



MAKING PLANS

England, Camboglanna, Early October, 516 A.D.

Cassie Pennington stood looking out a window, trying, along with everyone else in the room, to figure out how to secretly penetrate a defended castle and free hundreds of prisoners. After nearly a full morning of brainstorming, they weren't much closer to a plan. They had just seven people, including Cassie herself. David and Sarah, her oldest friends, sat near her. Beyond Sarah, William sat with his newfound sister, Gwendolyn. Opposite them were Caelwyn's daughter, Telyn, and Merlin's daughter, Ganieda. The dogs, Kai and Dassah, were also in the room, but they hadn't said much. Though animals didn't much like to admit it, humans were far better at making plans, as their thought patterns worked in greater detail than animals' did.

So far, thanks to William, the group had established about how many men would be in the castle, and they had an idea of their locations at any given time. Also thanks to William, who had read an ancient account of a large group of Brenwyds being freed about this time, they had a good idea that they would succeed in their endeavor. Unfortunately, William did not know exactly how the operation had occurred. The writer had omitted such details from his narrative. They had to figure out how to get through the

soldiers to the Brenwyd prisoners. They didn't have enough people for a siege (not to mention that would take way too long), nor did they want to just kill everyone there. Aside from the important fact that wanton killing repulsed all of them, something like that would raise an alarm and possibly cause soldiers that they hadn't reached yet to start killing the Brenwyds to prevent their escape. And it would definitely attract the notice of Morgan le Fay, which they absolutely did not want. Cassie sighed in frustration. "If we can take care of the soldiers, then it will be simple enough, but there *must* be some way besides barging in and killing all of them," she said, turning back to the center of the room.

"We might have to," David said, frowning, "if we can't think of anything else. But that's rather excessive, I think."

"Not to mention that if we miss any, they'll go running to Morgan," William said. "And that we can't have. Just because I read that record doesn't mean it'll happen no matter what we do."

"If we could get them all in one place and then lock the door on them, that might work," Gwendolyn suggested. She wore a worried look on her face, and carried deep apprehension in her green eyes. Cassie knew it wasn't just the Brenwyds' plight that was bothering Gwendolyn. Her father, King Arthur, had been seriously wounded in battle two days before, and had been taken to a chapel about fifteen miles away in the desperate hope that the nuns who lived there could heal him, as they were renowned in the region for their healing prowess and herbal remedies.

"But how would you get them all in one place?" Telyn wondered. "And how would we know everyone was in there?"

"Merely an idea," Gwendolyn said, shrugging.

David glanced at William. "Do you remember anything else?" he asked.

William had an intense look of concentration on his face, and also looked slightly annoyed. "I'm trying. I wasn't reading the re-

cords to memorize them, you know. I didn't have anything better to do in the middle of a snowstorm, and so got assigned to translate old records so they could be entered into a computer and preserved. I remember reading that some group released a bunch of Brenwyds, and the man writing it was extremely angry about it. It didn't make that much sense, and I did more of a skim translation so I knew what it was about, rather than a complete word for word. It was a lot of work to translate the Brythonic."

"It didn't say *anything* about how the Brenwyds were released?" Sarah asked.

"Not really," William answered. "It was kind of odd, actually. It was as if they slept through the release and woke up after the Brenwyds were gone. Like I said, most of it was ranting and raving that they had escaped. 'Brenwyd witchcraft' and the like, very repetitive. It was... I don't know... almost like he was drunk or something. The handwriting was really messy. The next thing after that was from several weeks later."

"So it was a night raid?" Ganieda asked, tugging a strand of her dark hair, her brown eyes thoughtful. "How odd there was not more to the account."

"Well, there was something about treasures being stolen and Mordred being in a rage and..." William's voice trailed off. "I'd forgotten that."

"What?" David asked.

"It said something about Mordred being grief-stricken," William answered.

"You don't say?" Cassie asked, raising her eyebrows. "Wonder why, considering he was just raised from the dead." A dim light had started to turn on in her brain. She began pacing. David and Sarah watched her expectantly. They knew Cassie was really thinking when she started pacing, so something that had been said had gotten her brain going. "As if they slept through it... treasures stolen," she murmured. "Drunk."

"It is hardly a time for drinking," Gwendolyn said, "for either side."

"Or maybe it is," Cassie said, sounding thoughtful.

"Uh oh," David said, a slightly humorous look in his dark brown eyes. "She's got an idea. Now we're in trouble."

Cassie rolled her eyes. "Thank you for that boost of confidence, David. I've got the beginnings of an idea, to be precise."

"What is it?" Sarah asked.

Cassie stopped pacing to look out the window again. "Tell me, if you had just succeeded in seriously wounding the leader of the opposing force, your own leader had just been raised from the dead, you had captured the strongest Brenwyds, and you were (you thought) about to conquer the rest of the kingdom, what would you do?" she asked.

"I see your point," Gwendolyn conceded after a minute, "but how does that help us?"

"It gives us an opening," Telyn said, catching on to Cassie's idea (though her mind-reading ability probably helped, too). "If they are celebrating, that means wine and mead will be flowing freely."

"Which would make them drunk," Sarah finished. "But even drunks can fight. And there will surely be some who abstain from drinking."

"I would not be so sure about that," Ganieda said, lips pressed thin to show her disapproval of such behavior. "These are not exactly moral men, I believe. What else are you thinking?"

"And how could we know for sure that they are having some sort of celebration?" David asked. "We have no evidence for that, you know."

"That's the easiest component, I believe," Telyn said. "Cassie can see it."

"So what does the rest of this plan entail?" William asked.

"I'm still working on it," Cassie said. "But what if we *made* them sleep?"

“How?” David asked.

Telyn looked at Cassie, and an excited gleam entered her green-blue eyes. “Cassie, that is brilliant. Why did we not think of it sooner?”

“Think of what?” Ganieda asked.

“Use Morgan’s own weapon against her,” Cassie said. “Or should I say potion?” Everyone straightened, new animation coming to their faces as the idea was introduced.

“But we don’t know how to make that,” Sarah said. “I don’t, anyway.”

“We do not have to,” Telyn said. “Lancelot dropped his pouch of it in a corridor as he ran, and Mother picked it up. I believe it is still at our house.”

“The potion Lancelot used on Mother?” Gwendolyn asked, her eyes darkening.

“Exactly,” Cassie said.

“There’s still the problem of making sure all the soldiers drink it,” David pointed out. “And we don’t know if they will celebrate. If they don’t, we’re back to square one.”

“I told you I was still working on it,” Cassie said. “But if they’re not... maybe someone could still sneak in and dose the common barrels. They all have to drink sometime. That would take a long while, though.”

William looked thoughtful. “If we did do it,” he said, “that would explain things. But how would someone sneak in and drug the wine or whatever they’re drinking unnoticed?”

“David does have a point in that before we go any further with this idea we must know whether they are celebrating or not,” Telyn said. “For if not, we are back to... what did you call it?” She swiveled her head to look at David inquisitively. Often when the four from the future spoke in Brythonic, they would use modern idioms translated into the ancient language as best they could, but would then have to explain what the expressions meant.

“Square one,” David said. “It’s just another way of saying we would be back to where we started from.”

“So, translated,” Cassie said, “you want me to try to See what the local bad guys are up to.” She looked out the window. “Alright, but give me a minute.” The chamber fell silent.

Cassie closed her eyes, preparing to call upon her Second Sight, which could let her See, in a sense, almost anything she wanted, provided she knew what she was looking for. It was a newly discovered talent, despite the fact she’d unconsciously been using aspects of it for years in the form of hunches, and she felt a little self-conscious with everyone waiting on her. Throwing the feeling aside, she brought the image of Mordred’s hall to mind. It appeared in her mental view, looming like a black giant, sneering at her attempt to pierce its walls. It didn’t do the hall any good, though, as her Sight just zoomed through a window. It then blurred and she assumed it was traveling through something. It refocused on several soldiers standing over the gate, watching laden wagons enter the courtyard. They looked like they were in a good mood. She could hear them speaking in a weird, disembodied, echoey way, and listened carefully.

“There’ll be plenty of fun tonight,” one said with a grin. The one standing next to him nodded.

“The mistress ordered only the best to toast our victory and future subjugation of this island. Unfortunately, neither she nor the Master will be here. He still needs to recover, and I say let him take his time,” he said.

“I wish he would hurry up,” a third growled. “I want all those Brenwyds sent to hell. I can’t stand ‘em. They do not cry out, they merely *look* at you in that way they have, as if they can see into your soul.”

“Oh, come now,” the second said. “Do not fret yourself about them. The Master gave strict orders that they will be executed as

soon as he is well enough to attend. They are all doomed, no matter how long they stay down in those cells.”

“And perhaps,” the third said, with a sly and suggestive expression on his face that Cassie didn’t like, “we might even be able to turn their helplessness to our advantage, if you know what I mean. There are many a pretty face among them. That would take the defiance out of them quick enough.”

Cassie was appalled as she caught the meaning, but the first laughed. “I take your meaning very well. That would suit me fine, I think. And I also heard some girls are coming up to earn some extra coin, should we be pleased with their... service.”

“Truly?” the second said. “This will be a grand night indeed.” The rest of the talk Cassie had no wish to hear, and her Sight obliged her, but what it showed her next she did not expect. She saw a dimly lit cell with several figures chained to the wall, unmoving save for the rise and fall of their breathing. She caught her breath as she recognized two of them: Siarl and Bleddyn, Caelwyn’s husband and son, Telyn’s father and brother. They did not move because the manacles were made of devil’s iron, which burned the skin of Brenwyds for a reason no one knew but the Brotherhood exploited.

Cassie opened her eyes and stood staring out over the landscape of the valley that the fort was in. Soldiers moved slowly over the ground, gathering the dead for a proper burial and identification. The stench of blood and death was thick in the air, and carrion birds wheeled overhead. Cassie’s stomach churned. She wasn’t squeamish, but the sight was enough to sicken anyone. She was sure it would haunt her dreams for months to come.

“What did you See?” Telyn asked.

Cassie turned and sat heavily. “There is going to be a celebration tonight. The soldiers I overheard were very, uh, excited about it.” She said no more, but thought of the other comments she had heard.

She must have been thinking very loudly, because Telyn gasped in horror. “They would not dare do that to a Brenwyd!” she exclaimed.

“As Ganieda said, these are not moral men,” Cassie responded, scowling.

“What?” Gwendolyn asked.

“Oh, um, they were talking about, uh, taking advantage of some of the, er, female prisoners.”

“The slime!” Ganieda burst out. “They have fallen low indeed.”

“So now we know that there will be an opening tonight,” Sarah said, her hazel eyes devoid of their usual humor. “How do we get the potion in the wine so everyone gets it?”

“It would have to be in every cup,” William said. “But I don’t see how that could be done unnoticed, and it would likely take more than one person. If we sneak in, they’ll notice unfamiliar faces and start asking questions.” There was a thoughtful silence.

“Perhaps it is simpler than we think,” Telyn said slowly.

“What do you mean?” David asked. A cunning look took shape on Telyn’s face. Both Ganieda and Gwendolyn groaned.

“Not that look,” Ganieda said. “I know that look too well. I am not going to enjoy this idea, am I?”

“Oh, dear,” Sarah said. “Is that the universal Brenwyd-has-an-idea-look? Because it looks strangely familiar.”

“Oh, come on,” Cassie protested. “Is it really that bad?”

“Considering that what comes after is generally rather mad and somewhat nonsensical,” Ganieda said, “yes.”

“But the ideas work,” Telyn said. “And no, Ganieda, I know you shall not like it. I dislike it myself, but it may work.”

“And it is?” Gwendolyn asked.

“Hiding in plain sight,” Telyn said. “Mother used to say that if a person isn’t expecting to see anything, they usually won’t.”

“So William and I sneak in and pretend to be part of the crowd while surreptitiously pouring sleeping potion in people’s cups?” David guessed.

Telyn smiled slightly. “A good supposition, David, but you have it reversed. As William mentioned, if you try that, you will likely be

noticed because of your unfamiliarity.”

Cassie snapped her gaze to Telyn as she realized what the other Brenwyd girl had up her sleeve. “Are you joking? That’s completely insane! No way could I – will I – do that. It’s nuts!” she sputtered. “You can’t be serious.”

“But I am,” Telyn said, with a sober expression on her face, but restrained amusement at Cassie’s reaction evident in her eyes. “I am not exactly looking forward to it either, but it is because it is so mad that it just might work. What do you mean by nuts?”

“Another word for crazy. Er, mad. But... but... okay, I admit, I’ve made some crazy plans that have worked, but this has to be a hundred times crazier than anything I’ve come up with. It’s not just crazy; it could turn out to be extremely dangerous and... and... damaging!”

That is an accomplishment, Kai piped up, interest aroused now that a new topic had been introduced. Before the humans had simply revisited old ideas that wouldn’t work, but this one sounded promising, and it was new. *What is it?*

“Rather simple, really, but also rather distasteful,” Telyn said. “We take advantage of the fact we have more girls than boys – I apologize, you two, but it’s merely a fact – and we girls sneak into the festivities as *part* of them. There will be other unfamiliar female faces. What is a few more?” Everyone stared at her, completely flabbergasted.

“You *are* mad,” Gwendolyn decided. “You’re suggesting we pretend to be... to be... I can’t even say it! Absolutely not!”

“Gwendolyn, listen,” Telyn said. “I know it sounds abhorrent, but it is merely pretending. I picked up from Cassie that there will be... some of those kinds of girls there, so we shall blend in. It will be easier to get near the cups, and there will be more of us, although,” she added, “I do not think all of us need to go. We can also help prevent the men from using the Brenwyds. It need not be for very long, only until they all fall asleep. Then we can use your idea, and lock them up wherever they happen to be. The boys will be waiting outside with some other soldiers, and with wagons and

horses to help transport the Brenwyds, and we'll sneak out before anyone is the wiser. And while everyone's asleep," Telyn switched her gaze to William, "it will be a good opportunity to search for the Sword of Kings. You said yourself that the records mentioned treasure that was stolen. Perhaps we can find Seren, too."

"That sounds awfully risky," William said, his expression dark. "What if one of them tries to... you know." He shifted uncomfortably.

"We go to a quiet area and send them to sleep the hard way," Telyn answered. "I know it is risky, but it may be the only way."

I do not like the sound of this, Kai said. But I think she is right.

"I really don't like the sound of this," David said. "William's right. It could happen, and I don't-"

"It is not your choice to make," Ganieda said. "It is ours. I do not like it either, but... I agree with Telyn. My father is in there, and I will do whatever it takes to get him out. Even this." Her quiet statement made everyone pause for a moment.

"Would there be enough potion to do the job?" Cassie asked.

"I believe so," Telyn said. "There was a large amount in the bag, if I remember correctly. It does not require much. Lancelot gave Guinevere an overdose. Normally it should wear off in about four hours. It's not magical at all. It's simply a mixture of herbs that induces sleepiness. Morgan uses such potions for many things. Even some healers use it when tending serious wounds so the person is unconscious of the pain."

"Four hours," William mused. "That might be doable, but remember, the Brenwyds will be heavily weakened from the devil's iron."

"There's that tunnel entrance near the dungeons that we used," Sarah remembered. "And once all the soldiers are asleep, we can bring some of our own soldiers in through the gates to help. And remember what Dragon said about Mordred riding a Brenwyd horse? It's entirely possible that Mordred has the prisoners' horses as well, which would really speed up the process."

“But where would we take them?” David asked. “We can’t bring them here. It would be the first place Morgan and Mordred would look.”

“There is a Brenwyd community on an island off the coast,” Telyn said. “All Brenwyds know it. It’s a sanctuary very few humans have ever been to. Not even Morgan could get there, and the horses would know it. Some of the strongest Brenwyds now imprisoned come from there.”

“Are you all actually agreeing to this mad plan?” Gwendolyn asked, incredulous.

“Well,” Cassie said. “It’s the only real plan we have come up with after thinking all morning. Do you have another?” Cassie actually wished the princess did, but Gwendolyn shook her head reluctantly and sighed.

“Oh, very well. I shall go with you. All of us should go, for moral support if nothing else. And you are neglecting to think of something important for this sort of role,” she said.

“What?” Ganiada asked.

“Clothes. We would not be very believable in battle attire now, would we? I can go to Camelot and get some things.”

“Would you?” Telyn asked. “I had wondered about that.”

“You all are determined to do this?” David asked. The girls’ expressions gave him his answer. He sighed. “If you’re sure, I don’t suppose there’s anything we poor outnumbered males could do to stop you, is there?” he asked resignedly.

Sarah gave a nervous laugh. “Don’t tempt me. I wouldn’t need much persuasion.”

“And don’t sell yourselves short,” Cassie said in a dry tone. “We might just send out a frantic plea for a knight or two in shining armor, but seeing as they don’t quite exist in this century, I s’pose you two’ll have to do.”

“I have a question,” William said. “Don’t we have to run this by Constantine first? We do need to use his soldiers.” Constantine

was Gwendolyn's fiancé, and was in charge of the remaining army in Arthur's absence.

"I shall take care of it," Gwendolyn said. "But I believe you should come with me."

"Me? Why?" William asked. "What good would I do?"

"For one," Ganiada said, "you are a man, and he would likely be more in favor if he knows that it was not just women who came up with this. To him it would make the plan seem more... reliable and sensible, you might say."

"And for another," Gwendolyn said, "you won influence by defeating Lancelot, and not merely as the winner of a duel. You prevented the fort from being taken from behind, which would have made Mordred the undoubted victor. Constantine will listen to you and respect your opinion for that." She paused. "And that fight caused many to believe that you are, forgive me for saying this, a bastard son of Father's. Constantine suspects this. He spoke to me of it yesterday. He thinks Father will formally recognize you and you will become king instead."

William blinked. "What? That's... ridiculous."

"Not if you have been raised in this century. Bastard children are more common than you may think. But because he thinks this, he will be more inclined to listen to you, because he does not want to risk offending you." William looked unconvinced.

"It's sound logic, William," Cassie put in. Her lips twitched upward into a mischievous smile. "It's never wise to offend the potential heir. It's been the downfall of many people throughout history."

William rolled his eyes. He half wished he had a pillow or something to throw at her. "Thank you, Cassie. Alright, I'll go with you, Gwendolyn."

"Good," she said, standing. "Let us go now, then. It is best to present such plans as early as possible. He needs time to fully comprehend them."