venus forsake her appointed circuits.*

*(90) The malignity of the star Saturn shall fall down in rain, and slay mankind with a crooked sickle. The Twelve Houses of the Stars shall lament the irregular excursions of their inmates.*

Chilling to the bone, is it not?

Let us continue some more with his life. Into the wilderness again and it is said that his interactions with the world cause him to slip back somewhat into his previous madnenses, though who can say? Are not all the great saints mad in our eyes? Their devotion so unwavering as to be unsettling? Their manner of talking so allusive yet alluring? Their simple good-natured demeanour a confusion to the constant complicating busyness of our minds? Indeed, those of the courts were so short-sighted as to brandish him a madman. So much for that!

This man, I tell you, now begins to speak the very language of the starry heavens, which Holy Writ tells us “Declares the glory of God and proclaims His handywork”. He communicates in the tongue of birds, knowing the life of crane and swan and woodpecker, as per his “*Catalogue of Birds*”. Which is to say he speaks the eternal language of the Holy Spirit! That third person of the Holy Trinity who became bird, took on avian form as a dove when Jesus Christ was baptised. Also, descended as tongues of fire, like phoenix’s, upon the disciples in their great Pentecostal illumination. This also must have been the way

for our wild saint, a great Pentecosting came upon him!

I cannot write any more. I would only sully the life of this wonderful man with my clumsy words, a saint certainly in my eyes. I shall proceed at once to pass my recommendations to the Holy Father for the canonization of Mryddin, also called Merlin. Soon, I pray, to be St. Merlin of the Borders. If not, I may myself become mad and retreat into the woods. I thank you for your request and owe you no small debt of gratitude. I shall leave you with St. Merlin’s own words of praise to Holy God after a second healing at a spring. Glory to God through his Son Jesus Christ!

Therefore, praising God, he [Merlin] turned his face toward the stars and uttered devout words of praise:

*O King, through whom the order of the starry heavens exists, through whom the sea and the land with its pleasing grass give forth and nourish their offspring and with their profuse fertility give frequent aid to mankind, through whom sense has returned and the error of my mind has vanished! I was carried away from myself and like a spirit I knew the acts of past peoples and predicted the future. Then since I knew the secrets of things and the flight of birds and the wandering motions of the stars and the gliding of the fishes, all this vexed me and denied a natural rest to my human mind by a severe law. Now I have come to myself and seemed to be moved with a vigour such as was wont to animate my limbs. Therefore, highest father, ought I to be obedient to thee, that I may show*



*forth thy most worthy praise from a worthy heart,  
always joyfully making joyful offerings.*

Yours in Christ, Bishop Hugh of Avalon

P.S There may be some issue over Merlin's parentage. Let us hope the Holy Father overlooks or indeed sees the glory of God's work all the more in such a strange siring.

God Bless.

