

Avalonia
Kristen Britain

Mist curled and wove about the ruins of the old abbey like trailing, winding strips of gauze. The Tor was long lost to sight in the fog, though once, a window had opened, revealing a brief, titillating view of the fourteenth-century tower atop it.

Vapor coated Anne Wilder's glasses, obscuring her vision further. She tore them off her face in vexation and rubbed the lenses clear with the tail of her scarf.

What had possessed her to visit Glastonbury on such a foul day? Even the tourists, who usually came in busloads seeking the spell of Arthurian legend, had fled Glastonbury for the shopping districts of London.

She had come on the word of a blind musician.

Last night she had taken supper in a pub down the street from her bed and breakfast. During a break in the band's Celtic repertoire, one of the musicians made his way to the bar, uncannily avoiding the clutter of tables, chairs, and patrons as though he traveled a well-worn path. He sat on a stool beside her.

The barkeep passed him a pint of dark, bitter ale, and he reached for it instinctively, whereupon he turned to Anne.

"You are new here, aren't you," he said. It was a statement of fact.

How did he even know she sat beside him? "Yes. How can you—"

"And American by your accent. What brings you to England?"

Anne wondered at his interest. She was but one of millions of tourists who inundated Britain yearly. He seemed friendly enough, however, and if he wanted a bit of conversation, she welcomed it after her solitary travels.

"A walking tour of Scotland," she said. "And some birdwatching along the coast, and..." A great weariness had prompted her escape, a weight on her shoulders.

Too many battles she had fought, and lost. She shrugged, then remembered he could not see. "I came, I guess, for whatever reason anyone travels."

"Hmmm." He took a swig of his ale, then turned to survey her with eyes that could not see. They were a startling blue beneath frosty eyebrows. "You seek something deeper."

"Excuse me?"

He leaned close to her and said, "I hear it in your voice and words, m'dear.

A

longing to remember that not all mysteries can be answered with science."

Anne shifted uncomfortably on her stool, her own ale since forgotten at her elbow. Mysteries? His words didn't make sense to her, though he had spoken with the conviction of a prophet. And science? Did he somehow know of her work?

Maybe he was a nut. She glanced around for an escape route and tried to think up a polite excuse.

To her horror, the musician clamped his hand on her wrist, as if to prevent her from leaving. His knuckles were gnarled with age, like burnished tree roots. "Go to Glastonbury," he said.

"Why?"

"I've the second sight, you see." He thumped his temple with a stout index finger. "You will find memory in Glastonbury, and a power in the land that still dwells there. I know this."

Anne almost laughed in his face. What kind of New Age nonsense was this? A travel brochure had proclaimed Glastonbury as a major Arthurian site, as though King Arthur had been historical fact rather than overdone fiction. Yet she did not laugh, for the musician's expression was painfully earnest.

He sniffed the air as if it could tell him something. "In Glastonbury, you will find memory. Belief. And perhaps a choice." He then gulped down a swig or two of his ale and left her to rejoin his band.

Anne sniffed the air, too, but smelled nothing more remarkable than cigarette

smoke, cooked food, and her own ale. The musician took up his fiddle, and the band worked its way into a slow, mournful ballad.

Anne sniffed the air now. It was laden with damp; not just the damp of air, but of reeds and mud and ... well, a wetland. Legend held that the old abbey sat upon what was once the Isle of Avalon, but there was no lake to surround it now.

Natural succession, Anne thought. A shallow lake or pond soon turns to meadowland. Terra firma, the solid ground beneath her feet. This she understood.

Yet, when she took her next step, her foot lifted with a sucking sound. Her shoes were soaked.

So here she was in Glastonbury on a foul, damp, and foggy day because a blind musician with the second sight told her she would find memory and belief. And perhaps a choice. She snorted in contempt. There were gift shops, museums, and

the ruins. Ruins and museums held little allure for her. History confounded her, especially in a land such as this where it was layered like an onion—Roman walls, medieval castles, standing stones. And then there were the peoples—Saxons, Picts, Romans, Celts, and Britons.... Legends simply confused the issue. It was too much.

She thought she should return to her lodgings to fight off the chill with hot tea and biscuits, and maybe plan a hike in the Lake Country to watch more birds and take in the landscape. She turned back toward the abbey, but the fog folded in around her, a dense opaque cloak. She tried wiping off her glasses again, to no avail.

Anne combed her fingers through lank, sloppy curls. Though there was no discernible landmark and she was unsure of her direction, she did not panic. She had felt more lost, more overwhelmed, in the few great cathedrals she had visited. She would pick a direction and walk. Eventually she would come to some landmark, someone's house, a footpath, or maybe the abbey.

Ahead, a great swirl of mist was accompanied by wingbeats. She pressed forward

eagerly, and witnessed a swan flapping its great pale wings before it vanished

utterly into the mist.

A swan where there is no lake...

She halted to take her bearings, but there was no way to do so. Even on the coast of northern New England where she had lived for many years now, she had rarely seen so dense a fog. Still, her apparent isolation did not arouse panic, though she began to feel the first few pangs of concern.

The mist is an enchantment, maybe, but such whimsical notions were gone with her childhood. Her mind lay in the realm of science and fact and provable results.

Not fantasy. Not history. Not legend.

Yet, she couldn't help but sense the antiquity of the place, and its charm.

It

almost seemed to flow from the ground, through her feet, and upward through her body. Odd she had not felt this way when standing in the awesome splendor of cathedrals with their multifaceted windows and detailed artistry. She had simply felt very small and alien, and she had not lingered. Instead, she sought out the countryside, avoiding historic structures of all kinds.

Maybe it was because she felt a kinship with the land. After all, wasn't her home in New England and parts of Britain composed of some of the same rock? A geologic phenomenon called a terrane, a bit of continental crust, transformed by Pangaea, when all lands became one. The terrane had been called Avalonia ... The hills she walked back home bore a strain of the same ancient, ancient lineage of the land she now walked.

The antiquity of Glastonbury was in the very air she breathed, and in the sense of place. Legend lived in the mists ... The musician had said there were

mysteries that science could not answer.

She let the mists gently waft by her, settle on her shoulders, caress her cheeks. She denied his words. Better to know geology and the names of birds. Better to know the behavior of mammals and the scientific method. These things

existed in her world and were tangible. The only mysteries she sought were those which could be unraveled by science.

Or so she thought. Her very certainty brought a sense of emptiness and sorrow and loss. It left no room for dreams, or the kind of mysteries the musician had spoken of.

She cleaned vapor from her glasses once again, and closed her eyes, feeling that resonance in the land flowing into her. She was a wildlife biologist because she loved the land and all the interconnections of species that lived on it. She armed herself with science, research, and facts in a battle to preserve the natural world.

A seemingly losing battle. Thus her weariness and the weight on her shoulders. As she stood there, she imagined she heard a horse, and then more than one, gallop through the mist. The earth trembled beneath her feet with their passing.

She imagined the shouts and cries of men, and a clash like the striking of metal upon metal; like sword striking sword. She scented iron and blood in the damp air.

She opened her eyes, but the imagining did not stop. The mist billowed and swirled, sculpting men and horses about her, gray and timeless, but with a certain substance. She turned around and around trying to make rational sense of what she saw, but her scientific mind could find no good conclusions about the gleam of light radiating from armor and weapons from another age.

Warriors

fought and fell all around her, their cries like those of a fading echo. One warrior rode amidst the others, a crown encircling his helm. He was more radiant than the others, his tabard bloodied. He carried an exquisite sword, flaming in his hand. This he pointed at Anne, and over the distance that separated them, he said in a quiet, calm voice that belied the strivings and carnage around them, "Your disbelief will lose the battle."

And with an astonished blink from Anne, the warrior—the king—and the battle around her rolled away as mist.

Ghosts? But Anne did not believe in ghosts. She let go a shuddering sigh, desiring to be back beside the fire-place, in her bed and breakfast, snug and dry, with nothing more extraordinary around her than Victorian furnishings and the drone of a television in the common room.

The scent of wetland carried more strongly to her now, overladen with apple blossoms though it was not spring. She heard a gentle lapping, as though of a lake upon the shore. She turned about again, and there, incredibly, the mist parted revealing the edge of a lake.

"I must have wandered farther than I thought," she murmured, not remembering a

lake pictured on any of the glossy brochures about Glastonbury she had picked up.

"Far, indeed." A woman stepped barefoot among reeds and rushes of the shore. She

was an elderly woman with ivory hair loosely braided down her back and a green

laurel upon her brow like a crown. She wore a shawl and a simple dress of blue-green wool. Her eyes were as piercing as those of a kestrel that misses nothing, but still gentle. She approached Anne, clutching her shawl.

Another vision?

When the woman stood but a pace from Anne, she extended her hand, palm up, the

lines that creased it clearly defined.

"Touch my hand, child, and you will know I am no simple vision."

Anne did, resting the tips of her fingers lightly on the woman's palm. She felt the warmth of earthly flesh, but there was more. It was the same sensation of the earth beneath her feet singing inwards through her veins and heart, and from the woman she scented loam, like one who works with the soil and brings forth green, growing things, as a gardener.

Anne withdrew her hand almost reluctantly, her heart pounding. Here she found resonance, here panic swelled within her: mystery.

"Who are you?" Anne asked. "And—and where am I?"

"Don't you know?" The question was sad, not coy. "Yes, I see you do not know. You have been fighting for so long that you have lost sight of why." The woman

transfixed Anne with her quick, piercing eyes. "You have come where so few can

cross over, for the way has been nearly obliterated: Your coming is a sign of hope."

Anne stared blankly at her, and the woman chuckled.

"You hail from far away," the woman said. "There is a freshness of spirit about you. A child who thrives in a place of wild, tall pines and seaspray." How did she know? "New England. I live in New England."

The woman raised both brows. "Truly." But there was no surprise in her voice. Because silence fell between them and Anne felt a need to fill it, she babbled, "I am a biologist at a wildlife refuge there."

The woman sighed, and it was like a breath of a breeze that rustled tree limbs.

"Such is the day that nature's creations must be set aside in refuges."

"If we didn't," Anne said a little defensively, "it would be all gone."

"As I said, such is the day."

They strolled the shoreline of the lake in silence for a time, the woman's skirts trailing along the ground. It seemed to Anne that tiny white flowers blossomed in the woman's wake.

'Tell me, child, how is it in this refuge? How do you care for what you protect there?'

Now Anne walked on solid ground. She recited her research into seabird populations. She spoke of monitoring the reproductive rates and successes and mortalities of terns, puffins, and razorbills. She spoke of data and papers and publications, and of a not-so-far-off doctorate.

When she finished, slightly breathless, the woman's expression had changed little. She halted and turned to Anne. She took both of Anne's hands into her own, and again there was that resonance, the grounding.

"Why do you pursue this, child?"

Anne drew her eyebrows together in consternation. She had just explained it all.

"So we can understand the implications of—"

"No, child." The woman had not raised her voice. "Look deeper. You have neglected a part of your spirit. Gaze into the lake and look deeper."

The woman squeezed her hands in reassurance and led her to the very lake edge.

She peered into the shallows, through the reeds. The water was glassy and she could see to the muddy bottom. A frog plopped into the water nearby, sending ripples in ever widening rings. A bluish light cast off the water's surface, and Anne began to see herself.

She is nine years old on a visit to Isle Royale National Park in Michigan. She

is camping with her family. A ululating cry pierces the night, followed by others in an unearthly chorus. It is like a summons to her, and even now she feels its power.

"What is it, Daddy?" she asks.

His head is cocked, listening, a strange expression on his face. Everyone is quiet, even her little brother, Matt.

"Wolves," her father says. "They are speaking to one another."
She shivers.

Other images and sensations flowed through Anne's mind: miniature alpine flowers blossoming on the mountain heights; gigantic Sequoia trees looming toward the heavens, more awesome to her than any cathedral; the sweet scent of pine resin on a hot summer day; the wing-beats and honking of wild geese rising into the bronze, autumn sky ...

These memories and more surged through Anne, and when she opened her eyes, she

found herself on her knees, the wet ground seeping through her pants, and a torrent of tears rolling down her cheeks.

"Do you remember, child?"

"Yes," Anne whispered. She had found memory. "Who are you?"

The woman smiled gently. "You have penetrated the mists between worlds, to Avalon. Once I was known in both worlds. The old beliefs are but gone, except on Avalon. Still, I think in your heart, you know me."

Anne scrambled to her feet, pulling off her glasses so she could dab at her eyes with the end of her scarf. "Avalon—just legend. And you..." She shook her head.

"No, I can't believe what I think you're asking me to believe."

"You have removed yourself from belief," the woman said.

"I have no faith of the kind you suggest," Anne said. "I move in the world of statistics and results, not in a world of myth and legend. I believe what I can see."

"What do you see when you look at me?"

Before Anne could stop herself, she said, "I see the rain and rivers and the lakes. I hear in your voice the song of the ocean and the breeze. I see all living things and their strengths."

The woman nodded and wiped away a tear that glided down Anne's cheek. "It is so.

And there is another you must see. Another moment of faith, if you will."

Unbidden, the warrior king stepped from the mist, his bright sword now sheathed at his side, his helm tucked beneath his arm. "My lady," he said. He bent to his knee before the woman.

"Rise, my child."

And he did.

Anne shuddered. The woman was asking too much of her; asking her to make too great a leap of faith.

"He does not exist," she said. "He's a story. Legend."

"Indeed?" The king glared upon Anne, his bearing imperious. "Legend gives me life. Belief. A story so oft repeated, and it changes with the telling. I have

been Artorius, Artos, and Arthur. I am the warrior who comes again and again."

"A legend does not live."

"Your denial will not only close the way to this world, but deny it of the inexplicable, the mysteries. A loss of hope."

"You have memory once again," the woman said, "but only belief can give rise to hope and dreams. Without hope or dreams, you have lost the battle before it has begun."

"I was given this blade to bring hope," the king said. He drew the sword and held it aloft. "I betrayed that hope, and I must always return to the field of

battle to redeem myself."

"The way between the worlds is fast closing forever," the woman said. "So few in your world believe. Without belief, all mystery will cease. That which you love and fight to preserve will wither, and you will have lost more than a battle."

Anne could not speak. Their words swirled great turmoil within her. She was used to a certain surety in her world. There was that which was true, and that

which was false. Cut and dry. Black and white. Yet two legends stood before her. And it was not a dream.

"A choice presents itself," the woman said.

"A choice?"

The woman twined her fingers together in front of her. "You are a child of the

land. You sense it strongly—it's a sense of spirit. One does not need crumbling walls or castles to mark their place in the world. Your place, your roots are here."

"Here?"

"The spirit of Avalon runs in your veins, child."

There was a prickling on the back of Anne's neck.

"A remnant of the old blood is within you. It has drawn you here. And you may remain here, child, if you wish, for Avalon is a refuge of sorts. But first you must believe."

Anne looked from the woman to the king. Both were grave. Both were as still as

trees on a day without a breeze.

Avalon runs in your veins, child. Anne had come here, unsure of her purpose. Yet, she had found memory; memory of why her work was so important to her, why

she fought so hard a battle. Never had she anticipated this.

I cannot explain this. Nor could she explain the magic of a wolf's cry in the night, or the sensation she felt when she watched the aurora borealis. Perhaps I

am not all fact and logic after all.

"I believe," was all she said.

"And will you stay? You will not be able to return to your world."

Anne wondered what lay beyond the mist. Should she stay, would it be like traveling in time? What sort of magics were at work there? What was Avalon like?

Curiosity had made her a scientist, and she looked beyond the woman and the king as though some vision might reveal Avalon to her. But she could only go there if she chose to.

"If I go, what will happen to this world?"

"It will continue on. There is great sorrow ahead—a grayness. Without a champion, your world will wither."

Anne nodded. The curiosity that had made her a scientist also reminded her that she left her work undone. She couldn't abandon it, but she could return to it with new insight. With memory of why she began it all in the first place. What better tribute to the lady was there than completing work that would help preserve at least a part of the world that moved out of sync with Avalon?

Anne passed her hand through her curls. "I must return to my work. I am one to

help make refuges, not one to seek refuge."

The woman smiled. "I know, my child. And you will go with my blessing." She kissed Anne tenderly on the cheek. "Perhaps your work will open another path to Avalon, for though the way is closed, Avalon will always exist. And you will find places that resonate with the old power, even in a faraway place of wild, tall pines and seaspray."

The woman turned and walked away, the mists winding and folding about her, until she vanished.

The king made a short bow. "I, too, must go. My tale leaves off where yours begins. I am weary beyond measure."

And Anne saw it in his face. Too many battles, too many betrayals. This was not the Arthur of stories about chivalry, honor, and courtly love. This was not the Arthur of a dozen shallow Hollywood movies.

It goes deeper.

"I leave this in your keeping." He handed her the great sword, hilt first.

She expected it to weigh more, to be cold to the touch, but it was neither of these things. It possessed only lightness.

"When you are no longer able to carry it," the king said, "when you, too, are over wearied, bring it to this place and cast it into the lake."

The king, too, turned and faded into the mist.

For many moments, Anne stood where she was, suddenly feeling bereft and lonely, and realizing the opportunity she had forsaken. But as the dense fog thinned and she was able to discern the outline of the Lady Chapel up the slope, she felt her spirit renewed, a new sense of purpose now that her memory had been restored. A new sense of hope now that belief bloomed in her heart. The swan glided from the mist and flew overhead in a circle before landing in front of her. The swan curved its long, elegant neck and folded its wings to its sides.

Not all legends had stayed within Avalon.

The swan then thrust its head upwards and it grew in a single fluid rush, transforming into the figure of a man— the blind musician. He extended his hand to her.

She took it into her own, marveling at how easy it was to believe.

"I will guide you," the musician said.

Anne smiled, knowing that she would not be alone on this side of Avalon after all. And perhaps the way to Avalon would reopen one day, just as the lady had said, and she would follow the path that led into the mists. But for now, sword in hand, she would return to her own work, to the land with the ancient soul whose lineage was also of the land she now walked upon: Avalonia.