

Merlin Speaks:

I have lived many lifetimes as normal men would count years, for I am a sorcerer and the magi are not as other men. What the exact count of my years is, even I cannot say, for time has lost meaning to me in all the ways that truly matter. The years of my life, extended by dweomer craft as they have been, bear less relation to a human lifespan than they do to that of an ancient oak, or a mountain, ageless and unchanging. Is it any surprise, then, that the passing of time has come to mean so little to me? Does an oak mark the turning of the seasons when it has seen a thousand years of changed seasons, each one coming to seem no different to the last?

What is the dweomer? You have asked the greatest of all questions, my young friend, one that, if you and I were to sit here from now until the Changing of the world and the dawn of the next age that I would not be able to answer, even if I were so inclined. Patience, however, and that is a question that you will learn that you will not truly need to ask, for those who seek to follow the dweomer path eventually come to realise that what seemed so elusive and mysterious at the outset is in fact something that they have known all their lives, albeit by a different name. And that is true even of a life that has been as long as my own.

If the truth be told, the dweomer has been the only constant for me through these long years. I have seen all of the friends that I have ever known die; more, I have seen their children die, and their children's children through many generations. What family I had I severed ties with so long ago that if I am remembered at all it is as a figure from myth or folklore, a shadowy ancestor with no connection to the present. You have heard of Ask and Embla, who are said to be the firstborn of mankind in the oldest histories? Yes? Good. Then know that I feel like such a one as they - a piece of history that may be of speculative interest but that is of little practical value in the here and now.

Do not try to persuade me otherwise. Isolated I may be, in this cave and in these mountains, but I am not ignorant. I make some effort to keep track of what goes on in the world and the more that I see the more I am compelled to conclude that the world – your world – is one that I no longer have any place in.

What I considered a city in my time you would regard now as fit for no more than farmers and peasants, little more than a hamlet. Your lords and princes now board themselves in strongholds of stone and iron rather than the rude little wooden huts that I knew when I first travelled the world. And it is just as well, for your wars are fought not with bows and swords, as in a more innocent age, but with fire sticks and engines of destruction that can carve apart armies of men in much the same way that wheat may be reaped by sickle or scythe.

To one such as I, raised in a more civilized age, your settlements no longer resemble the dwelling places of men. With their filth and their smog and their overcrowded streets, whose denizens seem to live one on top of the other like chickens in a coop or rats in a warren, your cities seem to bear more of a resemblance to one of the many hells. Gone is any sense of aesthetic value in your creations, for all that men now build seems to be for one purpose alone: personal gain. Mankind has forgotten that the world is not simply a resource, to be stripped and used at will, but a living creation of the Mother. Yet you burn her, cut her, changing and destroying as you see fit. Men dam the rivers, deforest the green places, and mine the earth of all its wealth, taking as they see fit with no thought as to the consequences of their actions. The earth bleeds and its Mother, helpless, looks on and weeps.

As for the others that have always lived upon the earth alongside men, the creatures of mountain, wood and river, they whom the Mother intended to share the world with men have instead been broken, enslaved or else hunted to extinction. The Dvergar and the Aelderfolk, both proud races that existed long before the coming of men, are now regarded as fairy tales for they have been forced to hide in the deep places of the earth out of Man's sight lest they

be annihilated. The world sickens and slowly dies all around you, though you cannot see it, choose not to see it perhaps. When the end comes, as it must, it can surely only be regarded as a blessing. Is it any surprise to you, then, that this world of yours is one that I not only no longer belong to, it is one that I have no desire to be a part of?

I have lived here, alone in the mountains, ever since I grew weary of men and their petty concerns. It is perhaps the greatest irony of my life that as the years passed and my strength in the Craft grew this became less a source of pride for me than of apprehension. For as my strength grew so did my reputation and from far and wide many sought me out, among them great princes and generals, men both powerful and ambitious. Their ambitions were rarely honourable, however, and the more important the men the less honourable were their intentions. They came seeking the means to destroy their rivals or to expand their territories, and usually they sought to do this with weapons of dweomer power that they asked me to conjure for them. I have no doubt that if I, or any other dweomer master, had agreed to make weapons for such men the world would not long have survived their existence. It was because of this that I eventually abandoned the world of men and came here, to this, my mountain home.

As you will note, life is somewhat simpler here, away from your cities, kingdoms and empires. My only companions are the mountain goats who cross the almost vertical slopes with effortless grace and the birds of prey that soar far beyond even the tallest of the peaks. And I am content, for a life of solitude suits me now. Loneliness is not an issue for one such as I, who has a lifetime of memories, indeed, many lifetimes' worth. I am Myrddin, wizard of Albion, Archmage to the Court of the Emperor Ambrosius Aurelianus, Dweomer Master and Sorcerer of the Blessed Realm and I will tell you my story, if that is what you came to hear.

I was born in the village of Caerfyrddin on the shores of the Shady Lake in a land whose true name has been swallowed up by time but is now known as Dyfed. My mother died when I was barely half a dozen years of age but my memories of her and of that time are among the happiest of my life. To my childish eyes she was the most beautiful sight imaginable, although my hindsight, tempered by the wisdom of age, recognises that in fact she was homely rather than a true beauty. But I have always trusted insight more than any other form of perception, especially the fickle tool that is hindsight, and it was my insight that recognised the great warmth and inner beauty that my mother exuded. I basked in this glow for the short time that it was available to me and until it was stolen from me one summer when our village was hit by a sudden outbreak of the crimson fever. A score from our village died that year, although only one of those mattered to me, for it was as if my entire world was taken from me by the cruelty and capriciousness of Fate, a mistress whom I was to both praise and curse many times in later years. That earliest blow was one of the hardest, however, and it was made all the more difficult to bear by the fact that I barely saw her in her last days, and was not even allowed to look at her body after the life had left it.

The blame for this, as with so much else in my life, I laid at my father's feet. He was guilty of a great deal, my father, so much hurt and so many wrongs that as I think of him even now I am unable to forgive him and find it hard to refer to him by anything other than his name, Cathbad, as if by doing so I can dissociate him as my parent. But as far as my mother is concerned I cannot fault him, for if he was guilty of anything in her regard it was simply that he loved her too much, for she was his world just as much as she was mine. Her death was a hard one, in its manner as much as for any other reason. Crimson fever is a hideous illness, for it is so named for the fact that it causes the sufferer to bleed from every pore, slowly at first but by the end so freely that the skin can barely be seen below a crimson blanket of blood. In fairness I have to thank Cathbad for sparing me the sight, which I now realise must have haunted him to his dying day, of his wife, my mother, suffering the agonising final stages of the fever. But the wisdom of centuries was not available to me, a boy of six, at the time, and

all of my rage and frustration at the unfairness and injustice of the cruel circumstances that had seen my mother taken away from me were directed at his door.

It must have been hard for Cathbad, for I was a difficult child. In appearance I resembled neither of my parents, who were stout, ruddy folk with the look of the outdoors about them, all health and good pallour. In contrast I was a thin, sickly looking boy, with pale skin, an unruly mess of dark hair and a fleshless body that never seemed to put on weight no matter how much I was fed. But it was my eyes that seemed to trouble the people of the village more than anything else, for unlike the browns and blues that were prevalent among them my eyes were grey. It was regarded as an ill-omened colour, for it was the colour of mourning and twilight and all things dark and portentous; as a result even the oldest and wisest men of the village feared to look into my eyes for they were wary of what they would see reflected back at them. In some ways I was always aware of the misgivings that men had when they beheld me, even as a child, although it was not until I grew older that I realized how these feelings could be used against them.

I was an enigma to Cathbad, almost from the day that I was born. I was the child of his age, for he had married late and to a woman many years his junior. He had been something of a recluse for many years, living on his farm on the outskirts of Caerfyrddin by himself, the last survivor of an old farming clan. What drove him to marriage I cannot say; perhaps he feared the family name dying out once he was gone or maybe it was simply that he fell in love with my mother, the youngest daughter of an innkeeper in the neighbouring village of Bryn. What I can say with certainty, however, is that if he had expectations of raising a son that he could be proud of out of that marriage then he was disappointed.

My wan appearance and weak constitution must have been a bitter blow for a man who had expected that a son would give him a strong pair of hands to help out around the farm. He felt little kinship for me as well, given that, being thin and drawn where he was hale and full of life, I bore no obvious physical resemblance to him. I later learned that my looks were a result of the blood of my mother's mother, a woman of the travelling people known as the Witan, a discovery that was to change much in my life afterwards. But I shall speak more on that later. Suffice it to say that as a child, despite my mother's warmth and affection, I often felt cold and unwanted, as if I was a stranger in my own home, a feeling that was only exacerbated by her death.

I sometimes wondered whether Cathbad thought that I was a faerie changeling, left in place of the true son of his blood by the cruel, capricious spirits of the wild places. In all honesty, it was something that I often wondered myself for it was at an early age that I discovered that I was not the same as other children. It was an understanding that came upon me gradually as strange, troubling events continued to happen around me and it was only with the slow wisdom of the passing years that I began to understand my true nature, that there was a name for such as me: Sorcerer.